Worlds apart: Why are Kerala and Uttar Pradesh so different in their human development outcomes?*

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April 1, 2003

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In the quest for human development, public action can build on history, perpetuate its patterns, or break out of them. With educated voters, a desire for universal basic services away from clientelism and social polarization, and with time on their side, politicians can strive for substantial improvements—even at low levels of income. It is never too early to start.

States in one federal nation, following the same Constitution, laws, and intergovernmental finance system, and subject to the same election cycles, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh remain worlds apart in human development. Their divergence translates into dramatic differences in the quality of life for millions—Uttar Pradesh, with 175 million people in 2001, is larger than all but six countries in the world (Kerala is 32 million). This paper highlights why the two are worlds apart, and the paths of history, politics, and public policy that each followed to get there. It is a story of achievements and failure, of the power of public action and the burden of official inertia.

Women born in Kerala can expect to live 20 years longer than women in Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh’s infant mortality rate is almost six times higher than Kerala’s (table 1). At the turn of the century, one in three girls in Uttar Pradesh had never been to school, as compared to universal enrolment in Kerala. Kerala’s total fertility rate compares favorably with the 1.7 rate for high-income European countries and is lower than the 2.1 rate for the United States. Uttar Pradesh’s total fertility rate is substantially higher than the average of 2.85 for India and 3.1 for low-income developing countries.

Education and health services in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh echo these differences (table 2). Public facilities in Kerala are likely to be regularly manned by teachers or physicians, well supplied, and adequately maintained, unlike in Uttar Pradesh. If a public primary health center is not attended for a few days in Kerala, people are likely to

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1 Background paper for the WDR 2004, *Making Services Work for Poor People.*
2 In late 2000, the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh were constituted into a new state, Uttaranchal. This paper relates to Uttar Pradesh as it existed prior to its division.
protest at the nearest district office. In Uttar Pradesh a rural school can be non-functional for years, with teachers absent or shirking but without any civic protest.

Table 1: Health and educational outcomes and basic service use  
Latest available data, percentages unless otherwise stated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>Uttar Pradesh</th>
<th>India</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births)</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total fertility rate (per woman)</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ratio (women per 1000 men)</td>
<td>1058</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female school enrolment rate (6-17 years)</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male school enrolment rate (6-17 years)</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural girls (10-12 years) never in school</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural women (15-19 years) never in school</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunization coverage rate (12-23 month)</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled delivery care (% of births)</td>
<td>94.0</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2: Access, quality, and demand for education and health services  
Latest available data, percentages unless otherwise stated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kerala</th>
<th>Uttar Pradesh</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of rural population living in villages with selected facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>90.1</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary health center</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected with all-weather road</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total medical expenditure per hospitalization in public facility (Rs)</td>
<td>1,417</td>
<td>4,261</td>
<td>1,902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women reporting that provider respected need for privacy</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women reporting health facility was clean</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not consider skilled attendance at delivery necessary</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls should be given as much education as they desire</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of households among poorest 20% that prefer a public facility if ill</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Why did Kerala succeed where Uttar Pradesh failed?

A head start from history helped. Even though its consumption poverty was among the highest in India, Kerala already held a lead in human development in 1955 when it was formed. Social movements against caste divisions, culture (including matrilineal inheritance in certain communities), and openness to foreign influences (including missionary-led education) all helped. But history is not all. Much of Kerala’s

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5 Dreze and Gazdar (1996), Probe Team in Association with Centre for Development Economics (1999)
spectacular achievements came after 1955. In 1950 adult literacy was around 50 percent, compared to over 90 percent now, life expectancy at birth was 44 years, compared to 74 now, and the birth rate was 32, compared to 18 now. Further support that public action after Independence had something to do with Kerala’s success comes from substantial progress in the Malabar region of Kerala, which in 1955 lagged behind the rest of Kerala (comprising of the erstwhile ‘native states’ of Cochin and Travancore) in all its social indicators. Today, these differences have disappeared.

Dreze and Sen (2002) suggest that Kerala’s success is the result of public action that promoted extensive social opportunities and the widespread, equitable provision of schooling, health and other basic services. They argue that Uttar Pradesh’s failures can be attributed to the public neglect of these very same opportunities.

- The early promotion of primary education and female literacy in Kerala was very important for social achievements later on. In Uttar Pradesh, educational backwardness has imposed high penalties, including a delayed demographic transition and burgeoning population growth.
- Gender equity and the agency of women appear to play a major role in Kerala’s success. Uttar Pradesh has a long, well documented tradition of oppressive gender relations, and gender inequalities are extraordinarily sharp, not just in literacy, but also in women’s participation in society. More than 70 percent of primary-school teachers in Kerala are women as compared to 25 percent in Uttar Pradesh.
- Basic universal services in schooling, health care, child immunization, public food distribution, and social security seem to differ sharply in scope, access, quality, and equitable incidence. In Uttar Pradesh these services appear to have been comprehensively neglected, with no particular efforts to ensure results. There is little accountability, particularly in schools.
- A more literate and better-informed public in Kerala played an active role in politics and public affairs in a way that did not appear to have happened in Uttar Pradesh.

