

THE STATE OF KERALA, INDIA: A CASE STUDY
OF ACCULTURATION IN DIVERSITY

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Abstract

The State of Kerala, India is unique not only in its geographical design, but also in the culture of its people. Keralites are masters of acculturation. Known as India's most peaceful state, the citizens of Kerala enjoy the highest quality health care, longevity that surpasses all other Indian states, excellent educational resources, as well as gender and caste equality. Benefactors of early visits from multiple cultures, successful acculturation developed the Keralite ethos – an excellent example of diversity – embraced!

Key words: Acculturation, India, Culture, Adaptation, Diversity

The State of Kerala, India: A Case Study of Acculturation in Diversity

India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. During the last 59 years of democracy, this country has achieved phenomenal socio-economic progress. Self-sufficient in agricultural production, India is now the tenth industrialized country in the world (mapsofindia.com). With one foot steeped in rich cultural traditions and the other fervently striding into the entrepreneurial e-age, India embraces its diversity with unmatched serenity. This country spans 3.28 million square kilometers and is comprised of 28 states and seven union territories. India, since independence, has a parliamentary form of democratic governance.

Kerala, the most southwestern area of India, is a reactive state; well known for a co-existence of orthodoxies and leftist movement. This mosaic has nurtured ideological polarization and intellectual conflicts between right wing and left wing thoughts. Critical discernment of issues has thus become a part of Kerala's society (which supplemented social growth productively and qualitatively). Thorough understanding of social needs and wanted changes insisted that the apostles of orthodoxies accept dismantling of caste in social spheres,

provide ownership to workers and remove matriarchal inheritance. Meanwhile, the leftists were molded to be responsive, but pacifically. As a result, the communist movement evolved in Kerala. During the 1940's, Keralites adopted democracy much sooner than the communists of the rest of world even thought about doing so. The most acclaimed acts that belong to the communist movement in the state include acceptance of cultural and intellectual pluralism, leading to co-evolution of orthodoxy and leftism. This dynamic created a new Kerala: a realistic melting pot of acculturation. The modern phase of acculturation, which roots its initiation in social tensions, expounded around 1810AD and has subsequently and successfully resulted in nurturing pro-people attitudes among different rulers in the region. Throughout the last 150 years, acculturation has matured and the region today abodes the highest literacy rate, lowest infant mortality rate, a very low birth rate, high women empowerment rate and enhanced human dignity. These traits identify a separate identity for Kerala (apart from other states of the Indian Union).

How did Kerala, geographically segmented from most of India, develop such a diverse yet harmonious culture? This case profiles the unique State of Kerala. Today, Americans and Indians may collaborate, by choice or necessity, with each other in business and education. The people of Kerala are the masters of acculturation. What then, could Americans (as well as people from various cultures) learn from the Keralites? Benefits from Kerala's acculturation should encourage all people to enhance communication, cooperation, and acculturation.

The Geography of Kerala

By Indian standards, Kerala is a small state, tucked away in the southwest corner of the country. Kerala represents 1.18 percent of the total area of India and hosts 3.34% of the total population of the country. It is separated from the rest of the peninsula by natural geographic boundaries. The mountainous Western Ghats, with rich primeval forests and a high degree of rainfall, form



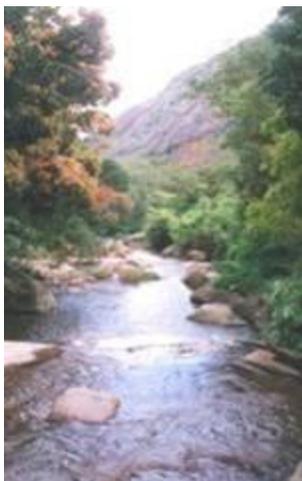
the eastern boundary of Kerala. They extend from the north to Kanyakumari in the south. Further south of the Western Ghats region lie the Cardamom Hills. The entire western border of Kerala, 560 km in length, is established via the Arabian Sea. Between these natural boundaries lies the long and narrow area of land which defines Kerala. At the widest area, Kerala spans 120-km from the sea to mountains.



