

Interplay of Socio-Communal Dynamics and Political Influences: Shaping Higher Education Policy in Kerala

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Abstract:

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Kerala's education sector, focusing on its achievements, challenges, and the intricate nexus of politics. Kerala is renowned for its advanced education system, high literacy rates and nearly universal primary education. However, disparities persist in higher education, exacerbated by politicization and issues related to social justice. The political landscape in Kerala is deeply intertwined with its education sector, with caste and communal factors influencing governance and policy decisions. The emergence of influential middle-class groups and communal organizations has led to challenges like corruption and nepotism in private educational institutions. Campus politics further exacerbates these issues, limiting academic freedom and governance. Despite advocacy for social justice in higher education policy, disparities among vulnerable groups persist. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from policymakers, educational institutions, and civil society. Strengthening governance mechanisms, promoting inclusivity, and fostering academic freedom are essential for achieving a more equitable education system in Kerala.

Keywords: Higher Education Policy, Kerala, Caste, Community, Social movements.

Methodology

The study involved a systematic approach to gather, analyse, and synthesize information on Kerala's education sector. It involved a literature review, data collection, analysis, and data synthesis to identify trends, patterns, and disparities. Scholarly perspectives were incorporated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The information was critically evaluated to ensure accuracy and relevance. The text was organized and edited to ensure clarity and coherence. The methodology provided a comprehensive overview of Kerala's education sector and its political and social dynamics.

Introduction

Kerala's education sector is highly acclaimed and extensively studied. Kerala is considered highly advanced in education in India due to its population having an average of 7.7 years of schooling, far higher than the national average of 5.6 years in 2009-10. One state in India has achieved a high level of literacy and nearly universal primary education. The enrollment rates in secondary education are quite high. With almost all individuals receiving school education, the level of disparity among various social, gender and economic categories is minimal. The state's achievement in higher education, while not as outstanding as

in school education, is nonetheless positively compared to the system in the rest of the country, however, it has not garnered much notice. (Tilak J., 2016)

This brief analysis examines key aspects of higher education in Kerala using data from 2006 to 2016. The higher education sector in Kerala is equivalent to the national level based on many quantitative metrics. In certain aspects, Kerala's higher education system is even better than that in quickly growing southern states. Nevertheless, there are significant risks that remain, with the primary concern being the fast expansion of the non-philanthropic commercial sector in higher education. If left uncontrolled, this growth might potentially undermine the fundamental principles of a fair and impartial higher education system, which is essential for a compassionate society.

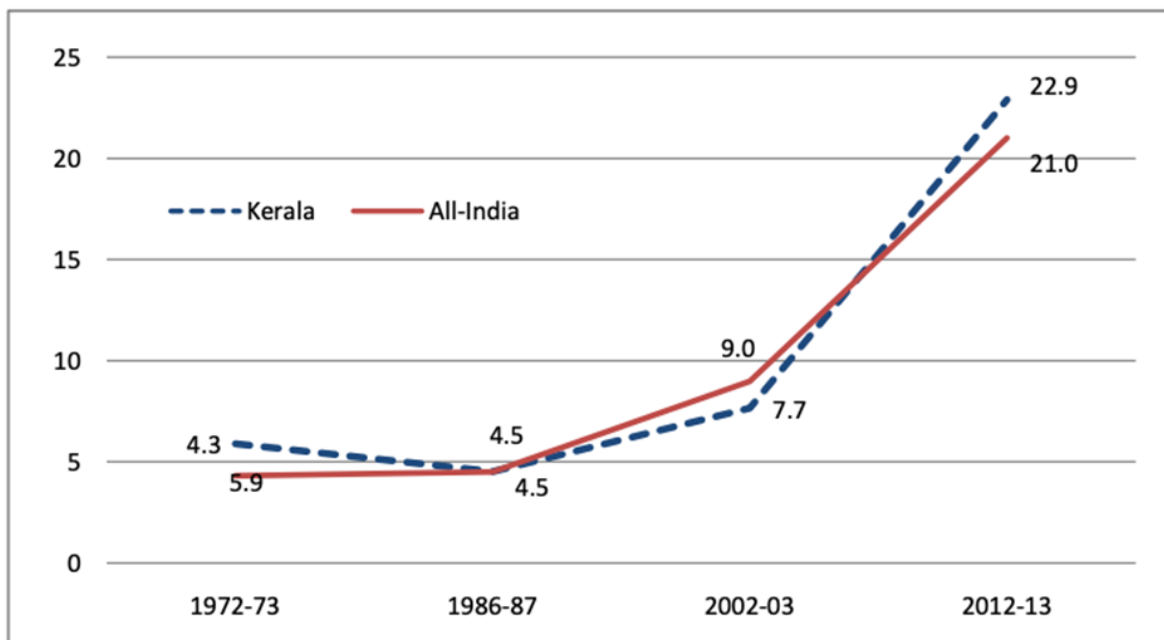


Figure 1 the gross enrolment ratio in higher education.

