

THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP: A SAGA OF SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES IN THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE OF KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Educational achievements in Kerala, India, include near total literacy, free and universal primary education, low dropout rates, easy access to Higher education resulting in the exceptional social development and quality of life. It is often acclaimed as the 'Kerala Model' with reference to the whole education system in India. The initiatives by missionaries and princely regimes of Travancore and Cochin laid the foundation for education in Kerala. The social reform movements accelerated the spread of education. Large scale Government funding of education was an important factor behind the State's educational development both in private educational institutions established by any person or agency and recognized by and is receiving aid from Government, and Government institutions established and maintained by State Government. This paper focuses on the unique partnership between the private and the public which paved way for the success of the 'Kerala model' of education in India along with its challenges and significance.

Key words: public, private, partnership, challenges, educational landscapes

INTRODUCTION

Kerala has the distinction of being a historic state in the educational map of India owing to its highest percentage of literacy amongst the states of India. The uniqueness of Kerala's progress lies in the exceptional social development and quality of life in spite of low economic development. This is often referred to as 'the Kerala Model' of the development, which has become the topic of global discussion about development. Kerala's achievements in education include near total literacy, free and universal primary education, low dropout rates at the school level, easy accesses and gender equality. It is often acclaimed as the 'Kerala Model' and some recommend Keralization of the whole education system in India (Lewis, 1997). The success in the field of education through the public and the private partnership is also continued in the scheme of the continuing Education programme. Kerala was the first State to experiment with a campaign for implementation of the Total Literacy Programme, and the state was declared a fully literate state in 1991.

The public and the private partnership can be viewed as a contract that a government makes with a private service agency to acquire a specified service of a defined quantity and quality at an agreed price for a specified period. This view covers several different types of contracts, which may procure different services and vary in complexity. The services include education services like management, maintenance, and support services like transportation; operation services, such as pure management and infrastructure (Patrinos, Osorio, & Guáqueta, 2009).

The concept of a public-private partnership recognizes the existence of alternative options for providing education services besides public finance and public delivery. There are many forms of the public and the private partnership, including partnerships where private organizations support the education sector through charitable activities and high involvement enterprises. The type of the public and the private partnership in which the government guides policy and provides financing while the private sector delivers education services to students is applicable in Kerala.

KERALA EDUCATION ACT – A MILESTONE

The missionaries and princely regimes of Travancore and Cochin of nineteenth century pioneered the education in Kerala. The social reform movements and civil rights movements accelerated the spread of education. Large scale state funding of education was an important factor behind the state's educational development. The government of Kerala envisaged the necessary framework "to provide for the better organisation and development of educational institutions in the State providing a varied and comprehensive educational service throughout the State" (*The Kerala Education Act, 2011, p. 89*). Educational opportunities irrespective of regions, religions, castes and classes, were top most in the agenda of all the governments in Kerala. The direct funding of education or through grants-in-aid to private agencies helped the process of expanding educational opportunities. Till recently, the need for subsidizing education by the government was not a disputable issue among the political parties. It is this general interest and support from the part of the government which contributed to the Kerala model of educational and social development. The educational development in Kerala since independence has been quite impressive not only in the growth of schools and colleges, but also in terms of diversified subjects of study and professional courses.

FREE AND COMPULSORY EDUCATION

The primary attention of the government during the early years after independence focused on the rendering of school education compulsory and free. The Kerala education policy of 1958 insisted that the government should provide free and compulsory education for all children of the state within a period of 10 years

from the commencement of the Act. It was also stipulated that the government should provide every support to the students in terms of food, books and other materials free of cost. The government made education at the higher secondary level free of tuition fees from the year 1991. Efforts made by the government during the 1950s and the 1960s to develop a system of basic education in schools proved to be fruitful on many grounds. It envisaged that the Government may appoint local education authorities who will assess the educational needs of the local area, prepare schemes for educational development and submit them to Government. It will supervise the implementation of the scheme of noon-day feeding of school children, and promote conferences, exhibitions and other matters calculated to create among the people an interest in education.

PROMOTION OF UNIVERSAL EDUCATION

The Private Secondary School Scheme was introduced in 1950 for strengthening the private school system. It laid down that the salaries of private school teachers would be paid by the government while the management had to remit 80 per cent of their fee collections to the government. Almost all private middle and high schools joined the scheme by the end of 1955. The Kerala government has also followed policies for promoting the educational levels of backward communities and other vulnerable sections of the society through seat reservations, fee concessions, subsidies, lump sum grants, special coaching programs and reservations for appointment in government services. Literacy increased by more than 44 percentage points from 49.8 in 1951 to 94.2 in 2001, the corresponding increase in female literacy was by more than 56 points from 31.4 to 87.9 during the same period (George, 2008).

