

**POVERTY ALLEVIATION AS ADVANCING  
BASIC HUMAN CAPABILITIES:  
KERALA'S ACHIEVEMENTS COMPARED**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is complementary to my earlier paper on *Public Intervention and Poverty Alleviation: Declining Incidence of Rural Poverty in Kerala* (published in 1995). The objective of this paper is to go beyond the notion of income-poverty and consider the achievements in advancing basic human capabilities. Written for an Asian audience, the paper highlights Kerala's achievements in advancing basic human capabilities to an extent that is far above than would be warranted by its per capita income. For this reason, the experience of Kerala, along with a few other countries, has received considerable attention in the development literature. This paper highlights Kerala's achievements by comparing them with six Asian countries' performance. These countries are: India, China, Thailand, Malasia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. After examining the significance of Kerala's achievements, the paper discusses Kerala's record in relation to the selected six Asian countries. In addition, the paper also briefly deals with Kerala's achievements in relation to all-India since the Indian experience in general is one of slow progress and the task ahead is quite considerable both in absolute terms as well as in relation to most other countries. Emphasis has been given to public action by which Kerala has achieved considerable reduction in poverty. Here I have identified education as the central process through which other changes in society, especially for the poor, were brought about. In this process, the importance and impact of historical factors in poverty alleviation have been highlighted. Finally an attempt has been made to draw some lessons from the Kerala experience by focusing on the role of public action.

**JEL Classification:** I 30, I 31, I 32

**Key Words:** Education, health status, human capabilities, human deprivation, Human Poverty Index, income-poverty, mobilisation, poverty alleviation, public action.

## **Introduction**

It has been widely recognised now that poverty alleviation is not just a matter of having adequate consumption of food or other necessities of daily life, but should also include such other dimensions of life as education and health. The former is usually referred to as the 'entitlement' aspect of poverty and the latter as the 'capability' aspect. It is only when these two aspects are combined that one can move towards a more holistic definition of poverty. It is in this sense that the current literature talks about human development which we shall employ for our discussion in this paper. Even though the term 'human resource development' is widely used, we prefer to employ the term 'human development'. The former takes into account only the instrumental value of human development, viewed as a resource for furthering the economic welfare of either individuals or collectives or both. The latter has a more fundamental connotation as it takes into account human development for its instrumental and intrinsic values. In the latter sense, the human condition of being educated and in good health is valued in itself.

The objective of this paper is to highlight the success of Kerala in alleviating poverty, as defined above, to an extent that is considerably far above than would be warranted by its per capita income. For this reason, the experience of Kerala, along with a few other countries, has now received considerable attention in the development literature. Here we intend to highlight Kerala's achievements by comparing them with

six Asian countries' performance. Although the achievements in poverty alleviation will be highlighted, the focus of the discussion will be on education. This is not only to examine the role of education in human development but also to assess the crucial role that education had played in alleviating poverty in Kerala. Section I examines the significance of Kerala's achievements. Section II discusses Kerala's record in relation to selected six Asian countries. Section III briefly deals with Kerala's achievements in relation to all-India since the Indian experience in general is one of slow progress and the task ahead is quite considerable both in absolute terms as well as in relation to most other countries. Section IV is a discussion of the social process by which Kerala has achieved the considerable reduction in poverty. Here we identify education as the central process through which other changes in society, especially for the poor, were brought about. In this process, the importance of historical factors in poverty alleviation has been investigated. Section V briefly deals with the nature of impact of the historical process in which education played a crucial role. Section VI is an attempt to draw some lessons from the Kerala experience by focusing on the role of public action.

### **1. The Significance**

At the outset, the significance of Kerala's achievements should be noted. From an international development perspective, Kerala's achievements, despite its low per capita income, are comparable or even better than such countries as Sri Lanka, China, Costa Rica, and Cuba (Dreze and Sen 1988; Ghai 1997). But in our view the significance of Kerala goes beyond the 'low per capita income and high human development' thesis. This is because the Kerala experience has also demonstrated that poverty alleviation can be achieved along with the reduction of spatial and gender gaps, the two important gaps that are quite prominent in the development experience. The former refers to the gap between rural and urban areas while the latter refers to the gap

between men and women. As we shall see later, the Kerala experience shows that while the rural-urban gap is quite low there are a number of indicators wherein women perform as well as men, and even better.

There is, however, another significance for the Kerala experience. Most of the countries that are selected here for comparison, in spite of their high achievement in human development and in lowering human deprivation, cannot claim the kind of freedom of political choice for its people as it is in Kerala and India at large. In the Indian case, the existence of such freedom of political choice in terms of a pluralistic democratic polity has been criticised for its lack of political will in alleviating poverty. What the Kerala record shows is the feasibility of poverty alleviation without denying the freedom of political choice to the people. In East and Southeast Asia, poverty alleviation took place with the active intervention of a strong state, however, with limited freedom of political choice for the people.<sup>1</sup> The Kerala experience is, therefore, significant in the sense that there are only very few examples in the contemporary developing world where poverty alleviation has taken place within a framework of unrestricted political freedom of choice and low per capita income. But for the suspension of civil rights and the disintegration of its democratic polity for prolonged periods arising out of its internal ethnic conflict, Sri Lanka could have been the next best example in this regard.

Although Kerala is only a sub-national entity, its experience is taken out of the national context to demonstrate what can be achieved with all the limitations of such an assumption in mind. At the same time, taking it out of the national context is not insignificant analytically or quantitatively. First of all, issues that fall under poverty alleviation in the Indian federal system are the responsibility of the state governments.

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1. It should, however, be noted that the extent of freedom of political choice varies from country to country.

Secondly, the size of Kerala in terms of population (around 30 million in 1991) is much larger than that of a large number of developing countries.

The significance of Kerala's development experience is brought out here in terms of a comparison with selected Asian countries. Apart from India, which provides the national context for Kerala, the selection is guided by the fact that they are all high achievers in human development and in reducing human deprivation compared to their per capita income levels. These countries (India and Sri Lanka are from South Asia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia from Southeast Asia and China from East Asia) also represent the most populous regions of Asia, or for that matter, the world.

