

# Building a New Kerala

## Ideas and Reflections



### **Thinking of Public Education in Times of the Deluge**

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## **Thinking of Public Education in Times of the Deluge**

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The Great Deluge, no doubt, has triggered a massive rethinking of all the systematizations of social life in Kerala as well as the habits and practice that constitute our everyday life. A number of contradictions and gaps structuring our social life became visible all of a sudden. All the dirt that we tried to either ignore or bury in stealth have reappeared with a vengeance and indeed, struck back hard. The Great Deluge was indeed a horrific experience; the losses and suffering experienced are truly unheard of and numbing. Nevertheless, the response to it did kindle fresh hope. Many collective values, including the capacity to act together above all differences, which were thought to be extinct in this society, seem to have sprouted in its wake. The awakened awareness and capacity for collective action which are the hallmarks of the Malayali are back, and they should form the backbone of all effort towards the New Kerala.

This is perhaps most relevant when we consider public education here. Many schools have suffered immense material losses; great numbers of children have lost their learning materials. The psychological impact of this loss is not small. As always in natural disasters, the worst sufferers are the children from socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The effort to remedy their losses is on. However, it may be important to think of how rebuilding public education can be part of the efforts to integrate rebuilding efforts in different sectors into a collective movement for New Kerala. This reflection is offered towards that end.

Public education no doubt is a key aspect of Kerala's unique social development that sets it apart from the rest of India. However, it can hardly be ignored that this very public education is struggling to stay alive and is in intensive care.

### **Control Private Interests in Public Education**

While acknowledging that the present government's efforts to protect public education are indeed laudable, it is also necessary to see that at present, our education sector is unhealthily dominated by private interests. Parents' preference for private schools, the tendency to treat models in private education as solutions to the ills of the public sector, the sad history of the neglect of the government and public schools by the government itself, and the acknowledging of English as the primary medium of learning and other features of private schools as markers of educational excellence – all these lead many to think so. This produces many dangerous tendencies, especially to do with creating new forms of elitism and social divisions. It is now common in Kerala to see children from different economic strata attending different schools; children are also sent to study in schools run by their own religious and caste communities. There may be reason to suspect that there is a rise in gender-segregated schools.

Remedying these divides must receive priority in crafting education post-deluge. It may not, however, be easy to resurrect the idea of the common school that was central to the recommendation of the Kothari Commission Report that is, of course, one of the foundational

documents of education in post-independence India in contemporary Kerala. Nevertheless, it should remain an important goal, and all effort should be made to attain it.

### **Create a Public Sphere within the Field of Education**

Despite the divisions and hierarchies among schools, it may be possible to build an active communication-and-action network linking the students in them into curriculum activities. This should be allowed to mature into an active public sphere that debates common issues, including collective waste management, collective action for ecological protection, collective art and culture, and collective farming. This could lead to the formation of many common spaces and platforms – for sports, culture, recreation, and science and technology. Such an effort needs active collaboration between the government, schools, and voluntary groups. This may be able to counter the ongoing widening of both economic inequalities as well as social distance among students. The crucial importance of collective civil social response in the phase of rescue during the Great Deluge can hardly be ignored; public education, therefore, needs to be reoriented towards fostering values and skills that make it possible by building bridges connecting different institutions in which our students are presently enrolled in.

The present context makes it possible for us to attempt this on an experimental basis, for instance, by linking schools across selected panchayats through setting up forums and platforms for discussion and action on common issues. Surely this is not an easy task since the general trend has been to distance and dissociate education from all common social concerns. However, the present crisis forces us to rethink this: the project of re-linking education with ongoing social and ecological issues cannot be postponed any more.

### **Make Ecological Consciousness the Foundation of Public Education**

One key insight from the experience of the Great Deluge was about the centrality that ecological consciousness deserves to be granted in all citizenship-building activities, including public education. For a number of years from now, all public education needs to be pivoted on activities shaping a deep and enduring respect for ecological balance.

In a way, the Great Deluge was brought upon by our unforgivably-long neglect of this vital task. If we are indeed committed to saving future generations from such calamities, it is necessary that we refrain from the hypocritical reduction of ecological activities to the observing of special weeks or days and integrate them into the very fibre of everyday life. The quality of water in the panchayat, the soil composition, and the structure of the flood plain – exploring these must become part of routine school activities. Besides the primacy of the Western Ghats in Kerala's survival, the threat from waste which is now assuming monstrous proportions here should become issues of everyday discussion and concern in schools, becoming integral to the learning and teaching that takes place there. That is perhaps the only way to make sure that the rebuilding process of New Kerala remains continuous and stable instead of receding after initial enthusiasm.

**Empower Teachers; Allow them Freedom**

For the above to be actualized, certain negative tendencies widely prevalent on the ground in Kerala's public education need to be tackled effectively. Most important of these is ending the disempowered status on teachers and local-level education activists, through constant effort and opportunity to improve their knowledge-base and skills. There has to be a large and systematic effort to change mindsets through effective training and constant follow-up activities via the new media. Though we do have many exemplary teachers in our system, the regrettable reality is that it is still controlled by those with overly-bureaucratic inclinations and inflexible, or those who are resistant to change and stubborn. That granting teachers considerable freedom and flexibility to turn teaching into a creative activity yields rich rewards is evident from the experience of Finland and other countries that have experimented with it.

Teachers who develop innovations in pedagogy should be publicly recognized; in general, ample opportunities should be made available for teachers to improve their knowledge and skills, both academic and practical. In Finland, the minimum qualification to be a teacher is a post-graduate degree. All teachers are supported in their efforts to do research in their careers. The importance of such models of innovative education becomes evident when we consider the fact that teachers are expected to shape the attitudes and culture of an entire new generation, which is, of course, the very purpose of public education. Our failure in public education has been largely because of the manner in which it has been distanced from public concerns and citizen-building, the excessive focus on preparing students competitively for the global labour markets, the resultant fall in quality, and our inability to revise and improve public education in step with changing social realities. Faced with the common danger of ecological collapse, it is evident that our priorities should change – revert – back to making public education the major site of shaping and building citizenship awareness and action. In other words, the reorientation of public education from its present market-focus towards the concerns of society and ecology in democratizing ways can no longer be dismissed as empty idealism or romantic fluff. On the contrary, in it alone lies our collective salvation from ecological and sociological catastrophe.

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