The higher education sector in Kerala has experienced remarkable growth. Enrolment in higher education has surged more than fourfold in 13 years, reaching over 720,000 in 2012-13 from 170,000 in 1998-99. The gross enrolment ratio in higher education in Kerala rose from 5.9% in 1972-73 to 22.9% in 2012-13. There has been significant growth during around forty years. The ratio had accelerated growth from 2000-01 to 2012-13. In 2000-01, the ratio was 9.0%. Kerala now has a higher gross enrolment ratio in higher education compared to the national average. The gross enrolment ratio in 2012-13 was 21.0% nationwide. In 2000-01, Kerala was below the national level, but in 1972-73, Kerala was somewhat ahead of the national average. Kerala surpasses other Southern states not just in terms of gross enrollment ratio but also in the stock of graduates. of 2010, graduates made up 9.5% of the total population of Kerala, according to the National Sample Survey (66th round). The ratio is less than eight in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh according to NSSO 2010. (Tilak J., 2015)

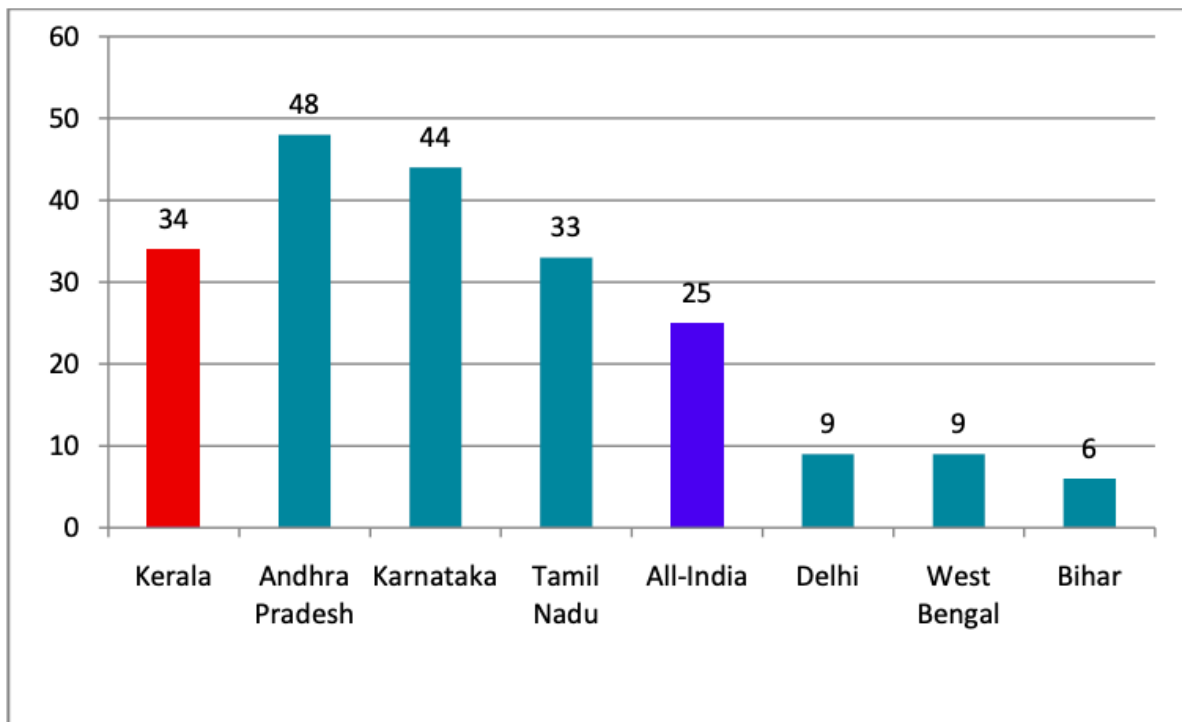


Figure 2 the number of colleges per 100,000 in India based on data from 2011 to 2013.

Inequalities in higher education are significantly reduced in Kerala compared to the national level. Kerala's performance in enrollment ratios by gender and caste groupings surpasses that of the national level and certain Southern states such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Women, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes have a higher gross enrolment ratio compared to the national average in India. Women accounted for 26.9% of the population in 2012-13, while males accounted for 18.9%. In Kerala, women have a higher enrollment rate compared to males. The distribution of educational attainment, assessed by the education Gini index, shows relatively low inequality in Kerala.

