

Old challenges in building a new Kerala

The Nava Kerala Mission requires decentralised planning and the participation of the local government



M.A. OOMMEN

For the Kerala government, the Nava Kerala (new Kerala) Mission, which seeks to address problems in four key sectors, has only become a bigger challenge after the 2018 floods. A Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) report, prepared by a team of 76 international experts in collaboration with the State government, estimates that ₹31,000 crore, which was 4% of the GSDP in 2018-19, is needed to rebuild the State. Reconstructing 17,316 houses, repairing 46,000 houses, rebuilding 1,613 schools, etc. are herculean tasks. Turning this challenge into an opportunity depends on the will and vision of the people. Rebuilding is different from repairing and demands a paradigm shift in the concept and strategy of development. A novel vision and holistic approach must replace the prevailing ad hoc approach. The PDNA report provides an excellent starting point for this.

Strengths and weaknesses

For any purposeful rebuilding, we need to identify both the strength and capabilities of the State as well as its major failures. Kerala has a fascinating human development narrative and a rich biodiversity. Since the Communist Party of India ascended to power in Kerala in 1957, the State has abolished landlordism, managed a literacy rate that is more than 90%, provided affordable healthcare, ensured decentralised people's planning, and seen the growing inflow of foreign remittances. However, social failures such as widening inequality, marginalisation of the most vulnerable sections of society, an increase in the crime rate, atrocities against women and children, a high suicide rate, and road accidents have been ignored by decision-makers.

Antonio Gramsci famously said that politics means conscious action (praxis) in pursuit of a common goal. While adversarial politics is part of democratic practice, the polarising approach which Kerala witnesses today is unhelpful in the context of re-



"Rebuilding is different from repairing and demands a paradigm shift in the concept and strategy of development." A scene from Paravur in Kerala after the floods in 2018. ■ REUTERS

building. New political idioms through discussions are important, for no society can meaningfully function without some presumption of trust and openness. The State needs significant transparency guarantees. Transparency guarantees – "the freedom to deal with one another under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity", as Amartya Sen observes – have an instrumental role "in preventing corruption, financial irresponsibility and underhand dealings". Rent-seeking and growing disregard for the rule of law cannot be the basis for rebuilding.

Today Kerala is told that it should recapture the spirit of renaissance. One needs to clarify this. It is discovering and rediscovering the essence of humanity, which has been under a cloud in recent times. Like the Enlightenment in Europe that threw up reason against religious fundamentalism, Narayana Guru brought out the significance of freedom for those who were suffering caste and class unfreedoms. The moot question is whether Kerala will sink preconceived religious prejudices and political fundamentalism and imbue the public sphere with reason.

The project requires the participation of the local government, and decentralised planning. The third tier of governance in Kerala comprising nearly 22,000 elected representatives is known for its multistage planning process and people's participation. What is wrong in making the local government the centre of recovery and rebuilding?

The current debates and the PDNA report are silent on urban governance. Several problems in Kerala arise out of the failure to address the issue of a rising urban population. Urban Kerala has the highest monthly per capita consumption expenditure in India. As a result, the report estimates the daily municipal solid waste production in Kerala to be at 10,044 tonnes. This is besides the colossal disaster debris that remains to be cleared. It is not difficult to revive the gram sabha spirit of the past as part of the rebuilding project. Section 55 of the Kerala Municipality Act, 1994 provides for the creation of a State Development Council presided over by the Chief Minister with the Chief Secretary as Convener and comprising members of the Council of Ministers and leaders of pan-chayats and municipalities. Both the United Democratic Front and the Left Democratic Front have wasted this institution. The State Development Council can be made the umbrella organisation that will integrate the Nava Kerala Mission and the local government to serve as the centrepiece of the rebuilding project.

Many people speak of making Kerala a green State. A green economy is not possible without an understanding of the havoc that has been done to the land-use pattern through indifferent policies and action. Reminiscent of Keats' line, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever", Kerala has to be consciously conserved – not just for tourists but for everyone. Human beings have to rely on nature's resources for

survival, but aggressive development invites nature's wrath in the form of landslides and floods.

The change in land-use pattern and water management has resulted in a sharp decline in the area under paddy: from 35% of the crop area in the 1960s to 7% today. Rice cultivation is done on watershed basis. The water scarcity that Kerala faces today is largely linked to paddy reclamation. Since the Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act was belatedly passed in 2008, not much has happened except the ratification of all the illegal transgressions.

Unless we realise that the quarrying, metal crushing and sand mining mafias are endangering Kerala's ecosystem, no meaningful land use and mining policy can be implemented. The Seventh Report of the Legislative Environment Committee regarding the working of the quarries speaks of the pathological environmental management underway in Kerala. Placating vocal voter interests (as in throwing away the Gadgil report) can never be the way to build common good and sustainable development. The PDNA recommendations for an integrated water resource management approach should never be neglected.