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• *Informed citizen action and political activism in Kerala, building partly on mass literacy and the emphasis placed on universal services by early Communist governments, seems to have played a crucial role in organizing poor people.* In *Uttar Pradesh, traditional caste and power divisions, particularly in rural areas, have not only persisted through more than 50 years of electoral politics but, indeed, such divisions have come to form the core of political discourse.*

**Credibility and clientelism in basic service delivery**

Perhaps no other comparison than between Kerala and Uttar Pradesh can make the point forcefully enough that political incentives for what and how public resources are actually spent are critical in determining actual development outcomes.\(^7\) What leads to these political incentives? The answer appears to lie not in the formal political institutions of Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, but how these have interacted with legacies and local conditions. Three elements stand out: Kerala’s voters were and continue to be better educated and informed; they have been less polarized socially; and delivering broad, universal basic services has remained a credible political platform in Kerala compared to the clientelist, caste and class-driven politics of Uttar Pradesh.

**Better informed voters.** Kerala’s informed and politically active electorate is reflected in high turnout rates averaging over 75 percent in the first few elections. High initial levels of adult literacy and social egalitarianism probably allowed Kerala’s voters to provide strong political incentives for good performance. Dramatic achievements in education and health were made in the following years with political competition on the basis of promises to deliver better social outcomes for all. In contrast, Uttar Pradesh entered democracy with a population of largely illiterate voters, with limited access to information, gender inequity, and active institutions of social discrimination that effectively prevented the so-called “backward castes” from accessing public services. Turnout rates in the first few elections averaged 55 percent.

**Less social polarization in politics.** By the 1980s, electoral competition in Uttar Pradesh had become intensely socially polarized, with voting decisions overwhelmingly

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\(^7\) This discussion draws on Keefer and Khemani, *World Development Report 2004* background paper.
based on a candidate’s identity, and political parties organized along caste lines, including the three main parties now competing in the state that appeal to specific majority or minority voter groups based on class, caste, or religious background.

Less clientelism. In Kerala, voters were not so polarized on social issues and identity-based politics. Communist parties with programmatic and policy-oriented economic platforms emphasizing the provision of universal basic services and social protection set the initial political agenda that then stayed for good in the coalition politics that followed. Political competition conditioned on promises to deliver better basic services was reflected in early budget allocations: education and health services accounted for 45 percent of public expenditures, with less than 30 percent spent on state administration (excluding interest payments) (figure 1).

Figure 1: Public spending on education and health and on state administration relative to total public expenditures, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, 1955-1998

In contrast, in Uttar Pradesh, even though early elections were run on issues of national solidarity and improving livelihoods of the poor, existing caste and class-based divisions and the absence of compelling political alternative that transcended these divisions led to poor incentives for effective provision of universal, basic services. Political reputations for delivering universal basic services were not developed nor valued. Instead, political competition revolved round access to instruments of the state to deliver public employment to specific clients. Public expenditures in the early years were accordingly concentrated in state administration, comprising almost 50 percent of the
Health and education were allocated less than 25 percent (figure 1). Today, prominent political parties don’t emphasize a program or policy-based election manifesto, but instead publicize the ethnic profile of its candidate list to demonstrate commitment to proportional representation for ethnic groups in the bureaucratic institutions of the state.8

**Breaking out of vicious circles and stepping into virtuous ones**

Public action can build on history, break out of its patterns, or perpetuate them. Individuals’ abilities to press their demands depend on their information, perceived rights, and literacy.9 Public action by influencing information that citizens have, their legal protections, and their schooling, influences private action, especially by the politically weak; and private action loops back to influence public action. One set of reforms can lead to further institutional evolution. There are good and bad development paths. A society can be caught in a vicious or virtuous circle. Dreze and Sen argue that Kerala’s evolution is a case of a virtuous circle, and that of Uttar Pradesh, a vicious one:

“[there is a] deeply complementary relationship between state action and public action….which makes it possible for a society to be caught in a vicious circle of (i) government apathy towards the needs of citizens, and (ii) public inability to challenge that apathy, as has happened in states such as Uttar Pradesh. On the positive side, it also means that the rewards of efforts aimed at breaking that vicious circle (e.g. based on the political organization of disadvantaged groups, or on the promotion of widespread literacy) can be very large, as Kerala’s experiment illustrates.”10

When politicians want to, policy interventions and electoral institutions that change the information processing capacity of voters, impact social fragmentation, and enhance credible commitments can potentially make a significant difference to the provision of broad, basic services. Where poor voters are already active in political processes, the issue is that of bolstering the credibility of political candidates to provide universal services, with a corresponding reduction in political pressures to pursue clientelist policies. As Dreze and Gazdar note: “In Uttar Pradesh, the social failures of the

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8 Chandra (1999).
9 Hoff (2003).
state are quite daunting, but the potential rewards of action are correspondingly high, and the costs of continued inertia even higher.”\textsuperscript{11}

Yet, it is important to recognize that our understanding of the impact of political institutions in interaction with social processes is still limited. Democratic political institutions in Uttar Pradesh, for instance, have changed the social landscape in the past fifty years through the political mobilization, albeit through clientelism, of traditionally repressed lower castes. It remains to be seen whether the dynamics of political competition will change now that the majority of the population is actively engaged in the political process, and parties must reach across social groups more vigorously than before to attain the required majority to form governments.

As for Kerala, though many economic and social problems linger and new ones have appeared, the bold aspirations of Gowri Parvathi Bai for her subjects have certainly come true. In 1817, this 15-year old Rani of Tranvancore issued a remarkable rescript:

“The state should defray the entire cost of the education of its people in order that there might be no backwardness in the spread of enlightenment among them, that by diffusion of education they might become better subjects and public servants and that the reputation of the state might be enhanced thereby.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Dreze and Gazdar (1996), p. 111.
\textsuperscript{12} Ramachandran (1996), p. 268. The Tranvancore rescript was issued 55 years before the similar Meiji Educational law of 1872 in Japan.
References

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