In 2012-13, the state had a total of 17 university-level institutions, comprising one central university and 11 state universities. There are also two institutions classified as universities. Proposals are being made to establish an Indian Institute of Technology, an Indian Institute of Information Technology, and many other scientific and technology-focused higher education institutions in the state. There are around 1100 colleges, including those focused on arts and sciences as well as professional and technical fields. Kerala, being a tiny state, considers these statistics to be significant. There are 1100 institutions, which translates to 34 colleges per 100,000 people, compared to the national average of 26 colleges per 100,000 people in India. The college-population index is 9 in Delhi and West Bengal. The number is significantly greater in southern states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Kerala has a greater density of technical and medical institutes per million people compared to the national average.

This will explore some themes to clarify the socio-communal and political effects on the higher education policy in Kerala.

1. Caste and community dynamics in Kerala

Caste and communalism are crucial factors in Kerala politics, essential for the functioning of the state's

political administration. Even before the establishment of Kerala state, the caste, sectarian, and regional factors started to significantly influence Kerala politics. Kerala is renowned for its high literacy rate, resulting in each individual having their own political beliefs and hobbies. Around 50% of Kerala's population belongs to minority communities, and their political preferences towards certain parties influence the establishment of coalition administrations in the state. Caste and communal political parties are constraining the influence of national political parties in the mainstream politics of Kerala. The study examines the prevalence of communal politics in all assembly elections in Kerala, analyses the impact of these communal parties on electoral politics in Kerala, and evaluates the Left Democratic Front and United Democratic Front's stance on the accumulation of communal influence in Kerala's electoral politics. (SHETH, 2009)

In Kerala politics, caste, sectarian, and regional aspects are prevalent. The establishment of UDF and LDF has been significant in the political governance of Kerala. Caste and communal groupings are the primary variables that determine the stability and volatility of Kerala politics. Caste and sectarian groupings are now essential components of the coalition ministry in Kerala. In the 1957 Kerala legislative assembly election, the first communist administration took office, although they still faced challenges related to caste and sectarian influences. Dr. Jitendra Singh researched the political landscape of Kerala and identified many causes for the communist victory in the 1957 election. He highlights community and caste dynamics as important reasons for the success of the communist party. The greatest support for the congress comes from the Christian community, particularly Catholics, while the communists receive support from the Ezhavas and scheduled castes. Muslims who backed the Muslim League did not vote for the Communist Party; instead, nationalist Muslims who did not support the Muslim League favoured the Congress. Therefore, the Nairs could exert influence over all three political parties. He discovered that the communist administration had gained power with the backing of caste and sectarian groups.

A mid-term poll was performed in 1960 following the conclusion of the first communist administration. Most major communal groupings had a predetermined goal of overthrowing the communist cabinet from the Kerala Legislative Assembly. A strong alliance was established by the major communal and caste groups, including Nairs, Christians, and Muslims, for this aim. PSP and the Muslim League formed a political partnership in Congress. Church organisations within these groupings worked together to secure the election success of the candidates from the united front of democratic forces. The communists were defeated in the 1960 Assembly election by an alliance of Congress, PSP, and Muslim League, winning 94 seats and forming a coalition administration under Pattom. A. Thanu Pillai from the PSP party as the Chief Minister. However, his government only endured for two years. In 1962, Congress established its administration with R. as the chief minister. Sankar is a prominent leader of SNDP, a communal organisation. Within two years, the Sankar government had to leave office due to personal and communal conflicts within the group. The 1965 elections presented a very different portrayal of state politics. This transformation happened as a result of two significant events: the division inside the communist party and within the Congress Party. The communist party split into the CPI and CPI(M). In addition to the original Indian National Congress, the Congress party has established a new section known as the Kerala Congress, which primarily functions as a Christian regional party. An electoral alliance was formed between the CPI(M), Muslim League, and SSP on one side, and the CPI, RSP, and several independents on the other side during the election. (Rajan, 2018)

The 11th assembly election took place on May 10, 2001. UDF won the assembly. Communal parties have played a significant role in both the LDF and UDF. In the UDF-IUML coalition, KC(M) and KC(Jacob)