An end to social exclusion

Why the tribals and the historically marginalised remain neglected is a question that needs to be raised as part of the rebuilding project. Indeed, the disasters have brought to sharp focus once again the vulnerabilities of the poor in general as well as of the elderly, women, the trans-genders, and the disabled. Given Kerala's growing elderly phenomenon, the three million migrant labourers will have to be made a dignified part of its social life. Will Kerala see rebuilding as an opportunity to put an end to the social exclusion through structural reforms and action?

A road policy that aims to reduce accidents should be another priority of the rebuilding project. In 2018, nearly 4,800 people died in road accidents. The State needs a Road Reconstruction Policy that will reduce such accidents. If Kerala is to consciously be rebuilt as a thing of beauty, half the battle will be won.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Conversations benefit journalism

Even in a polarising environment, it is vital to continue the dialogue between journalists and readers



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

My last column, "Neither vainglorious nor venturesome" (February 18, 2019), generated a debate among journalists about the need to converse with the critics of journalism. Some felt that Jeff Jarvis's prescription, that it is the sacred duty of journalists to listen to the public they serve, needed some modification. They argued that there is a need to make a distinction between the larger public served by journalism and the small, vocal and blatantly partisan section that has been undermining not only journalism, but also the idea of the public sphere.

Engage or disengage?

Journalists felt that this column, which is designed to be a dialogue between the newspaper and its readers, should strive to inform readers about the challenges faced by them in a polarising environment. I would like to summarise their angst in five points. One, we have a government that has a peculiar Teflon coat – none of its monumental failures stick on it. Two, facts are compared with rhetoric and hyperbole. Three, misogyny has grown and become toxic. Four, the threat to individual journalists' safety has become real, and attacks against journalists are taking place with impunity. Five, social media is used to discredit journalism and journalists. In this environment, what should be the relationship between journalists and the social media?

A couple of reporters asked whether I, as a readers' representative in a newspaper, agree with Farhad Manjoo, an opinion columnist for *The New York Times*, who asked journalists to disengage from the daily rhythms of Twitter, which he described as "the world's most damaging social network". They wanted to know whether it is possible to carry on with the dialogue process if one section refuses to follow any rules and prefers instead to spew venom and vitriol and threaten people. Mathew Ingram's essay, "The yin and yang of Twitter and jour-

nalism", explores journalism's difficult relationship with Twitter in a nuanced manner.

The points raised are real and disturbing. But disengaging is not the answer. As someone who handles complaints for this newspaper, I can vouch for the fact that the majority of the readers are without rancour. They are inquisitive and desire a fruitful engagement with the newspaper. They may not be as garrulous as the trolls. But they are able to distinguish between journalism and propaganda. They are appalled when reporters are attacked for raising pertinent questions and holding those who wield power accountable. They respect investigative journalism and they value truth. Hence, engaging with them is an inevitable task.

Truth and propaganda

The key question is how to distinguish between a truly inquisitive reader and a propagandist who wants to undermine journalism and the public discourse. I believe that journalists who have developed excellent editorial judgment find the difference in the very first sentence of the communication.

Discerning readers, who form the bulk of those who support journalism, ask journalists questions to scrutinise those in power. They do not pose questions to obfuscate truth or to defend the regime. These readers are able to see that journalism's first obligation is to tell the truth and its first loyalty is to citizens. They do not want propaganda articles or uncritical appeasement pieces. Citizens look for credible information to make an informed choice.

Journalists must realise that informed readers do not confuse objectivity with naïve neutrality. One cannot be neutral when a young girl is stalked and killed, or when marginalised people are further exploited, or when there is an open display of dominance-dependency in an equation. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel rightly pointed out, journalistic responsibility is "to provide citizens with the tools they need to extract knowledge for themselves from the undifferentiated flood of rumour, propaganda, gossip, fact, assertion, and allegation the communications system now produces." Hence, it is vital to continue the dialogue between journalists and readers, and not be short-circuited by the viciousness of the trolls.

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SINGLE FILE

Blatantly banal

Bollywood is noteworthy in turning homosexual characters into caricatures

KUNAL RAY



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Bollywood suffers from the messiah complex. Or perhaps that is a much-coveted status that we have thoughtlessly ascribed to the banal and innocuous films it produces. There was much hype around the release of *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, which

has same-sex love at its core. I watched it out of curiosity, given what we know about Bollywood's despicable track record of depicting same-sex love. Remember *Dostana*? Bollywood is particularly noteworthy in turning gay, lesbian and transgender characters into caricatures, perennial residents of marginalia. Their yearning, agony and desire remain entirely unexplored. Of course, this doesn't include films such as *My Brother... Nikhil* or *Aligarh*.