According to Kerala.com, (<http://www.kerala.com>), this state is divided into three geographical regions: the highlands, midlands and coastal lowlands. The highlands slope downward from the Western Ghats, which rise to an average height of 900 m. A number of peaks exceed 1,800 m in height. Major plantations that

produce tea, coffee, rubber, cardamom and other agricultural

species are located in the highlands.



The midlands lie between the mountains and the lowlands. This region is comprised of undulating

hills and valleys. Intensive crop cultivation (cashew, coconut, areca nut, cassava, banana, rice, ginger, pepper, sugarcane) and vegetables of different varieties are produced in the midlands. The lowlands of Kerala are networked by a seemingly endless, intricate maze of



backwaters and the estuaries of forty-four glimmering rivers.



Historically in Kerala, (two to three thousand years ago), the lives of common people were not based on caste distinctions and prejudices. Rather, broad division of the

population established based upon occupations. Assisted by geographical design, Keralites based their occupations on the nature of the land on which they resided. Divisions included Kurinchi (mountain land), Palai (arid land), Mullai (pastures), Marutan (west land) and Neytal (coastal land). The Kuravar (hunters) of Kurinchi, the Maravar (fighting men) of Palai, the Idayas (cowherds and shepherds) of Mullai, the Uzhavas (agriculturists) of Marutam and the Paravas (fishermen) of the Neytal were all from the same race.

Kerala, commonly hailed as *God's Own Country*, is highly revered due to its geographical and sociological features. Geographically, a long coastline in the west and mountains on the east form clear natural boundaries. The eastern hill ranges protected Kerala from direct invasion of military forces. Thus, Kerala remained a free country even before Indian union formation.

The land of Kerala is believed to be a gift of the Arabian Sea. Its favorable location fostered trade and established contacts with Egypt, Assyria, Greeks, Romans and the Chinese. As stated on Web India, (<http://www.webindia123.com>), The Malayalam era Kollavarsham is believed to

have started in the 9th century A.D. During this period of internal strife in Kerala, Cheraman Perumal founded the Chera dynasty (9th century AD). In 1498, the Portuguese came to Calicut and in 1502, to Kochi. Kerala was then divided into the Kingdoms of Malabar, Kochi and Travancore. In 1776, Malabar was under the rule of Hyder Ali. In 1792 Tipu Sultan ceded it to the British. While Malabar witnessed the direct rule of the British, Travancore and Kochi were princely states (owing only allegiance to the British). The princely states of Travancore and Cochin were integrated into Union India in 1949 as the Tiru-Cochi State, with a parliamentary form of government (Krishnan, 1998). In 1956, Malayalam speaking areas of the Tiru-Cochi State and those in the Malabar part of Madras provinces were associated to form a single political unit by an act of State reorganization Committee of the Government of India. This new, political region was then called “Ikya Keralam” or *Kerala* (meaning the land of coconut palms). In fact only in 1956, after 150 years of internal division, had the region regained its form from pre-British times. Therefore, the day of 1st of November 1956, is considered and celebrated as “Kerala piravi dinam”, birth of modern Kerala.

Religion

Hindus, Muslims and Christians live in a unique balance in Kerala. Nowhere in India, or perhaps in the entire world, can one witness such tolerance, cooperation and religious amity as seen in Kerala. Only in Kerala will one find person's of different religious communities coming together to celebrate each other's festivals with pomp.