made significant efforts to secure support from Muslim and Christian communities to gain communal and caste-based votes. In the 2006 general assembly election, the CPI(M) led LDF defeated the incumbent Indian National Congress-led UDF by a margin of 99 out of 140 seats. Veteran CPI(M) leader V.S. Achuthanandan headed the LDF administration in Kerala during the 2006 assembly election. The LDF received a significant amount of votes in the 2006 Assembly election mostly from the Ezhava population. In 2006, both the Ezhava and Nair communities together backed the LDF in their triumph. Christians and Muslims were the primary supporters of the UDF. The BJP received a small percentage of votes, primarily from upper-caste Hindus. The outcome of the 2011 Kerala assembly election was seen as a significant comeback for the LDF and a disappointment for the UDF, which just avoided a loss. The UDF gained a margin of only 0.9% more votes than the LDF in this election. The LDF managed to overcome anti-incumbency towards the end of their term but failed to regain power mostly because the Christian and Muslim populations, who traditionally support the UDF, voted in favour of them. The Christians from Kottayam, Idukki, and Ernakulam districts, along with the Muslims from Malappuram district, played a crucial role in the UDF's close win in the 2011 Kerala legislative assembly election. The UDF received 65% of the Muslim vote and 67% of the Christian vote in the election.

The 2016 assembly elections had significant importance in the political history of Kerala. In the 2016 election, a significant event occurred in Kerala's history when a social-religious organisation, SNDP Yogam, made a political move by forming an electoral alliance with the BJP to create a new political party called BDJS. The newly established BDJS did not get any seats in the legislature, although it received 3.9% of the votes, exceeding the expectations of both political parties. The BJP, leading the NDA, seized the chance to finish its 36-year fight to gain entry into the state legislature. This was a significant shift in the state's electoral history as the BJP secured its first victory through O. Rajagopal represents the 'Nemam' constituency. The BJP came in second place in 7 more seats with K. Surendran defeated by a narrow margin of 89 votes in Manjeswaram. These findings indicate the communal attitudes of Keralites against the BJP and BDJS. The electoral commission said that the BJP's performance surpasses that of both the LDF and UDF. (Paleri, 2023).

Kerala has a significant level of caste and sectarian impact in comparison to other regions of India. The Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore regions exhibit distinct communal inclinations towards Kerala's political system. These tendencies have been more pronounced since the foundation of the state of Kerala, leading to the fluctuating dynamics between the Left Democratic Front and the United Democratic Front. In Kerala, the rise of caste and communal dominance is leading to several issues such as the politicisation of communal differences, clashes, riots, administrative incompetence, personal and political prejudices, and government instability. It will transform the democratic system into an anarchic one.

2. Social movements' influence on higher education policy

The multitude of political and social forces in Kerala is now reshaping society. It is crucial for the advancement that farmers and labourers are liberated from the Brahmanical caste system and the socio-political framework based on land ownership. The political party's efforts in the 1960s to secure land rights for farmers served as a barrier to prevent their exploitation. In later years, this mentality affected the development policies of Kerala through a people-centred approach. Social movements in Kerala have influenced academia and created a significant Social Justice arena. Educational reforms in Kerala aim to promote social justice regardless of rural/urban divide and gender discrepancy.

India, as a growing nation, has been making significant advancements in its academic sector during the nineteenth century, reaching out to all sectors of its society. The country's wealth growth, advancements in scientific technology, and the introduction of the Internet have significantly enhanced academic progress across all fields. The recent rapid development in the academic sector serves as strong evidence of this phenomenon. Various academic initiatives from different regions of the country have received substantial government support through strategic planning in various policies. The active involvement of the business sector has led to significant progress and growth in the Indian academic sector. Private higher education institutes in India account for over 60% of all higher education institutions. Over the past decade, there has been a significant expansion in the establishment of higher education institutions in India, making it the country with the second-largest number of such institutions and student enrollment globally. While there are enough opportunities in higher education, the true attainment of Social Justice is uncertain due to factors such as socioeconomic disparities, the dispersion of educational institutions in urban and rural areas, and gender discrimination.

Social justice in academia is widely recognised as crucial for overall advancement and sustainability. The NIEPA (National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration) and the Indian Higher Education Report 2016 focus on the issue of Social Justice in the Indian higher education system. The study examines problems related to the expansion and advancement of higher education, imbalances in cultural, gender, social, regional, and economic aspects and their impact on education, student diversity and inequity, and the changing landscape of the Nation, Industry, and private sector during a period of significant growth in the academic sector.

3. Reservation Policies and their effects.

The notion of the Creamy Layer among Other Backward Classes (OBCs) originated from the landmark Mandal case (Indra Sawhney & Others vs. Government of India) before the Supreme Court. The Central Government issued an Office Memorandum to reserve 27% of jobs in central government services following the Mandal Commission's recommendations. Indra Sawhney contested the ruling at the Supreme Court. The constitutional bench of the highest court confirmed the decision to allocate 27% reservation for OBCs in Central Government service. The Supreme Court ruled that the creamy layer of the OBC community shall be excluded from reservation benefits. The Central Government has established a panel led by Justice Ram Nandan Prasad to determine the affluent segment within the OBC community. The commission's suggestion was approved by the Central Government. The Central Government issued an order outlining guidelines and criteria for eliminating the Creamy Layer among OBC individuals. The criteria and standards for identifying the Creamy Layer among OBCs remain unchanged.