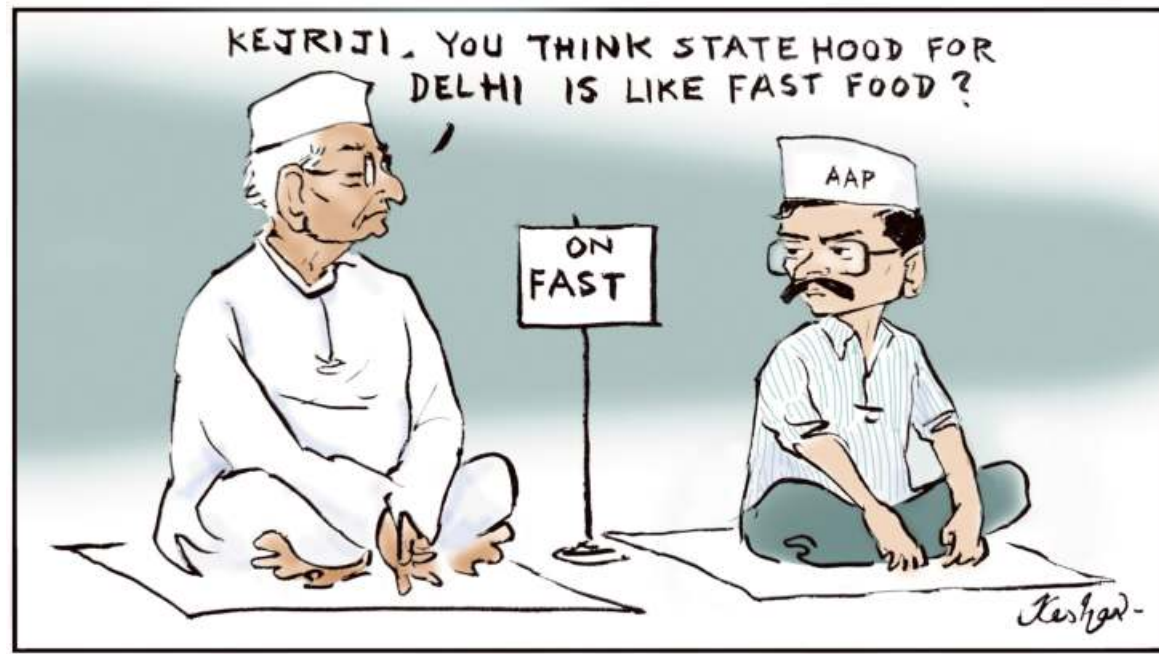
Unsurprisingly, then, *Ek Ladki...* is at best a formulaic Bollywood film that features love between two women as merely a plot novelty. My hopes were expectedly dashed while watching the film amidst unending giggles and guffaws when Sweetie (Sonam Kapoor) declares her love for Kuhu (Regina Cassandra). It has all the trappings of a quintessential Bollywood potboiler: the bucolic small-town Punjab setting where everybody is nice and happy, mind-numbing music, a struggling writer (again a classic Bollywood trope), a loving grandmother, and some moments in the big city (Delhi in this case, because how can these love stories originate in small towns?) amidst other props.

Further, Bollywood love stories cannot be realised without strife. Thus, there is the unfeeling elder brother and a prototypical villain from whom his beloved sister must be rescued. What's new then? Only that homosexual love replaces heterosexual love? Same-sex love is thus reduced to a convenient plot point to enable the director to deliver a social message.

Besides, the women in love need a heterosexual man (Rajkumar Rao) as the knight in shining armour to bring them together and of course the dutiful patriarch of the family (Anil Kapoor) must approve the match. They have no agency, which is a seriously problematic position. Sweetie and Kuhu's first meeting and eventual falling in love are the most unimaginative I have seen in recent Hindi cinema. For the lack of a better description, it is a poorly etched fairytale far removed from real life experiences. When will Bollywood stop the 'othering' of the same-sex love story? I wonder if this discourse helps the cause or is more of a disservice.

During a conversation with his mother in the film, Rajkumar Rao is told to write *sach* (the truth) and not a story. After watching *Ek Ladki...*, one is left wondering whether this notion would apply equally to the filmmaker. The day when Bollywood films begin to tell stories that adhere to the *sach* principle and eschew blatantly simplistic narratives will be the day that the depiction of minorities, sexual or otherwise, will become truer to their ground realities.

