

TODAY'S PAPER | MAY 19, 2020

---

# Lessons from Kerala

---

Umair Javed | May 18, 2020



The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.

**AMONG a variety of state and subnational responses to the pandemic across the world, one that stands out in particular is what's being done in the Indian state of Kerala. Kerala's track record as a social-democratic, welfare-oriented polity is fairly well known. Its exceptional track record of delivering on human development, such as universal literacy (above 95 per cent), public health (life**

**expectancy above 72), and reproductive health (infant mortality is under 12 per 1,000) among other indicators, sets it apart from not just other states in India but the broader South Asia region as a whole.**

What this pandemic has done is bring into sharp focus the underlying political basis for the state's effectiveness in battling the virus. To date, the state has seen a remarkably low four deaths, has been successful in flattening the curve, and has been able to deliver on a variety of welfare commitments.

There are at least two competing theories that seek to explain these exceptional results. The most popular (and in my view, most accurate) is the 'social forces' argument, which traces Kerala's social democratic dispensation to robust mobilisation and political assertiveness of the agricultural and industrial working classes from the late colonial period all the way up to the present. Proffered by long-time observers and scholars of Kerala, like Patrick Heller, this account sees low-income/working class groups as vocal stakeholders within the way the state is governed. They have voice, they make their preferences clear, and they hold the state accountable. In turn, the state is geared towards addressing those issues that are most relevant to the needs of low-income groups.

What's important to note though is that this isn't done without the existence of capable political institutions. In particular, sociologist Manali Desai has highlighted the active role of left-wing political parties, such as the Communist Party, which historically built mobilisation networks among historically disenfranchised and excluded groups and made political assertion possible. Kerala's Communist Party won its first election in 1957 and has since governed the state across several tenures. Importantly though, once the terms of governance were set along a welfare-oriented direction, subsequent periods of rule under non-left-wing governments have also retained the same commitment.

### *Kerala's investments in a large public health system have paid obvious dividends.*

---

Supplementing government commitment to welfare is the role of an extremely active civil society, consisting of a wide variety of social development organisations, associations, unions, and other social collectives, which 'keep up the heat', so to speak, on the government and compel it to deliver. Repeated cycles of demand-side-led pressures, and accountability, have allowed for the creation of a social contract between the state and citizens in Kerala that prioritises broad welfare over unilateral obsessions with growth as its model for development.

A competing theory to explain these exceptional outcomes comes from Prerna Singh, who points out the role of ethnic affinity and conducive sub-nationalism among elites and non-elites in the state. The argument given is that ties of ethnic solidarity, expressed through a conducive, non-

conflictual form of nationalism, makes elites more likely to invest in the welfare of their co-ethnics. A sense of shared identity, history, and destiny helps build patterns of nationalist sentiment, which then pave the way for welfare-oriented decision-making.

Singh's argument is no doubt compelling and goes against the usual accounts of ethnic nationalism which see it either as a tool in the hands of ethnic elites used to manipulate poor people, or as a source of conflict in divided societies. As the title of her book suggests, solidarity can actually work for welfare, given the right circumstances and context.

Whether one ascribes to the class mobilisation and incorporation argument or the sub-nationalism argument, the headline outcome is that the state in Kerala works for its poorest constituents. The fact that it does so out of pressure from civil society and its assertiveness, or from sentiments of solidarity within decision-making elites, is important to establish causality, but less important in terms of what it tangibly means for the poor.

From the perspective of dealing with the pandemic, Kerala's investments in a large public health system have paid obvious dividends. What has also helped, and this has gone relatively unnoticed so far, is the consistent political investment made in its local government system. Kerala's local governments are some of the most empowered in the region, with wide-ranging fiscal and political mandates and authority.

As Heller points out in a piece for *The Hindu*: "Whether in focalising containment efforts in hotspots, tracking down those who have been exposed or managing the broad array of direct benefits that have been distributed to migrant workers, the elderly and the differently abled, the key has been the capacity of state actors and civil society partners to coordinate their efforts at the level of panchayats, districts and municipalities."

This is particularly relevant for Pakistan, where there is a great deal of rhetorical commitment to 'smart lockdowns', but little to show for it in practice. The absence of investments in local government capacity is showing as administrators struggle to enforce SOPs and create adequate mechanisms for targeting and tracing.

The point of retelling Kerala's story here is to identify a few key lessons that can travel well in the Pakistani context. It is important to remember that Kerala is not particularly wealthy, nor did it have a stellar development base at the time of independence. The divergence we see today is solely down to differences in how politics has evolved. Political party strengthening, civil society-based mobilisation, programmatic commitment to welfare, and adequate investments in healthcare and local governments do not require massive outlays of resources. What they do require is clarity of vision and clarity on the end goal of politics itself, which should simply be citizen welfare.

*The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.*

Twitter: [@umairjay](https://twitter.com/umairjay)

*Published in Dawn, May 18th, 2020*