SI No	Category	Percentage of reservation
SOCIALLY AND EDUCATIONALLY BACKWARD COMMUNITIES		
1	Ezhava/Billava/Thiyya	9
2	Muslim	8
3	Other Backward Hindu	3
4	Latin Catholic & Anglo Indian	3
5	Other Backward Christians	1
6	Dheevara	2
7	Viswakarma	2
8	Kusava/ Kulala/Kumbhara	1
9	Kudumbi	1
Total for OBC		30

Figure 3. The allocation of seats in professional degree courses, sourced from BCDD Kerala.

SI No	Category	Percentage of Reservation
SOCIALLY AND EDUCATIONALLY BACKWARD COMMUNITIES		
1	Ezhava / Thiyya / Billava	8
2	Muslim	7
3	Latin Catholic /SIUC	1
4	Other Backward Hindu	3
5	Other Backward Christians	1
Total for OBC		20

Figure 4 The reservation of arts and scientific courses in Kerala. Source. BCDD Kerala.

Sl No	Category	Percentage of Reservation	
		HSE	VHSE
	SOCIALLY AND EDUCATIONALLY BACKWARD COMMUNITIES		
1.	Ezhava /Billava/Thiyya	8	9
2.	Muslim	7	8
3	Latin Catholic &SIUC	3	3
4	Other Backward Christians	1	1
5	Dheevera	2	2
6	Kudumbi	1	1
7	Viswakarma	2	2
8	Kusavan/Kulalan/Kulala Nair/ Kumbharan/Velan/Odan/Kulala/Andhra Nair/Andhur Nair	1	1
9	Other Backward Hindu	3	3
	Total	28	30

Figure 5 data on higher education reservations in Kerala, sourced from BCDD, Kerala.

In Kerala, reservation in State Government Services was allocated to Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes at rates of 40%, 8%, and 2%, respectively. The Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019, passed in 2019, created reservations for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in public employment and higher education. In 2020, the Public Service Commission implemented alterations to the reservation policy in Kerala.

The decision elicited a critical response from Muslim community leaders and Dalit leaders. Many believe that the Left Democratic Front, in power in Kerala since 2016, is attempting to regain the backing of the upper castes following its decision to allow women to attend Sabarimala Temple.

Several organisations, particularly Muslim groups, have objected to the One Hundred and Third Amendments. They claim that the increased quota goes against the Supreme Court's ruling in the Indra Sawhney case. The Bench declared that economic grounds alone cannot be the only justification for reservations. The 50% max restriction of bookings was also confirmed. In May 2021, the Supreme Court declined to reconsider the ruling that limited reservation in the Maratha Reservation issue. Muslims cite these two incidents as they argue that the increased quota violates the ideals of the reservation programme in India.

The Kerala High Court overturned a decision made by a single bench to modify university regulations to provide reservations for SC/ST applicants in hiring at supported non-minority institutions.

The court's division bench stated that the right to nominate staff, including both teaching and non-teaching personnel, is acknowledged as a component of the right to create and manage an educational institution. The court reviewed four appeals and a petition, with the main case being W.A. Number 1664/2015.

The high court referenced a 2002 Supreme Court ruling (TMA Pai Foundation vs. State of Karnataka) to clarify that government oversight in the appointment of staff at private educational institutions is limited to creating rules that support effective administration and prevent mismanagement. The court stated that the authority to hire employees is with the management, and the government does not have the authority to exert extensive control over these organisations.

The government pays teachers' salaries but does not have any disciplinary or supervisory authority over the faculty. Hence, the institutions do not meet the criteria to be considered instrumentalities of the State, as indicated in the ruling.

4. Impact of religion and community on educational institutions

The literacy rates of the scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribal (ST) populations in the state are greater than the general population in India but lower than the general population in the state. 10.7% of pupils are from the SC category and 1.2% are from the ST category in schools. Their enrollment percentage corresponds to their representation in the school-age population, with 10.4% for SCs and 1.2% for STs. The proportion of SC and ST students in higher education enrollment reflects their respective percentages in the state's overall population, which are 9.8% and 1.1%.

Over 94% of the rural population has access to a primary school within 1 km, and 98% have a school within 2 km. Over 96% of the population has access to an upper primary school/section located within 3 kilometres. Almost 98% of the rural population has access to secondary school within an 8 km radius. Rural students have access to higher and technical education facilities within a reasonable distance. The broad availability of public transit and significantly discounted fares have made it easier for rural students to visit higher educational institutions in urban areas.