Tables 1 and 2 present some basic demographic and economic indicators of Kerala along with the selected Asian countries (Asian Six, hereafter). We can straightaway observe that Kerala is bigger than two of these countries, Sri Lanka and Malaysia, in terms of population size. But population alone is not an adequate indicator to measure the carrying capacity of a country in terms of resources, such as land. If these two are taken into account, we find that the population density of Kerala is the highest among all the countries listed here which suggests a higher inherent burden even if one were to make allowances for the quality of land and so on. It may not be an exaggeration to state that Kerala is one of the most densely populated regions in the world.<sup>2</sup>

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2. However, it must be mentioned that such a density is unlikely to be felt when one visits Kerala because of its habitat pattern which is one of high dispersal rather than concentration. In terms of urbanisation, only Malaysia and Indonesia are distinctly more urban than Kerala. Both India and China are slightly more urban than Kerala while Sri Lanka and Thailand are less urbanised than Kerala. In the context of Kerala, urbanisation, measured in strict terms, does not hold much water. This is not only due to the dispersed and continuous nature of its settlement pattern but also because of the presence of a number of urban amenities in rural areas and the relatively low level of industrialisation of urban areas. In fact the Kerala situation is referred to as 'rurban', meaning neither rural nor urban (Sreekumar 1990).

**Table 1: Selected profile on population and economy**

Country/ State	Area (000 sq.km)	Popu- lation (mill- ion) 1994	Den- sity per Sq. Km	Urban Pop'n (%) 1994	GDP Per Capita		Economic/Employment Structure 1994					
					PPS \$ 1994	1994 \$	Income			Labour Force		
							A	I	S	A	I	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Kerala	38.8	30.5	786	26	1618	389*	33	27	40	47	18	35
India	3287.6	918.6	279	27	1348	317	31	28	41	64	16	20
Sri Lanka	65.6	18.1	276	22	3277	646	26	26	49	48	21	31
Thailand	513.1	58.2	113	20	7104	2461	12	38	50	64	14	22
Malaysia	329.8	19.7	60	53	8865	3586	19	40	41	27	23	50
Indonesia	1904.6	194.6	102	34	3740	897	20	40	40	55	14	31
China	9561.0	1208.8	126	29	2604	420	22	44	34	72	15	13

\* This should be treated as GNP for Kerala since this includes remittances from abroad. Krishnan (1994) made an estimate of around 26 percent of the State Domestic Product as the share of remittances for 1986-87. We have applied this estimate to get the GNP for Kerala.

Source: UNDP (1997); for Kerala, Government of Kerala, *Economic Review*, various issues; Column 8 to 13 for the Asian countries UNCTAD (1997). A, I, and S stand for Agriculture, Industry, and Service sectors.

**Table 2: Kerala's position in relation to selected Asian countries: Population and Economy (Kerala =100)**

Country/ State	Area (000 sq.km)	Popu- lation (mill- ion) 1994	Den- sity per Sq. Km	Urban Pop'n (%) 1994	GDP Per Capita		Economic/Employment Structure					
					PPS \$ 1994	\$ 1994	Income			Labour Force		
							A	I	S	A	I	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Kerala	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
India	8473	3012	35	104	83	83	94	104	103	136	89	57
Sri Lanka	169	60	35	85	201	170	79	96	123	102	117	89
Thailand	1322	191	14	78	439	648	36	141	125	136	78	63
Malaysia	850	65	8	204	548	944	58	148	103	57	128	143
Indonesia	4909	639	13	131	231	236	61	148	100	117	78	89
China	24642	3963	16	112	161	111	67	163	85	153	83	37

Source: Based on Table 1.

When it pertains to per capita income, whether measured in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) or official exchange rate in US dollars, Kerala is the lowest along with India. In official Indian statistics, the per capita income of Kerala is shown to be even lower than that of India. This is because such state income calculations within India do not capture the flow of remittances. Since the flow of international remittances to Kerala is quite significant, we have made some adjustment to this factor. Even then Kerala and India are the lowest in terms of per capita income. In terms of income generation, it is evident from the tables that Kerala has a relatively higher proportion of income generated in agriculture compared to all other countries while its share of income originating from industry is the second lowest, next only to Sri Lanka. As we pointed out earlier, this is because of the low level of modern industries and the dominance of low value-adding and labour-intensive agroprocessing activities in the industrial sector. Concomitantly, the sectoral distribution of the labour force in Kerala is more balanced than in other countries except in Malaysia. Along with Malaysia and Sri Lanka, Kerala's labour force, during the 1990s, is more non-agricultural than agricultural. This is not the case with all-India, China, Thailand and Indonesia.

## **2. The Record**

In terms of the record of poverty alleviation, let us first take the composite index of poverty, i.e. the Human Poverty Index (HPI) as measured by the UNDP in its Human Development Report 1997 (UNDP 1997). This index takes into account (i) the survival deprivation in terms of people not expected to survive to age 40, (ii) deprivation of education and knowledge indicated by adult illiteracy rate, and (iii) a composite index of deprivation in economic provisioning indicated by (a) population without access to safe water, (b) population without access to health services, and (c) underweight children under the age of five. The value of HPI for Kerala is only 0.15 i.e. only 15 percent of the population is

deemed poor by the HPI measure. As we can see in Table 3, only one country has a lower value than Kerala i.e. Thailand. All other countries have values higher than Kerala's. (The value for Malaysia has not been reported). In terms of the 76 countries for which the values of HPI have been worked out and published in the Human Development Report of 1997, Kerala would rank 12th followed by China (18th), Sri Lanka (22nd), Indonesia (23rd) and India (47th).

Now if we turn to the Human Development Index (HDI), given in Table 3 which is an indicator of 'achievement' of a country, Kerala's value of 0.628 is considerably higher than India's (0.451) but lower than that for other countries.<sup>3</sup> It is closer to that of China's 0.650. The low level of per capita income is partly reflected in the income measure of poverty for Kerala. Even in the 1990s, the proportion of people below the nationally determined poverty line is around 25 percent in Kerala as against 22 in Sri Lanka and considerably lower in all other countries. The all-India estimate is the highest. What this suggests is the fact that Kerala's achievements measured in terms of human capabilities is far higher than its achievements in reducing income-poverty. Thus the adult literacy rate in Kerala is one of the highest and on par with Sri Lanka and Thailand. Although all other countries except all-India are high achievers, the gap between male and female literacy is small as in Sri Lanka and Thailand. Relatively higher gaps are reported for other countries, the highest being for all-India followed by China.

The record of school enrolment in Kerala is quite impressive (see Table 3). Almost all the children in the relevant age-group attend school. Enrolment at the secondary level seems to be the highest for Kerala among all the Asian six with girls marginally exceeding the number of boys. That only two other countries, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, show a

3. It should be recalled that one of the three constituent indicators that make up the HDI is per capita income. Since Kerala's per capita income is the lowest among these countries, a relatively lower HDI score is not surprising.

higher percentage of girls than boys at the secondary level is interesting although the total enrolment is less than 100 percent. In the Kerala context, the convergence of social changes with physical access perhaps explains the high enrolment ratio for the entire school-age population. The ten-year school education roughly corresponds with the age-group of 5 to 15 years. The demand for school education for boys and girls has been adequately met by physical access. By the 1990s, 94.4 percent of the rural population was served by primary schools within a distance of one km, 97.96 percent within a distance of two km and 96.2 percent for upper primary schools within a distance of three km (GOK 1998:96).