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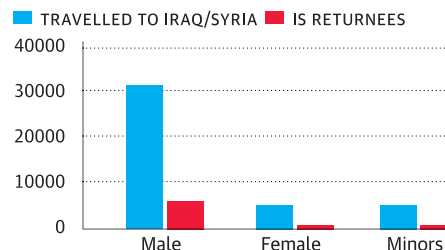
DATA POINT

A long way home

Recently, a woman from the U.S. and another from the U.K. who were part of the Islamic State sought to return home, but were refused entry. Over 40,000 people from 80 countries joined the IS till the fall of the 'Caliphate' in 2017. Only a small percentage have returned to the country from where they left. By Varun B. Krishnan

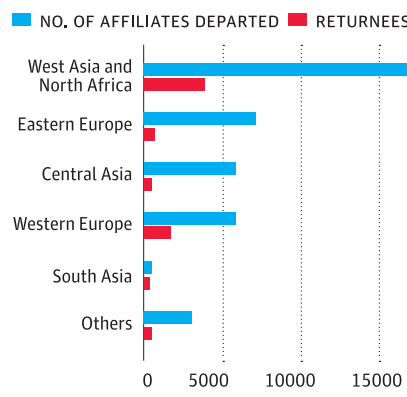
The missing women

The percentage of women who returned to their countries of departure is minuscule (about 5%) as they may be held in detention centres, transferred to other regions, or killed. The status of several of them is unknown



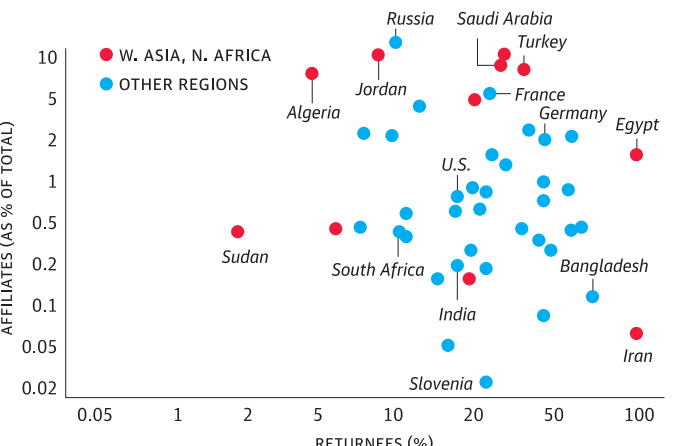
Where were they from?

A region-wise break-up shows that about 45% of the IS affiliates were from West Asia and North Africa. About 9% of these affiliates returned to their countries of departure. There were also a large number of them from Europe



Back to base

About 5,000 affiliates from Russia (including Chechnya and Dagestan) travelled to Syria/Iraq to join the IS. Only around 8% of them have returned. The scatter plot shows the affiliates from each country as a percentage of total fighters and the percentage of affiliates who returned to their countries of departure



Definitions
Affiliate: Person who travelled to Iraq or Syria and joined the IS in some capacity.
Returnee: Affiliate who returned to his or her country of departure (those who travelled to third countries not included).

Source: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation report, July 2018, which collated the data from official govt. reports, institutional publications and media reports

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 25, 1969

Anglo-French row

Whatever chances there might have been of considering Gen. De Gaulle's proposals for a "new Europe" on their merits were seriously damaged over the weekend by an acrimonious debate between Britain and France on whether the French President's ideas and intentions were accurately conveyed to the British Government by Mr. Christopher Soames, British Ambassador in Paris, to whom the General first put them across, and on whether it was proper for the British Government to pass on the proposals to West Germany without prior French consent. Gen. De Gaulle proposed that the E.E.C. might be replaced by a larger free trading area and NATO might eventually disappear yielding place to another, less rigid and less institutional, arrangement for the defence of the Western world.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 25, 1919

Tilak Case in London.

The Tilak case was continued to-day [February 20, in London]. Addressing the jury Sir E. Carson declared that the case ought to have been tried in India. Mr. Tilak ought certainly to have the verdict if he deserved it but Sir E. Carson emphasised the result of such a verdict on the Government of India and white officials in India. Mr. Tilak had the most profound British justice and before giving the verdict the jury ought to take into account the whole of Mr. Tilak's actions since 1893. Sir J. Simon pointed out that when Mr. Tilak was tried for sedition in Poona in 1897 not a word was said about the murder. Of Mr. Rand also the Government in Bombay confirmed Tilak's election to the Legislative Council. He was not seeking to justify everything Mr. Tilak had done but even the devil should have his due. The case was adjourned.

CONCEPTUAL

Restorative justice

LAW

This refers to a form of criminal justice where the major emphasis of court proceedings is on repairing the damages imposed by a criminal on the victim of the crime. This view of criminal justice is in direct contrast to the modern criminal justice system that is focused primarily on retribution against the criminal. Restorative justice closely involves the victim of a crime in the judicial process so that proper compensation is offered to him through the imposition of an appropriate penalty on the person who committed the crime. Under the restorative justice system, a crime is not viewed as an act against the law but simply as an issue between the criminal and the victim.

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