Most new educational entrepreneurs are primarily driven by business motives. Religious and caste groups that formerly funded education using their own resources are increasingly opting for student funding to support education. Universities, government institutions, and cooperatives established by the government are currently initiating the establishment of colleges paid only by students. Many job-oriented courses such as nursing, medical, engineering, and management are being offered in the self-financing sector.

Kerala's educational system has primarily evolved through government-owned or government-supported institutions. Schools do not charge any fees at any level. Tuition costs at government-owned or government-aided higher education and technical schools are quite affordable. In 2006-07, the government was able to recoup only 2.6% of its revenue expenditure.

Kerala's school system has mostly achieved gender parity in enrollment. Almost half of the students in lower primary schools are female. Gender inequality in pre-primary school enrollment is minimal according to the CSES 2002. Girls make up a larger percentage of students in higher grades at schools. The proportion is significantly greater at arts and science colleges at both the graduate and postgraduate levels. Girls are underrepresented in professional courses. In Kerala, over 70% of teachers in schools are female, compared to 50% nationwide. Female instructors make up around 50% of the faculty at arts and scientific universities.

Multiple detailed examinations at a small-scale show that the situation is not as positive as implied by the overall numbers mentioned before. The investigations showed that the overall statistics hide significant

disparities in educational accomplishments among individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds. Exclusionary patterns have been intensifying since the 1990s. These causes include rising private expenses for students, expansion of student-funded schools, reinforcement of non-financial entry obstacles, and insufficient focus on issues faced by disadvantaged populations.

Historically, religious groups and community organisations were primarily responsible for creating both the need for and provision of educational possibilities. Educational progress in the state was led by Christian missionaries, local parishes, Nair Service Society (NSS), Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDPY), and the Muslim Educational Society. The agencies were directed by the educational and social requirements of their communities and the broader community. Some commercial agencies played a key role in extending education to underdeveloped areas, castes, and socially and economically marginalised communities. Some of these agencies also advocated for the advancement of girls' education. Resources for establishing schools and colleges were gathered from the local area or community using a range of clever methods. Student fees were just one of the resources used to cover the recurring expenses. Privatisation did not result in the commercialization of education. The state provided various forms of support to these entities. The current leadership of these community groups, established during social reform movements, no longer have a noble objective, similar to political parties. The current leaders of these institutions lack a coherent vision for the direction of Kerala society, unlike their predecessors. Community groups seldom initiate new programmes to meet the educational needs of disadvantaged communities and the underprivileged inside their communities.

Over time, religious and caste associations evolved into pressure groups. They quickly gained significant influence in Kerala politics from the start. New political parties have emerged primarily to safeguard the interests of certain populations. Kathleen Gough emphasised the communal nature of political activities in Kerala. The relationship between caste, social status, and political party allegiance prompts an inquiry into the presence of 'casteism' in Kerala politics. Political parties vie for power by seeking support from various communal groups such as NSS, SNDP, Muslim League, and Catholic Church to secure more seats. The influential power of educational agencies and communal organisations was so significant that it could thwart all efforts to restrict the unethical labour practices of private management, attempted by the rulers of Travancore and later by both Communist and Congress governments. Neither the United Democratic Front (UDF) nor the Left Democratic Front has successfully reduced the prevalent corruption, nepotism, and communalization in the hiring of instructors at assisted schools and institutions. Many educational institutions operated by minority religious groups such as Christians and Muslims utilise the minority rights outlined in the Constitution to safeguard their societal and economic interests in education. Corruption and nepotism in the hiring process at private educational institutions have prevented teachers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds from entering the field.

Several factors contribute to the emergence of the middle class. Higher education has contributed to the development of this social class. Individuals who obtained advanced education, benefiting from substantial government subsidies in the past, have transitioned into the emerging middle class. Commercial farm expansion, industrial employment, and service sector jobs have all fuelled the emergence of this social class. Land reforms enabled former tenants, primarily from middle castes and communities, to free themselves from feudal control and transition into middle peasants. Global migration has contributed to the development of the middle class.

Religious and caste groupings also hurt educational growth. The 1931 Census of Travancore, as cited in Nair's work from 1981, observed that the expansion of education did not break down caste barriers but

instead reinforced them. Each caste remained exclusive, striving to maintain its distinct identity within the political structure to protect its interests. Educated individuals from various communities, despite their communal tendencies, formed a powerful middle-class group that assumed leadership roles in most social and political organisations in the state. Despite the increase in knowledge among the general population, political activities in Kerala are mostly influenced by sectarian groupings.