One may decompose the HPI, as we do here in Table 4, in order to find out the record of human deprivation in some detail. Kerala's value for the percentage of 'people not surviving to age 40' has been found to be six placing it at the top among the Asian Six (data for Malaysia was not available). Similarly, the latest figures for adult illiteracy indicates that it is the second lowest in the group, after Thailand. In terms of population without access to safe water, it is somewhere between the high achievers such as Thailand and Indonesia and the relatively low ones as Sri Lanka and China. It is interesting to note that the all-India figure is the same as that of Kerala in this respect. We have every reason to believe, that the percentage of population without access to health services is perhaps one of the lowest for Kerala as both rural and urban areas are covered by at least primary health care services. In terms of the number of health care institutions, rural areas reported a higher share as early as in 1987 (Kannan, et al. 1990), although this does not mean that the number of medical professionals employed are loaded in favour of rural areas. On the contrary, it is due to the concentration of secondary and tertiary care institutions in urban areas.

Some more insights of the achievements in poverty alleviation can be gained by examining the demographic situation that has a

**Table 3: Human development and deprivation:Indices and indicators**

Country/State	HDI value 1995		HPI value (%) 1996	GDI value 1995	Population below poverty (%) 1989-94		
	International Poverty line 1985 one PPP\$/day)				National Poverty line		
Kerala	0.628		15.0	NA	NA	25.4	
India	0.451		36.7	0.424	52.0	36.0	
Sri Lanka	0.716		20.7	0.700	4.0	22.0	
Thailand	0.838		11.7	0.812	0.1	13.0	
Malaysia	0.834		NA	0.785	5.6	16.0	
Indonesia	0.679		20.8	0.651	14.5	8.0	
China	0.650		17.5	0.641	29.4	11.0	
Country/State	Adult literacy Rate (%) 1994			Gross enrolment ratio (1995)			
	Total	Male	Female	Primary		Secondary	
				Total	F as % of M	Total	F as % of M
Kerala	89.8	93.6	86.3	102	96	103	102
India	51.2	64.0	39.0	100	82	49	64
Sri Lanka	90.1	93.2	86.9	113	98	75	110
Thailand	93.5	95.6	90.7	87	NA	55	NA
Malaysia	83.0	88.2	77.5	91	101	57	107
Indonesia	83.2	89.4	77.1	114	96	48	85
China	80.9	89.6	70.9	118	98	67	89

Source: UNDP (1997), HDI for Kerala from Srinivasan, K and Shariff, A (1997). Education data for Kerala from Government of Kerala (1998). Note: Adult literacy rates for Kerala refer to 1991. HDI stands for Human Development Index; HPI for Human Poverty Index; and GDI for Gender Development Index.

**Table 4 : Indicators of Human Deprivation Index**

Country/State	Survival deprivation : people not expected to survive to age 40 (%) 1990	Deprivation: education & knowledge : Adult illiteracy rate (%) 1994	Deprivation in economic provisioning		
			Population without access to safe water (%)1990-95	Population without access to health services(%) 1990-96	Underweight children under age five 1990-96(%)
1	2	3	4	5	6
Kerala	6.0*	8.0	19	NA	29
India	19.4	48.8	18	15	53
Sri Lanka	7.9	9.9	38	7	38
Thailand	8.9	6.5	11	10	26
Malaysia	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Indonesia	14.8	16.8	15	7	35
China	9.1	19.1	33	12	16

Source : UNDP (1997) CMIE (1996) for column 4 for Kerala. For column 6 for Kerala Srinivasan, K and Shariff, A (1997).

\* Computed from the West Model Life Tables based on life expectancy at birth. I am grateful to my colleague K. Navaneetham for this computation.

significant bearing on the health status of the population in general and women in particular. Some selected, but basic, indicators are reported in Table 5. It is here that one can appreciate the tremendous achievements of Kerala when viewed from the background of its very low per capita income. Life expectancy is considered the most robust measure of health status. By the early 1990s, Kerala's life expectancy of 71.7 years is on par with Sri Lanka's 72.2. Most importantly, women have a higher life expectancy in all countries, and it is also the highest in Kerala, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. One must remember here that Malaysia's per capita income is more than five times that of Kerala measured in PPP terms and close

**Table 5: Demographic Indicators**

Country/ State	Life expectancy Year 1994			Population growth		Total Fertility Rate	IMR 1994	U5MR 1995	Births attended by trained health personnel (%) 1990-96	Maternal mortality rate (per 1000 live births, 1990)
	Total	Male	Female	1980-92	1992-2000					
	2	3	4	5	6					
1						7	8	9	10	11
Kerala *	71.7	68.8	74.4	1.4	1.1	1.8	13	27	94	1.3
India	61.3	61.1	61.4	2.1	1.7	3.0	74	115	34	5.7
Sri Lanka	72.2	70.0	74.6	1.4	1.1	1.7	16	19	94	1.4
Thailand	69.5	66.8	72.2	1.8	1.3	1.8	29	32	71	2.0
Malaysia	71.2	69.0	73.5	2.6	2.2	3.4	12	13	94	0.8
Indonesia	63.5	61.8	65.3	1.8	1.4	2.5	53	75	36	6.5
China	68.9	66.9	71.1	1.4	1.0	1.8	43	47	84	1.0

Source : Population growth rate from World Bank (1994-WDR); all others from UNDP (1997). \* For Kerala, column 2 refers to 1990-92 and column 9 refers to 1990. Source for Kerala, Government of Kerala, *Economic Review*, and Srinivasan, K. and Shariff, A. (1977)

to ten times when measured in official dollars. Sri Lanka's per capita income is twice that of Kerala in PPP terms and 1.7 times in official dollars. Yet their achievements in life expectancy are the same for both men and women. Population growth is a major concern of policy in all these countries except perhaps Malaysia (where the density is still quite low). Although most Asian countries have made remarkable progress in reducing the rate of population growth, the policy regimes under which such population programmes have been enforced show wide variations. In China, it is a strict policy of mandatory limitation of the number of children per couple to one with some exceptions made to farmers and minority groups. Indonesia's programmes were enforced with a heavy hand by the government until recently. For others, the programmes function under a system of incentives. The appropriate indicator here is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), indicating the average number of children per couple in the fertility age group. When a society reaches and maintains a level of two, it will reach a replacement level of population within one generation. That this has been achieved in Kerala by the end of the 1980s is a remarkable achievement. Several studies exploring the causative factors for such a demographic transition in the context of the low per capita income have pointed out the crucial role of education in general and that of women (mothers) in particular as the prime mover (Nair 1981; Krishnan 1976; Bhat and Rajan 1990). Other factors such as the role of the state have helped in accelerating the process. Improved access to health care facilities, especially for pregnant mothers, have subsequently played a crucial role in ensuring the survival of new-born children. This is indicated by the percentage of births attended by trained health personnel. In this respect Kerala's record is on par with Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

