

BOOK REVIEWS

Accomplishing More with Less

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Srikumar Chattopadhyay and Richard Franke, *Striving for Sustainability: Stress and Democratic Initiative in Kerala*, Concept Publishing Company, 2006.

Kerala has long been a model for progressives demonstrating that reform can be a form of development. In a period when the Communist Party was in power, Kerala State increased life expectancy and literacy rates without any rise in conventional indicators of development, such as the Gross National Product. Kerala's GNP was, in fact, lower than the Indian average. Within decades, these quality-of-life indicators were better than in other Indian states and comparable to some "developed" countries. In effect, more was accomplished with less. Such changes were achieved by extensive land reform, pension and work protection systems, subsidization of food prices, successful literacy programs, and other measures that were intended to benefit the people of Kerala as a whole.

The present study looks at Kerala as a possible model for sustainable development—a model which recognizes physical, economic, and socio-cultural limits and emphasizes the more efficient use of resources, especially the local: "Kerala's experiment in local self-government is perhaps one of the very few experiments worldwide with the potential to present an alternative system of environmental resource management and planning that could lead to sustainable development through the empowerment of ordinary people." [p. 205.] Indeed, the authors note, the grass-roots planners of Kerala bear some resemblance to Chinese "barefoot planners" [p. 23].

Despite such impressive gains, like most places in the world today, Kerala is burdened with the stress of escalating environmental deterioration and resource depletion. According to the authors, market forces—that is, capitalism—rather than population growth (which Kerala has "managed") is the real culprit, since it is present-day capitalist consumerism that is diminishing and damaging "common pool or public resources" [p. 293]. These forms of stress and degradation include shrinking forests and wetlands, destruction and deterioration of arable land, increased road building, and a loss of biodiversity. Forests are not only important for environmental health and integrity, but they also provide useful "products," such as medicinal plants, herbs, foods (e.g., game, honey, nuts), which some people depend on for their livelihood.

As is the case in many "developing" countries, Kerala is experiencing a shift in what is traditionally grown there. Tree crops such as rubber and other export crops are replacing food crops like rice and tapioca, which negatively impacts local sustainability. Cropping intensity, furthermore, depletes the soil faster than it can recover [p. 106]. Mining, the destruction of wetlands, and large-scale human interventions in the movement of water, such as enormous and bitterly contested hydropower projects, are also wreaking ecological havoc.

The authors argue that the history of Kerala shows that some of these unsustainable trends can be slowed and even reversed through local-level planning: "Among the places in the world where rapid environmental change and degradation is taking place, Kerala State in India has generated a number of experiments in local-level planning that offer insights into how the local component of an environmental turnabout could be developed." [p. 25.]

Collaboration between “local indigenous technical knowledge” and that of scientific experts is one of the strengths of the Kerala Model. The authors highlight examples of local people participating in enhancing productivity in both agriculture and forestry while lowering the energy intensity of crop production and animal husbandry. They point to resource bases such as “The Peoples’ Biodiversity Register,” established by a thorough mapping of various bioregions, as important aids in planning.

The idea that traditional technologies, such as those used for rain “harvesting,” could be improved with the use of modern materials and technologies is particularly intriguing. Applying these principles in an American urban context, one might imagine the roofs of cities like New York having rainwater catchments that with the help of gravity decrease the burden on upstate reservoirs. Such a plan would maximize the use of one local resource—water—reduce New York City’s ecological footprint, and thus make the city more sustainable. “Upgrading” older, more environmentally friendly technologies using modern materials (such as bicycles made with lightweight alloys) offers additional interesting “back to the future” possibilities.

The book reviews numerous grass-roots environmental initiatives taking place in Kerala: campaigns to protect a valley from being destroyed by large dams; struggles by tribal groups to protect their land; the internationally renowned campaign against Pepsi and Coca Cola, who were depleting and contaminating local water supplies; literacy campaigns; local initiatives to create self-sufficiency in water resources; anti-poverty projects; serious land reform endeavors; and the support of micro-enterprises of various kinds, including micro-hydroelectric projects. These initiatives highlight Kerala’s emphasis on using its own rich, varied geography and resources to provide for many of its own needs in its efforts to move towards sustainable development and increase its self-sufficiency.

Critics might argue that micro-enterprises cannot deliver broad-based economic security and prosperity, yet Chattopadhyay and Franke maintain that they can and do so with a smaller ecological footprint than large-scale projects. They see such projects within an ecosocialist framework like that suggested by Kovel, which envisions a large network of productive communities and transnational scientific teams not tied to corporate interests and governing institutions, as an option worth exploring [p. 294].

Of course, how to take these ideas to most effectively link the local to a large-scale structure and institutions is a central issue. I’m thinking here of taking the model from Kerala, which has no megacities, and applying it to big cities, because barring apocalypse, big cities and megacities are in all likelihood here to stay. There are also many places where large cities can greatly increase their self-sufficiency and sustainability. That being the case, it would have been most interesting to read what the authors thought the Kerala model could teach cities, particularly how urban agriculture and water conservation could be adapted to help them reduce their ecological footprint and make them more sustainable. In their conclusion, the authors point out that there are some 600 eco-villages and intentional communities in North America. While many are spiritual, religious communities, the authors suggest that they nonetheless have a lot to teach about treading lightly upon the earth.

The authors touch upon transport and sustainability by pointing out that despite the increasing desire of everyone to have easy access to a road, road building must be controlled because of the adverse environmental impacts (for instance fragmentation of natural habitats, deforestation, encroachment on arable land) of building too many roads. But I would have liked to have heard

more on transport and land use issues specifically in Kerala. For instance, has the globalization of automobility penetrated Kerala State, and is it “driving” road building there?

Taking a wider view, the authors note that the current global ecological crisis—which goes well beyond global warming and includes alarming losses of arable land, forests, wetlands, biodiversity, and pollution of air, water and land—to a great extent, has its origins in industrial capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonial exploitation. Yet population growth—especially with regard to a densely populated country like India—typically gets the blame. However, the authors maintain that pointing the finger at population growth ignores the fact that “inequality and especially the high-consumption life styles of those wealthy countries play equal if not a more important role” [p.15]. They cite the example of the very polluting and energy-intensive use of automobiles in the industrialized world: Car ownership is limited to 8 percent of the world’s population, the majority of whom are in the industrial northern countries. Thus, they argue the mandate to do more with less should fall heavily on these countries.

The hegemonic paradigm of global capitalist development eclipses other more sustainable and equitable options and ways of thinking about development. Perhaps the most valuable contribution this book makes is that it provides concrete workable alternatives to this paradigm, making ecosocialist visions less utopian and yet stimulating the radical imagination. As such, this book is an invaluable resource for progressives, particularly those with ecosocialist stripes.