5. Political impact on higher education policy

The governments are intervening in both academic and non-academic affairs of the higher education institutions in the country. Many appointments, especially for high-ranking positions like Vice-Chancellors, are highly politicised. These political appointments not only restrict academic freedom but also impact the academic quality and independence of universities. This behaviour fosters a culture of seeking advantages through connections in academia, leading to nepotism, favouritism, and biased treatment towards staff and students. Universities have become hubs for misconduct, and excessive political involvement has turned them into a 'party organ.'

The issue in higher education in the state is the lack of effective university management, a topic often overlooked in discussions. Another crucial matter to consider is that a deficiency in university administration is leading to a decline in academic freedom at higher education institutions. The recent conflict between the Kerala governor and the state administration revealed the deficiencies in university governance and its detrimental impact on higher education institutions. Historically, governors have disagreed with state governments on matters like nepotism and political intervention in the selection of vice-chancellors. P Sathasivam, the ex-Chief Justice of India and former Governor of Kerala implemented many measures to address the chaos in the university sector that had accumulated in recent years while facing political influence. (Mittal, 2020)

During a time when Kerala's higher education sector is transitioning to a knowledge-based economy, it is crucial to eradicate political intervention in the management and oversight of universities. Academic freedom at higher education institutions relies on a robust and politically autonomous university administration. It is crucial to prevent the party's dominance in higher education administration. Kerala can realise its aim of becoming a Knowledge-Based Economy only under these circumstances.

Kerala is now facing challenging circumstances. Kerala is combating the COVID-19 pandemic as the LDF-led administration is facing other controversies. The current disagreement is between the Left Democratic Front administration, headed by Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, and Governor Arif Mohammed Khan. The political meddling in universities is aimed at undermining the autonomy of state higher education institutions. The LDF has faced allegations of widespread nepotism, particularly in the covert hiring of relatives of party leaders, within universities. This is the first time the Kerala Governor, who is the ex-officio chancellor of State Universities, has challenged the administration on this issue. (Govind, 2023)

The situation started when Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan wrote a letter to Chief Minister Vijayan, expressing dissatisfaction with political intervention in university matters. The Governor explicitly said in his letter that he is unable to continue serving as the Chancellor in this scenario and requested the government to dismiss him from his position (George, 2021). The Hindu reported on December 11th, 2021 that Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan expressed dissatisfaction with Gopinath Ravindran's renewal as Vice-Chancellor of Kannur University for a further 4 years. The University Grants Commission's (UGC) guidelines provide that a Search Committee must provide a list

of 3-5 candidates for Vice Chancellors. Only the candidate's name is required according to Kannur University's regulations. Gopinath Ravindran followed the University regulations when he assumed the role of Vice-Chancellor in 2017. The regulations were altered during the reappointment as reported in ONMANORAMA on December 14, 2021. A Search Committee consisting of three members was established to choose applicants for the position of Vice Chancellor at Kannur University. After the Kerala Governor approved the state government's suggestion to reinstate Professor Gopinath, the Search Committee was dissolved. The Kerala Governor stated that he re-appointed Prof Gopinath as Vice Chancellor due to significant pressure and had to cancel the selection process for a new Vice-Chancellor. R. Bindu, the Higher Education Minister of the LDF Government, intervened to reappoint the Vice Chancellor of Kannur University. The Minister reportedly wrote a letter requesting the Governor to rescind his announcement to establish a Search Committee and instead reinstate the Vice Chancellor.

In 2009, the University Grants Commission suggested modifications for Vice Chancellors that would restrict a second term to reduce susceptibility to political interference. Subsequently, these suggestions were retracted as a result of pressure from state government officials (Kumar 2010). Some argue that reappointment constitutes political involvement and exacerbates issues with university governance. The Kerala High Court rejected an application challenging the reappointment of the Vice-Chancellor of Kannur University on December 15, 2021. The Indian Express article is dated December 15, 2021. The matter of university governance must be tackled, notwithstanding any potential benefits it may bring to the state. Further talks and debates are required about this issue.