The educational capability is often captured in terms of the literacy rate or the rate of enrolment in schools. As with many other indicators,

this again is only a proxy for the wider notion of education. In Table 6, we report indicators that are vehicles for dissemination of information, to extend the notion of education beyond schools. It goes without saying that communication plays a crucial role in facilitating information dissemination. The print media occupies a prominent place in this because of its relatively long historical existence than other communication media like the radio, telephone and television. The limited statistics relating to the number of daily newspapers per 100 people indicate Kerala at the second position along with Thailand and Malaysia coming out as first. However, when one combines the data on both the number of newspapers and periodicals, for which data is available for Kerala, it shows the widespread nature of the role of the print media in Kerala. At least one newspaper or periodical copy is available for every five persons or every three adults in Kerala. This statistic, however, does not give us an idea of the reading habit of the population. Given the high level and pace of social and political activism in Kerala, reading habits are quite widespread, as we shall see later in Table 7. This is the cumulative result of a historical process of social and political mobilisation of the masses in general and the poorer sections in particular. It is perhaps for this reason that the first and second places for the largest circulation of newspapers in Indian languages are two Malayalam (the language of Kerala) newspapers, *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi*. However, the Malayalam-speaking population in India is less than 4 percent! Similarly, book publication is likely to be on the higher side in Kerala and more widely distributed because of the existence of a network of Village Libraries throughout the rural areas.

What we have attempted in this section is not only to demonstrate Kerala's achievements in poverty alleviation in a comparative setting but also to go beyond the summary measures by examining some detailed indicators. Given the very low level of per capita income, Kerala's

**Table 6: Communication Facilities**

Country /State	Daily news papers (copies per 100 people) 1992	TV per 100 people 1994	Radios per 1000 people 1994	Book titles published per 100,000 people 1990-92	Post office per 100,000 people 1991	Main telephone lines per 100 people 1995
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Kerala	7 (20)	NA	NA	NA	17.2	2.1
India	3	6	81	1	17.6	1.3
Sri Lanka	3	7	201	8	23.0	1.1
Thailand	7	25	190	13	7.3	5.
Malaysia	12	23	432	19	12.4	16.6
Indonesia	NA	15	148	NA	5.4	1.7
China	NA	23	184	6	NA	3.4

Note: Figure in bracket for Kerala indicates the number of newspapers and periodicals per 100 people.

Source : UNDP (1997). For Kerala Government of India (1994 and 1996) and Government of Kerala, *Economic Review*.

achievements are quite remarkable when compared to the Asian Six, some of whose per capita incomes are many times over than that of Kerala. It is also important to mention that not all initial conditions were favourable to Kerala. We think that some of the positive initial conditions such as early commercialisation and the transformation of the labour force into mainly non-agricultural, the early foundations in improving access to education and health care to the poorer sections and the relatively better position of women were overshadowed by the

negative initial conditions. These were: the high population density of a poor agrarian economy dependent on the outside world for the supply of foodgrains (because of the commercial and cash crop nature of agriculture), the very low per capita income, lower than the all-India average until the late 1970s, the high incidence of income poverty until the mid-1970s, and the very high rate of unemployment among all Indian States. But the problem of poverty has been taken care of in a remarkable manner during the last quarter of this century. But the foundations for such an outcome was laid much before through, what may now be called, public action. But before we turn to a discussion of this, a brief discussion of Kerala in relation to all-India may be in order.

### **3. Kerala and all-India**

Amartya Sen, along with Jean Dreze, writing about economic development and social opportunity in India, dealt with the problem of sharp inter-regional differences within India. They remarked that India should learn from within, pointing to the achievements of Kerala in expanding social opportunities to the poorer sections and thereby achieving a faster pace in human development (Dreze and Sen 1996). Here we make a brief presentation of the gap between Kerala and India in terms of poverty and its alleviation. Two things emerge from our presentation. One is that the gap between Kerala and all-India has tended to widen over time. Secondly, and more importantly, the gap between the women in Kerala and all-India are wider bringing to focus the need for a greater gender sensitiveness for human development in India.

We present a number of indicators relating to income-poverty, educational attainments from literacy to reading habits, and a number of basic health indicators in Table 7. Wherever appropriate, these indicators are provided separately for men and women to bring out the gender dimension into sharper focus. Progress in poverty alleviation in both

all-India and Kerala have been much faster since the mid-1970s. Nationally, the constraint on the supply of foodgrains was relieved since the mid-1970s as a result of the 'Green Revolution', although its spread has been uneven. Secondly, the rate of growth of the Indian economy began to improve and since the early 1980s attained a long-term annual average growth rate of five percent which is unprecedented in Indian economic history. Therefore the constraint imposed on poverty alleviation as a result of low economic growth has been somewhat relaxed since the early 1980s. For Kerala, the picture has been a reverse one. Kerala's economic growth since the mid-1970s to late 1980s has been around 2.5 percent with a per capita income growth of less than one percent. Remittances may have partly relieved this constraint. It was only since the late 1990s that the rate of growth of Kerala's economy started to pick up and show signs of improvement (Kannan 1998). However, it is interesting to note that it is precisely during the period of low economic growth that much of the progress in poverty alleviation has been achieved in Kerala which points to the role that concerted public action played in realising this achievement. As mentioned earlier, Kerala in fact had a higher incidence of income-poverty than all India. Table 7 tells us that during 1973-74 Kerala's income-poverty was nearly 10 percent higher than that of all-India. But within two decades Kerala not only reduced its incidence of income-poverty by 58 percent (compared to only 34 percent for all-India), but it is now lower than all-India by 30 percent. That means a faster decline in Kerala compared to all-India. A combination of income-poverty and health status measurement can bring out the ugly fact of the undernourishment of children. When we examine this fact we find that the incidence of 'severe' child undernourishment in Kerala was lower than all-India even during the mid-1970s, but it was lower only by around one-third. By the late 1980s this dimension of poverty in Kerala had been reduced to a very