The physical proximity has made 94% of the rural population accessible to primary school within a distance of 1 km while 98% of population has got one school within a distance of 2 km. More than 96% of the population is served by an upper primary school/section within a distance of 3 km. Nearly 98% of the rural population has the facility for secondary education within 8 km. Facilities for higher and technical education too are available to rural students at a reasonable distance. Besides, the easy accessibility of public transport system and the highly subsidized transport fares have facilitated an easy access for rural students to higher educational institutions in towns and cities (George, 2008).

THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATION

The implementation of the Kerala education policy in 1958, for the first time in the history of the state, gave provisions for the establishment of a new school or the opening of a higher class in any private school subject to the provisions of this Act. The Government regulated the primary and other stages of education and course of institutions in Government and private schools. It took, from time to time, such steps, as they considered necessary for the purpose of

providing facilities for general education, special education and for the training of teachers. The Government for the purpose of providing such facilities established and maintained schools, or permitted any person or agency to establish and maintain aided schools; or recognise any school established and maintained by any person or agency (*Human Development Report*, 2006).

Private participation in education has increased dramatically over the last two decades, serving all types of communities from high-income to low income families. Although government remains the main funding agency of education, the private agencies deliver a sizable share of education. Each government, from time to time, makes contract with the private sector to provide educational platforms to manage and operate educational institutions (Patrinos, Osorio, & Guáqueta, 2009). There are positive outcomes of the private provision of public services:

- i) **Competition:** The public-private partnerships can create competition in the education market. The private sector can compete for students with the public sector. In turn, the public sector has an advantage to react to this competition by increasing the quality of the education that it provides.
- ii) **Flexibility:** It can be more flexible than most public sector arrangements. Generally, the public sector has less autonomy in hiring teachers and organizing schools than the private sector does. Public-private contracts can be a better provision between the supply of and demand for education. Flexibility in teacher contracting is one of the primary motivations for public-private partnerships. The government can choose private providers in public-private partnership contracts by means of an open bidding process in which the government insists on requirements for the quality of education.
- iii) **Increased level risk-sharing:** It can demand an increased level of risk-sharing between the government and the private sector. This risk-sharing is likely to increase efficiency in the delivery of services. So increasing the private sector's role in education can have several potential advantages over the traditional public delivery of education. But it depends greatly on how well designed is the partnership between the public and private sector, and on the capacity of the government to oversee and enforce its contracts and partnerships with the private sector.
- iv) **Privatization of Education:** It will lead to the privatization of education, and thus will reduce the government's control over a public service. Increasing the educational choices available to students and their families may increase socioeconomic segregation if better prepared students end up self selecting into high-quality schools, thus further improving their outcomes (Patrinos, Osorio, & Guáqueta, 2009).

At the same time, there are negative consequences of the public-private partnerships:

- i) **Resistance from certain Stakeholders:** It may be seen as a threat to their job stability, while teachers' and public sector unions may see them as a

- way of diminishing their influence over their members' terms and conditions of service.
- ii) Challenges and risks: Inputs to education, processes, and outputs are very different and require several different forms of contracts including management, support, professional, operational, educational services, and infrastructure. All of these variations need to be assessed separately as they require different approaches in order to be effective.
 - iii) More cost-effective: It can provide education in a more cost-effective way than the tradition public sector approach. But, if poorly handled, contracting can even reduce already low levels of government accountability and control.
 - iv) Opportunities for corruption: In the awarding of the contracts and partnerships may not demand accountability, and it can have negative consequences (Kingdon, 2007).

In spite of its negative consequences, the main rationale for developing public-private partnerships in education in Kerala is to maximize the potential for expanding and improving education outcomes, especially for marginalized groups.

EXPANSION - A POLICY OF THE KERALA GOVERNMENT

In the higher education sector, substantial expansion was achieved after independence. The development of higher education in Kerala took place at a rapid rate only after the expansion of the school education sector achieved significant progress, unlike in many other states in India.

The efforts at expanding higher education comprised opening of colleges, starting universities, introducing new courses of study, permitting private appearance of students for university examination etc.

Kerala's educational system developed mainly through institutions which are owned or aided by the government. There are no fees at any level in schools. The fees are very low in the aided or government higher education and technical education institutions. The ratio of recovery of government's revenue expenditure was only 2.6% in 2006-07. Kerala's education system has been able to achieve gender equity in enrolment to a large extent. Nearly half of the students in lower primary classes are girls. This proportion is much higher in arts and science colleges both at the graduate and postgraduate levels. The representation of girls in professional courses is, however, comparatively low (George, 2008).