The syndicate, a group of policymakers at universities, is not a permanent entity and only has significant influence during their meetings. Syndicates, formerly seen as "think tanks," now serve as a tool for exerting party control on colleges. The makeup of the state's Syndicate differs among universities. Some Syndicates have a combination of nominated and elected members, while others have exclusively nominated members. Political parties designate sympathisers to preserve their interests in the state, whether they belong to UDF or LDF. When the LDF gains control, the UDF appointees are substituted by LDF supporters. Similarly, while the UDF is in power, their party members are given preference. University assistant professors who are members of teaching unions and political parties consider Syndicates to be a secure refuge. They are accepted to the Syndicate as part of the 'Eminent Educationist constituency'. Political party affiliations of people in power take precedence over the qualifications of prominent academics in the selection process. This applies irrespective of their possession of pertinent educational credentials and publications. Within the "Eminent Jurist constituency," party members who hold a law degree titled after them are thereafter selected for appointment. They behave as if they were superior vice-chancellors. The Syndicate Members exert influence to ensure Vice Chancellors yield to political pressure and endorse their party's agenda. Syndicates are marketing themselves as 'additional constitutional entities' even though they are not permanent entities. This creates a misleading perception that they possess greater authority than Vice Chancellors. This strategy is employed by the government to establish authority over universities. It regards the institutions as an extension of its higher education department and enforces regulations according to the ruling party's desires. The government is compelling technical universities to introduce political elements into the academic environment.

Political parties utilise campus politics to influence university administration and operations. Political engagement is prevalent on college and university campuses in Kerala. The primary student unions in Kerala are the Student Federation of India, affiliated with the Communist Party of India-Marxist, and the Kerala Students Union. Additional student unions include of the Indian National Congress Student Wing

and Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad. Political parties utilise these student clubs to address grievances with opponents and influence university authorities. They have conveyed the perception that student leaders have a position of superiority over the universities. This has resulted in them being seen as comparable to politicians at the national and state levels. University administrators typically hesitate to challenge these leaders. Some student unions have been known to restrict residency in college and university hostels to just those who are members of the union. The student union leaders are unresponsive to higher university officials and may use intimidation and violence to silence individuals who challenge them. Political parties influence student leaders by offering money or political careers to encourage them to resort to violence instead of fostering their development as responsible citizens. (Martelli, 2019)

Recently, some political parties have transformed their campuses into centres for electoral campaigning. CM started this trend. Vijayan is in Kerala before the 2021 Assembly Elections. During the CM's tour to universities to discuss higher education in the State, he did not declare the vote dates. However, it was evident that this was a deliberate pre-election activity. During the conversation with students at Kerala University, the Chief Minister stated that the LDF has successfully delivered 570 out of 600 pledges made during the 2016 election campaign. He expressed his desire to gather input and recommendations from the student body to craft the election manifesto for 2021. Students are encouraged to submit their comments or requests to the government in writing to enhance higher education. During his college tours, the Chief Minister stressed his government's goal of turning the state into a "knowledge society" by encouraging academic excellence. Some may argue that there were good sides to this decision. The Chief Minister's government and exploited it to influence the students in higher education. These efforts also subvert intellectual freedom. These events have a significant issue since they are carried out in an authoritarian way. These events do not include spontaneous contact between students and political leaders; rather, they feature rehearsed questions and responses designed to improve the leader's image. Discussions are conducted to gather opinions on the strengths and difficulties of the higher education sector. However, these strategic public relations activities by politicians have resulted in limiting academic freedom.

The recent discussion on political meddling has raised awareness among the general public about the role universities play in enhancing higher education. There are several misconceptions about colleges among the public. For some individuals, it is an establishment including many buildings, akin to a collectorate or expansive government offices. For some, it is simply a space for completing paperwork. Most individuals have not acknowledged that universities serve as institutions for education and as a hub for doing high-quality research. Enhancing university governance is a pressing matter. Universities should transition from using the 'Secretariat Manual' for administrative tasks to more modern facilities and procedures. This shift is necessary to provide academicians with the autonomy and freedom needed to effectively manage their institutions, as highlighted by Abbas (2019).

Conclusion

The intricate interplay of caste, communal, and political factors has significantly influenced the trajectory of Kerala's educational and political landscape. From the early days of communist victories in the 1950s to the recent controversies surrounding university governance and political interference, Kerala's journey reflects a constant struggle for social justice and equitable access to education.

Despite achieving remarkable milestones such as 100% literacy and innovative governance models in the education sector, Kerala grapples with challenges like nepotism, communalization, and political intervention that undermine the principles of academic freedom and meritocracy. The recent conflict

between the LDF-led administration and the governor underscores the urgent need to address issues of governance and political interference to safeguard the autonomy and integrity of higher education institutions.

Educational policy lobbyists and advocates play a crucial role in shaping the educational landscape of Kerala, advocating for inclusive policies, teacher well-being, and quality education for all. However, their efforts are often overshadowed by political agendas and personal interests, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes the overarching goal of delivering high-quality education to every citizen.

Moving forward, policymakers must prioritize the depoliticization of university governance, strengthen mechanisms for academic freedom, and address socio-economic disparities to ensure that Kerala's educational system remains a beacon of progress and social justice in India. By fostering an environment of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, Kerala can continue its legacy of educational excellence and contribute to the holistic development of its citizens.

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