**Table 7: Progress in selected aspects of poverty alleviation in Kerala and all-India**

Indicator	Period	Kerala	India
1	2	3	4
Incidence of income-poverty (Head-count) as % of population	1973-74	59.8	54.9
	1993-94	25.4	36.0
Life expectancy at birth (years)	1951-61 M	45.3	35.7
	F	57.4	43.5
	1990-92 M	68.8	59.0
	F	74.4	59.4
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000 live births)	1951-60	120.0	140.0
	1993	13.0	74.0
Incidence of severe child undernourishment (%) 1988-90	1975-79 Boys	10.2	14.6*
	Girls	10.4	15.3*
	1988-90 Boys	2.4	9.0*
	Girls	1.6	9.0*
Females/1000 Males	1961	1021.0	941.0
	1991	1040.0	927.0

\* For Seven Indian states only where the survey was conducted. These are : Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

Source : Compiled from various Government of India publications.

low percentage, thereby increasing the gap with all-India to a considerable extent. In the case of life expectancy, Kerala enjoyed an initial advantage even during the 1950s and by the 1990s its achievement is comparable to many high-income countries whereas the Indian average is yet to catch up with many other Asian countries, especially the Asian Six reported here. In the case of infant mortality, Kerala's IMR was 80 percent of that of all-India in the 1950s; during the 1990s it is only less than 20 percent. Again, the gap has widened considerably.

Let us now move to education in some detail. Kerala certainly enjoyed an initial advantage here too but the gap has now widened. This

is true not only for the literacy rate for the whole population but also for the socially depressed classes known as the Scheduled Castes who are the socially excluded untouchable communities in the traditional social structure of India. Kerala's progress in this respect warrants special attention as the literacy rate of this segment of the population is now considerably higher than that of the general population in India. The significance of this achievement is of great social importance to such a caste-ridden society as India's can be gauged from the fact that the *literacy rate of women belonging to Scheduled Castes in Kerala (74 percent) is higher than the literacy rate for men in the general population for all-India (64 percent) in 1991!* The high rate of current illiteracy could be due to the high illiteracy among adults. This means that future illiteracy can be reduced if it is ensured that children are made literate now. A measure of this for younger (6-11 years) and older (12-14 years) children show that the problem of illiteracy in the foreseeable future is a very real one in India unless urgent steps are taken right now. Children of school-going age group were fully literate in Kerala by the second half of the 1980, whereas in all-India 35 to 45 percent of children were reported to be illiterate. Within schools drop out is not a problem in Kerala anymore, whereas more than one-third of the children drop out of primary level in all-India. Drop out rates for the entire school years (one to ten years) is one-third for boys in Kerala but two-thirds in all-India, whereas it is only a quarter for girls in Kerala but three-fourths in all-India! Similar gaps are also found when our attention is drawn to children in rural areas.

The ability to read and write is a capability but how much of that is translated into practice warrants a different measurement. One such measurement in terms of reading habits is captured in Table 8. More than half the adults in Kerala are reported to read at least one newspaper whereas it is less than a quarter for all-India. For women it was more

**Table 8: Poverty alleviation: Educational Record**

Literacy (% of population above 7 years of age)		1961	M	55.00	34.30
			F	38.90	12.90
		1991	M	94.50	63.90
			F	86.00	39.40
Literacy among Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchable communities)		1961	M	31.60	17.00
			F	17.40	3.30
		1991	M	85.20	49.90
			F	74.30	23.80
Literacy among children	Age group 6-11	1986-87	M	97.40	64.70
			F	97.40	48.90
	Age group 12-14	1986-87	M	99.50	75.30
			F	99.10	54.50
Dropout Rates (%)	Class 1 to IV	1993-94	M	-5.35	35.05
			F	-3.05	38.57
	Class 1 to X	1993-94	M	33.43	68.41
			F	24.51	74.74
Percentage of rural children aged 12-14 who have never been enrolled in a school		1986-87	M	0.40	26.00
			F	1.80	51.00
Proportion of persons aged 6 and above who have completed primary education		1992-93	M	65.80	48.60
			F	60.50	28.10
Proportion of rural children attending school	5-9 years	1987-88	M	86.90	52.50
			F	82.80	40.40
	10-14 years	1987-88	M	93.30	66.10
			F	91.20	41.90
Proportion of readers in the estimated adult population ( <i>Any Daily</i> )		1989	M	53.40	23.60
			F	35.80	11.50
Proportion of Readers in the estimated adult population ( <i>Any publication</i> )		1989	M	63.30	26.60
			F	54.20	15.40
Proportion of Readers among agricultural labourers ( <i>Any publication</i> )		1989	M	45.90	3.10
			F	11.90	0.70

Source : Compiled from various Government of India Publications.

than one-third for Kerala but around 12 percent for all-India. If we take reading habits in general as the reading of any publication, then nearly two-thirds of men in Kerala are reported to read at least one publication. This proportion is closer to the proportion of adults in the total population thereby meaning that almost all adults have the habit of reading. Similarly for women, the proportion is 54 percent suggesting more than 85 percent of adult women have the habit of reading. The proportions for all-India are quite low at 27 and 15 percent of the male and female population. From the point of poverty alleviation, measurement of reading habit should be done with respect to those who are considered income-poor. This has been presented in terms of the reading habits of agricultural labourers who constitute the bulk of the poor in India. By the late 1980s nearly 46 percent of male agricultural labourers in Kerala were reported as having the habit of reading while the proportion for women agricultural labourers was 12 percent. For all-India these proportions are a mere three and less than one percent respectively. Given Kerala's share in the total agricultural labourers of India, it is not difficult to see that these all-India figures are the contribution of the share of Kerala. It may not be an exaggeration to say that reading habits among the poor in India are almost non-existent, the one reason being their illiterate status. The significance of reading as a habit even among the poor agricultural labourers in Kerala is indeed a measure of the social change that has taken place in Kerala during the last fifty years.

Let us now shift the focus to the gender dimension in poverty alleviation in Kerala and all-India. On all indicators presented in Tables 7 and 8, the gap between women in Kerala and India has widened. While women in Kerala have moved faster to close the gap between the men of Kerala, the women in India are falling behind both their men as well as the women in Kerala. Indeed, this puts an additional burden on poverty alleviation efforts at the all-India level. For example, the literacy rate of

women in all-India (that includes Kerala) in the early 1990s was equivalent to what the women in Kerala had achieved in the early 1960s (39 percent)! Less than 40 percent of the women in India were literate in 1991; in Kerala only around 15 percent of the women were illiterate in that year. Literacy among girl children and the school enrolment at the primary level are complete in Kerala while it is a long road ahead for girl children in India as a whole. The same is true for the incidence of severe undernourishment. The survival rate of women in Kerala is more than that of men as evidenced by a higher and increasing percentage of women in the total population. The reverse is the case for all India where the proportion of women not only was low to begin with but also one of further decline. For every 1000 men there were only 941 women in India in 1961 (as against 1021 in Kerala); this has declined to 927 in India while it increased to 1040 in Kerala. That sums up the position of women in Kerala and all-India.