STRENGTHENING OF THE AIDED SECTOR

The Travancore-Cochin government sanctioned the starting of 17 private colleges during the period 1949-1955. During 1965-1968, the Kerala University, the only general University which existed during that period in the state,

established 76 colleges. The majority of the colleges were private, in fact 72 out of 76. In 2004, there were 290 colleges in the state and 38 in the government sector, 148 of the private aided category and 104 private unaided category. The unaided category of colleges has been or relatively of recent origin, mostly of the 1990s and later since the advent of the liberalization era. The number of general universities also has increased to four. Apart from these, there is a very large number of technical universities and research institutes – the Cochin university of Science and Technology, Kochi; 83 engineering colleges, 375 vocational higher secondary schools, 470 industrial training institutes, 59 polytechnics and several commercial institutes, fine arts colleges and food craft institutes (Kingdon, 2007).

THE DIRECT PAY AGREEMENT

The University Act of 1969 was aimed at increasing the control of government over the Universities and private colleges in Kerala. The Direct Payment Act 1972 served as an agreement of private and public partnership. It approved the direct payment of salaries of teachers and non-teaching staff of colleges by the government. It gave permission for unification fees, reservation of seats for backward communities, remittance of fees collected by private colleges directly into state treasury and constitution of selection committees for appointment of teachers in private colleges. The introduction of the private registration system for appearance in university examination was an innovation of the mid-1960s. In 1999, Ashok Mitra Commission spoke about the extensive reach of the higher education system in Kerala. The Commission has observed that 10 % of students who enter school, enrol into university education, and the total percentage of students entering higher education accounts for 15 % of the relevant age group (George, 2008).

THE SCHEME OF CONTINUING EDUCATION

The educational system in Kerala developed in response to the demand created by social, political and religious groups. And the scheme of continuing education is another phase in the private-public partnership. The achievement in the field of education has been continued with the “Scheme of Continuing Education” with the private and public involvement. The basic objective of such a programme is to provide lifelong learning facilities at learning centres. The State Governments are required to share 50% of the expenditure for the project. Thereafter, the State Government is expected to take over the total responsibility for the programme. The intention is to ensure that the programmes of continuing education are owned and undertaken by the people without any financial assistance from the state. The community needs to sustain the programme in the long run.

INVOLVEMENT OF LOCAL BODIES

The high literacy rate and strong sense of democracy at the grassroots in this southern state are significant factors for the success of continuing education. The grassroots democracy is in the form of a “panchayati raj”¹⁸. Under this system, local government, comprising elected members of the community, plan and implement the development schemes. These elected bodies, located at the district, Block and village levels, are called District, Block and Village “panchayats” respectively. The elected members of these committees represent people from all sections of society including women and marginalized groups. They are sensitive to the needs of people, who are in a position to influence action through their representatives. The local government provides funds for the planning and implementing of the various activities that the ‘panchayats’ are involved in. These activities are the result of collective decisions based on the needs of the community. Thus the continuing education centres in Kerala normally have few problems in obtaining adequate funds and facilities for their effective functioning (*Kerala Development Report, 2008*).

Large amounts of funding are required in Kerala for diversification of courses, improvement of quality and enhancement in the intake capacity of technical education. While the demand for more investment is on the increase, the allocation of funds is on the decrease partly due to the fiscal crisis of the state government. The government had been reducing the share of social sectors in its budgets. Funds from central government and other funding agencies including external agencies to this sector are on the decline. Cost recovery performance is very poor. All these call for finding alternative sources of finance and implementation of strict financial discipline. In spite of these financial crises the government continued the support in the form of grant-in-aid to the educational sector (George, 2008).

SIGNIFICANCE AND CHALLENGES

The concept of a public-private partnership recognizes the provision for alternative options for providing education apart from public finance and public delivery. In particular, governments engages in a contract with private agencies to provide a specified quality educational service at an agreed price for a specific period of time. These contracts contain rewards and sanctions for non-performance and include situations in which the private sector shares the financial risk in the delivery of public services. So the proposed public-private contracts should help to meet education goals. Such public-private partnerships can increase access to good quality education for all, especially for students away from the main stream of the society.

The state lags behind in technical education and skill development. Kerala’s achievements in the educational sector had been mostly in the areas like school

18 A system of local governance in which “Gram Panchayats” are the basic units of administration.

education and general higher education. But the state government today finds it very difficult to maintain the gains it has already made. The very success of the Kerala Model of development in education has generated second generation problems. While the demand for funds has been increasing, corresponding government's investment in social sectors like education and health has not been increasing, partly because of fiscal crisis Kerala's achievements in the field of education.

CONCLUSION

The partnership between the public and the private in education is unique of its kind leading generations of people to enjoy the benefits of education. The achievements are definitely commendable. But at the same time, these achievements should not allow concealment of some of the more serious deficiencies and inefficiencies. Kerala, in the past, was spending much beyond its economic capacity on social sectors because it had the right priorities. Kerala's development experience, therefore, used to be described in the past as the paradox of high degree of social development despite low rates of economic growth. But when the economy started growing, the state shifted its priorities away from education. As a result, the state reduced the share of education in its total expenditure.

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