In terms of basic human capabilities, women in Kerala have achieved such levels that would take another couple of decades to reach, at the least, for women in the rest of India. The pace of catching up will certainly be dependent on the success of poverty alleviation because it is the wide gap between the poor and the non-poor in the rest of India that accounts for such disparities. Women in Kerala, it is now widely acknowledged, played a crucial role in its demographic transition. Despite the very low levels of income, women have enhanced life expectancy, reduced birth and death rates especially the infant mortality rate, brought down the average number of children per couple to below replacement levels, raised the age at marriage and planned their families in such a way that they are now available for a longer period of time for productive economic activities. As per a 1987 Survey (with a sample size of ten thousand rural households), morbidity rates for acute illnesses

were similar for men and women (20.3 and 20.9 percent respectively) although morbidity rates for chronic illnesses were higher for women (15.58 percent) than men (13.75) partly due to their reproductive role ('diseases of the uterus'). It is also interesting to note that the prevalence of handicaps (of various sorts) was lower among women (1.74 percent) than among men (2.42 percent) (Kannan et al. 1991). It is perhaps a tribute to the capability of Kerala's women that the incidence of severe undernourishment among girls has not only been brought down to a negligible percentage but it is also lower than that for boys.

In terms of education, the achievements are equally, if not more, impressive. Illiteracy is not a problem anymore for Kerala women, including those belonging to the Scheduled Castes. Dropout rates for girl children in Kerala are lower than that for boys; the situation is just the opposite in all-India. Girls and young women seem to desire education more than boys and young men. In 1993, 49.2 percent of the school-going children in Kerala (Class I to X) were girls, and they accounted for 50.6 percent of all students at the high school stage (Class VIII to X). In higher education, excluding professional courses, young women accounted for 54.2 percent of the total students (Government of Kerala 1998).

What contributed to such a generalised process of achieving basic human capabilities and reducing poverty in Kerala that has not put women in a position of distinct disadvantage, unlike in the rest of India and, indeed, in many other countries? For an answer we turn to the next section.

#### **4. The Process**

Kerala's successful promotion of basic human capabilities, and thereby the alleviation of poverty, has a history of several decades of

sustained public action that began at the turn of the twentieth century. But it must be remembered that the impact of such a long-term process could be felt adequately and comprehensively only since the mid-1970s. This shows a fairly long time-lag which we believe was necessitated by the slow rate of growth of the economy and the consequent constraints on the state to devote a higher proportion of its resources for poverty alleviation. Even today the reduction in income-poverty is far less impressive compared to the achievements in basic human capabilities such as educational attainments and health status. But the prime mover for the decline in poverty has been education. And that was brought about by public action in the form of the social mobilisation of large sections of people in general and, later, of the labouring poor in particular. Let us examine briefly the nature of this sustained public action.

The state of Kerala came into existence as a unified political-administrative entity only in 1956 when the reorganisation of Indian states took place along linguistic lines. Prior to that and during the British colonial rule, Kerala consisted of three separate entities. Two of them, Travancore in the south and Cochin in the centre, were ruled by Maharajas who were under the suzerainty of the British colonial government. The northern part, Malabar, was a district in the Madras Presidency of British India. Because of the linguistic and cultural unity of the three regions, the idea of Kerala became a political reality. The advent of colonialism shook the very foundations of the social, economic and cultural fabric of Kerala. Because of the diverse nature of Kerala's natural resources (tropical rain forests and marine fisheries along the long coastal belt) and the commercial nature of its agricultural crops, Kerala had already experienced trading with the outside world, thus linking its deep interiors with the trading centres. But it did not disturb the social equilibrium dominated by a rigid caste structure until colonial capital started penetrating directly into the Kerala economy in order to exploit its natural

resources and cheap labour in the nineteenth century. Such penetration accelerated since the middle of the nineteenth century in the form of expanding plantations and logging necessitating the opening up of the interiors through the construction of roads and other infrastructural facilities. Large scale and small scale manufactures were also started giving rise to an agroprocessing industry based on the coconut tree involving such items as coconut oil and coir products. Extension of the area under rice cultivation due to increasing shortage of food grains also resulted in increasing the commercialisation of such agriculture. As a result of all these, a class of rural proletarians emerged by the turn of this century. Although the caste structure was not dismantled, its foundations became much weaker as a result of the economic mobility and proletarianisation, particularly, among the intermediate castes (Kannan 1988: Ch.2). This is the economic background for the subsequent emergence of social movements striving for social and economic emancipation of the poorer sections of the society.

The social reform movements started as protests against the institutionalisation of social exclusion practised by the upper caste Hindus. Later on, these movements became the vehicles for reform of the communities from within, in which education was accorded the highest priority. The most important of all such movements was the one that emerged from among a numerically significant intermediate caste, known as *Ezhavas*. This movement was led by Sree Narayana Guru, a religious scholar and philosopher, who combined erudition with social activism and used the former to strengthen the latter. The initial struggles for emancipation were such symbolic acts as the right to enter temples and the right of passage through public roads. The movement took an organisational form in 1905 and one of its major activities was the establishment of educational institutions. The political message of the movement was one of empowerment through organisation. The

movement influenced not only the members of the *Ezhava* community but even those who were socially above them. Thus, an upper caste but influential non-Brahmin community, known as the Nayers, also took to organisation on a community basis and an organisation was formed in 1915 with the aim of establishing educational institutions. The Christians who were emerging as an economically stronger community had already established their own educational institutions through the work of missionaries and indigenous Church organisations. Liberal doses of patronage for this were received from the colonial government because of their religious affinity. Muslims also took up community work and later established an organisation, similar to other communities, to start educational institutions. But the most significant of all these developments, from the point of poverty alleviation in terms of the deprivation of both material means and social dignity, was the organisation of the marginalised communities, some of whom were considered untouchables. One of them, known as the *Pulayas*, a landless agricultural labouring caste, formed their own association as early as in 1907 in Travancore, emphasising the need for education for the members of the community, the wearing of clothes on the torso, self-respect, and sought to remove all symbols that oppressed them and made inferior.

The wearing of clothes on the torso for women was already perceived as a matter of dignity because it was denied to the lower castes to emphasize the superiority of the upper castes. Earlier the *Ezhavas* had rebelled against a government edict to tax their women wearing upperbody clothes. They successfully fought for this right which was later emulated by other lower castes.

A qualitatively new development took place when the community-focused social reform movements were gaining in popularity-- the influence of western liberal thinking as well as the socialist revolution

in the then Soviet Union. The need to break away from the restraints of caste was felt by the more radical elements within the social reform movements. The emerging proletarian nature of the labour force provided a good breeding ground for the growth of secular forces. Their aim was a caste-less society and the questioning of the existence of God and thus the need for religions. Starting around 1917, this new movement, known as the Brotherhood Movement, fought religion and its influence on the people. This led to a rationalist movement, especially among the youth embracing atheism. This started around the second half of the 1920s and influenced the latter-day leaders of radical political movement.

The radical political movement first emerged as a leftist group within the Indian National Congress. In Kerala this group quickly turned itself into communists, thus breaking away with the Gandhian methods and traditions of social and national struggles for social reform and national independence. It is this movement which was more successful than any other earlier movements in mobilising the labouring poor, cutting across caste identities, and capturing the initiatives from the better-off sections of the society for national independence. This radical political movement attracted the wrath of the state and the wealthy in society as well. Working underground and fired by an ideology of liberation, they influenced the poor in every nook and corner of Kerala. This method of organisation was critically dependent on education. Political study classes, publication of radical literature, work among the intelligentsia to influence arts and literature and the setting up of village libraries were some of the means by which they sought to effectively communicate with the masses. From the early 1930s to the late 1950s when the Communist Party was elected to govern the newly formed state of Kerala, it was a process of relentless work among the poor for organisation and political conversion.

Even after the formation of the State of Kerala, the relevance of these various forms of social movements did not fade although they experienced varying degrees of decline from their original objectives with the emergence of vested interests. From the point of basic educational capabilities, one of the institutional legacies of this half a century of mobilisation was the establishment of what are called Village Libraries, throughout the length and breadth of Kerala. These libraries, established since the mid-1930s, were a demonstration of the ideological convergence of all movements as far as the importance of education of the masses was concerned. The Gandhian social reform activists also made notable contributions, as indeed did the activists of the radical political movement. These Village Libraries came into existence through the initiatives of these social activists with strong local level support. Thus the local youth got involved in the establishment and maintenance of these libraries. After the formation of the State of Kerala in 1957, these libraries were recognised for their contribution to nonformal education and the government instituted a system of grant-in-aid for maintenance. Libraries with the minimum prescribed facilities such as a building, books, and members became eligible for such grants. Around five thousand libraries were thus recognised. However, the total number of Village Libraries is reckoned to be in excess of fifteen thousand because a large number of them do not enjoy the grant-in-aid from the government. Many of them however receive assistance from local governments, known as Panchayats, in the form of radio sets, free newspapers and magazines. It is these Village Libraries which were used as centres for literacy and post-literacy classes for illiterate adults. They had also functioned as the venue for political meetings, youth events, and women and child care centres. These libraries are now a part of village life in Kerala.

The social terrain prepared by the social and political movements and the network of Village Libraries later provided a space for the

emergence of a yet another qualitatively new kind of social activism among the educated in the Kerala society. This is now known as the Kerala People's Science Movement (*Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad* or KSSP) which was started by a few teachers and writers, who were also social and political activists during the early 1960s. This movement sought to popularise one's knowledge about nature, the world and the immediate society among children and rural people through a series of classes, meetings and publication of popular books. School teachers were the main activists in the early periods of this movement. Subsequently the movement focused on developmental issues and problems facing the people and incorporated a large number of intelligentsia into the movement. Issues such as the quality of education, health care, environmental dimensions of development, decentralisation of development, were widely disseminated and debated within Kerala society, thus forcing the attention of the decision makers on these issues.

In sum, the possibilities for acquiring education as a basic human capability for the poorer sections of the society was achieved through a process of mobilisation spanning over several decades. This was by and large through 'out-of-school' or what may loosely be called non-formal education. Such a process was not only confined to making people literate although that was one of its basic functions. It was a process of raising awareness by focusing on social and political issues that were intimately related to the emancipation of the poor. Emphasis on personal hygiene, proper dressing, changing the way of speaking with the poor who often were addressed and talked to in derogatory terms were part of this process of raising awareness. Above all, it instilled in the poor the value of educating their children. Today, a very high premium is attached to education by the poorer sections by sending their children to school and enabling them to gain as much education as possible. Along with this, the emphasis of the radical political movement was organisation of the

labouring poor. Thus unionisation of labour was not confined to 'industrial' establishments or urban areas but to all labouring poor, irrespective of the organisation of production, in both rural and urban areas. Thus, a large number of labouring poor are part of the labour movement, as agricultural labourers, agroprocessing workers in small work shops, self-employed workers such as those working under piece rates, workers in service-type jobs as loading and unloading of goods and so on. They have acquired a bargaining strength over time that is rare in the rest of India except in the private corporate and public sector enterprises and institutions.

## **5. The Impact**

Our argument has been that education was a prime mover in contributing to poverty alleviation in Kerala. We therefore show here how it spread widely and contributed to enhancing the health status and reducing income-poverty. We have already noted the time-lag that was experienced by Kerala. The impressive record in poverty alleviation since the mid-1970s should be seen, in our view, as the cumulative effect of a long process of mobilisation of the poor, giving them a social space and a political voice. That both the national and regional economic conditions - albeit in different ways - as well as the policy regimes became conducive to a relatively rapid reduction in income-poverty since the mid-seventies should also be viewed as a favourable factor.

As we discussed in Section 2, one of the notable impacts of that kind of public action was the attainment of universal literacy in Kerala. When the first social reform movement had started spreading at the turn of the century, impressive gains in literacy were recorded. Although subsequent periods present equally impressive gains, the importance of the 'initial push' should not be underestimated especially in a context

when social, economic and political forces were particularly hostile to the emancipatory aspirations, not to speak of the demands, of the poorer sections. More importantly, one should note the efforts of the Kerala women in 'catching up' with the men. During these two periods, the gains made by women were as much as that of men and it is these initial gains which helped in accelerating their efforts when the social terrain and policy regime were much more favourable since the formation of the state. A direct effect of this increasing literacy coupled with the political and social mobilisation was the spread of the reading habit which we have already noted. The result was a phenomenal growth in the print media in Kerala not only in terms of newspapers and periodicals but books and pamphlets. Concomitantly, there was a rapid growth in activities related to popular culture -- theatre, novels, songs, cinema, and so on -- which to this day continues unabated.

Such a legacy of the demand for education gave rise to the expansion of the formal education system, especially after the formation of the state. The striking feature of this expansion was the physical proximity, both in rural and urban areas. According to the First Economic Census, conducted in 1977, 99.7 percent of villages in Kerala had a primary or junior basic school within two kms, 98.6 percent had a middle school within two kms and 96.7 percent of villages had a high or higher secondary school within five kms as against an all-India average of 90.1, 43.8 and 20.9 percent respectively (Kannan 1988: 20).

The second impact of education, defined in its broad sense, is on the health status of Kerala citizens. As we have already discussed, Kerala's health transition has been made possible by the spread of education among all sections of its population. Women played a significant role in this transition because the care of the child and of the pregnant mother required awareness among women in the family. When

the life expectancy as well as child survival rates improved, it became feasible to limit the size of the family. The spread of immunisation of children, the popularity of medical personnel attending childbirth, and better nourishment of children, among other factors, are related to the spread of education among women. The remarkable progress made by women in catching up with men in the matter of literacy and schooling and the complete enrolment of children should be viewed as factors facilitating the improvement in the health status of the population at large. While the health status of the population in Kerala is much more advanced than the rest of India, there is genuine concern about the quality of health care services in the state because of high reported incidence of morbidity (Panikar and Soman 1985; Kannan, et al. 1990).

The third impact is on reducing income poverty. Here again one can see the role of education as the prime mover. Education and its contribution to the increasing social and political consciousness of the people in general and that of the poorer sections in particular have been instrumental in the success of both the social and political mobilisation of the masses. This mobilisation served as a public action in demanding state intervention in poverty alleviation. During the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, when Kerala made impressive gains in poverty alleviation, the rate of growth of the economy was quite slow, it was less than one percent in terms of per capita income. This goes to show the crucial role of the state in reducing poverty even when growth conditions were not favourable. The Public Distribution System in Kerala was started in the early 1960s but it was only since the mid-1970s that the quantity of commodities distributed could be increased. In addition, a number of direct poverty alleviation programmes were started. Prominent among them were the provision of free noon meals to school-going children at the primary level, supplementary nutrition programmes for pregnant mothers and pre-school children from poorer households, old age pension

to rural workers in a number of occupations, and implementation of such national programmes in poverty alleviation as the Integrated Rural Development Programme and other rural employment programmes. The combined benefits of all these worked out to around 21 percent of the annual expenditure of rural labour households in the Eighties (Kannan 1995: 722).

As we have seen earlier, these are basic achievements. Education played a much larger role in Kerala society in its evolution to a civil society. The growth of the print media and communication facilities, the enlargement of cultural space for an increasingly larger segment of the population, the social and political activism of its people are all traceable to the spread of education in the society.

## **6. Some Lessons**

What are the lessons from the Kerala experience in poverty alleviation? The most important lesson, in our view, is the socio-political context in which poverty alleviation has taken place. In the Asian context in general and the Asian Six in particular, poverty alleviation has been achieved by the intervention of a strong state. In some countries, as in China, the state intervened directly in all spheres relating to poverty alleviation. In the Southeast Asian countries also, the state was primarily responsible for poverty alleviation. However, the space available for non-state public action was rather limited. In countries such as Indonesia, the heavy hand of the state did not provide for much political space for the poor. In the Indian context also, the role of the state in reducing poverty is important. But the concern in India is not the absence of a political voice for the poor or the lack of opportunities for public action by non-state actors, but the frustratingly slow pace of the process of poverty alleviation. This is primarily because of the hierarchical and oppressive social structure that is heavily loaded against the emancipatory

demands of the poorer sections. What Kerala has demonstrated is the feasibility of poverty alleviation in the context of a political democracy that does not impose any limitations on the freedom of political choice or public action of the people. The exercise of such political choice compelled the state to respond to the demands of the poorer sections that were no longer constrained by the social structure. Public action played a dual role in removing the fundamental social constraints as well as in giving a political voice to the poor.

A second lesson of the Kerala experience is the role of economic growth in poverty alleviation. The trickle down theory does not enjoy much empirical support in the Kerala context. And poverty alleviation was accelerated during a period of a very slow rate of growth of the economy. It must, however, be said that two factors were favourable to the Kerala context. One was the improved supply conditions of food grains in the national context and the other was the flow of remittances to the Kerala economy from abroad. But such favourable factors could not have contributed to poverty alleviation without concerted public action. Therefore poverty alleviation can be achieved with or without economic growth if concerted public action is focused on the problem.

A third but no less significant lesson from the Kerala experience is the role of women in poverty alleviation. We have seen how women caught up with men in literacy, school enrolment, and performance indicators such as retention rates. Some of the historical and cultural factors such as the system of matriliney may have provided an enabling environment for such a process. But it must however be remembered that such influences were likely to have been more indirect than direct since most of the poorer sections in Kerala did not belong to the matrilineal system of family. The impact of the early social movements during the 1911-21 period and the radical political movement during the

1931-51 period was perhaps much more crucial. The catching up process in literacy during this period is thus particularly noteworthy. Studies so far carried out also emphasize the central role of women's education in Kerala's demographic transition that is closely related to a process of enhancement of its health status. One may therefore hypothesize, with the backing of empirical evidence available so far, that women not only contributed to Kerala becoming literate but also making it healthy. However, in the economic sphere they have had to contend with less than their due share, particularly in terms of employment and earnings. This could be partly due to the continuing slow growth of the economy. However, there are other powerful constraints such as segmentation and discrimination in the labour market. The need to go beyond poverty alleviation has now become imperative for Kerala if it has to meet the challenges of unemployment and further enhancement of the quality of life of its people.

While the rest of the world has recognised the achievements of Kerala in terms of social and human development, the concern in Kerala is now focused on the commodity producing sectors and unemployment, particularly, among the educated. The mismatch between social development and economic growth in Kerala has been attracting the attention of many scholars for quite sometime (see, e.g., Kannan 1990, 1998; Isaac and Kumar 1991; and Heller 1995). Although not the focus of this paper, this paradox of 'social development and economic backwardness' has presented itself as a formidable challenge for Kerala. If there is one major positive economic impact arising out of social development it is in the sphere of international labour migration. As a result of the phenomenal growth in demand for labour in the Arabian Gulf countries, there has been a steady flow of labour migrating to these countries for work. Two-thirds of them are in the category of semi-skilled but school educated workers. It would certainly not have been

possible for such labour to seize the opportunities for work abroad had they not been endowed with some minimal levels of education. The remittances by these workers helped the households in Kerala to increase their average expenditure on consumption. It created a boom in construction and a steady growth in the service sector. But the productive sectors of the economy, viz. agriculture and industry, performed poorly, especially between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s. Inadequate investment in infrastructure and poor management of existing infrastructure, short-sighted strategies of trade unions preventing technological changes and the inability of the state to attract investment are some of the major problems confronting Kerala in its quest for translating its remarkable achievements in social development into meaningful opportunities for economic advancement.<sup>4</sup>

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4. I have dealt with these issues in terms of, what I call, 'development dilemmas' in Kannan (1998).

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