India is the birthplace of two great religions of the world, namely, Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism is the dominant faith. According to the 2001 Census reported by Kerala.com, (<http://www.kerala.com>), 80.5% of the Indian population were 'Hindu'. Twenty four million Indians were Christian, comprising 2.3% of the country's population overall. Religion has played a crucial role in Kerala's cultural evolution. Here there are three main religions -

Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Religious origins could be traced to Hinduism, however, Census reports reflected that 57.38% of the population of Kerala are Hindus, 23.33% Muslims and 19.32% Christians. According to *The Hindu* (India's National Newspaper), in his article published in August of 2005, Shashi Tharoor stated that Kerala was a microcosm of every religion known to the country. Its population is now divided into almost equal fourths of Christians, Muslims, caste Hindus and Scheduled Castes, each of whom is economically and politically powerful.

The region of Kerala has experienced invasions of earlier religious philosophies too. First recorded in history were the arrival of Jainism around 300BC, Buddhism around 250BC, and Christianity in 52AD (by St. Thomas). Brahmanism arrived around 400AD and Islam in 644AD (by Malik bin Dinar). These religions, however, were integrated into the already existing Dravidian culture and thought processes in the society (which evolved out an independent identity for each immigrant expressing difference from its parental form).



When St. Thomas the apostle landed on the west coast of Kerala around 52 AD ([artandkerala history.org](http://artandkerala.org)), it is believed he established seven churches at various locations in Kerala. This

was a remarkable achievement when one considers that St. Thomas would have arrived by himself or in a small group to a totally strange and distant land, speaking an unknown language, and was able to communicate well enough to preach the gospel and to convert Keralites to Christianity. Even more remarkable were his efforts and



accomplishments when one considers that the great age of confrontation with the Roman Empire did not exist until third century AD (Cohen). It was not until the fourth century that Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire.

Islam is believed to have arrived first to Kerala in India in 900 AD. The other states of India realized Islam approximately 150 years later through Turkish and Mongolian colonialism. In addition to religion, the early Keralites benefited in many ways from their long western coastline and ample access to the Arabian Sea.

Cultural Evolution

The land and people of Kerala were recognized by many ancient civilizations in the past. From its seaside, Kerala had experienced advantages from early contacts with various cultures. Jews, Arabs, Romans, Chinese and Greeks were the first traders. These diverse groups preceded even Alexander the Great, who conquered the northern part of India in 325 BC.

It is assumed that the typical teak logs that date back to Sumerian period in Ur, a city on the banks of the Euphrates, belong to the sub equatorial forests of Cherapada (Kerala). King Solomon of Israel had imported ivory and monkeys from this land. Even before Alexander of Macedonia invaded Indus, the Greeks had an idea about the peninsula and its forest products, especially the black pepper from the coastal strip land. Around 100BC the Romans had established their trade links with local rulers in the region. In 68AD Jewish colonies were established for trade. By AD 700, Moors established their trade links with Kerala.

Arrival of the Europeans marked the beginning of another era in the history of Kerala. Main goals of the early visitors were trade and discovery of a shorter sea route to the Malabar Coast. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish a stronghold in Kerala. In 1498, Vasco da Gama reached Kappad, near Kozhikode. This was followed by the arrival of the Dutch in 1604 AD, in 1615 the English, in 1675 the French and in 1752 the Danes. The Europeans landed upon

these coasts for trade. The oldest available written data on Kerala is that of 2nd Rock Edict of the Emperor Asoka in 257BC. He ruled the Indo-gangetic plain of north India. The 2nd Rock Edict describes the civilized people in Cherapada ruled by Keralaputra.

With the arrival of the British began another chapter of Kerala's plantation history. Like other Europeans, the British also had great interest in Kerala. They too were attracted by the spices and other natural treasures of the land. British influence in Kerala started by the mid seventeenth century and lasted for the next 200 years until independence, contributing to organized plantation activities inducing the concept of profit in agriculture. The British streamlined the contributions and experiments of the Portuguese and Dutch in Keralalite crop production and made them commercially branded.

The Caste System in Kerala

Keralites, due to early acculturation and influence from various cultures, viewed issues critically. This dimension contributed to early dismantling of the Keralite caste system. As a people, similarities existed among early archeological findings in Kerala and in eastern Africa, thus indicating that there was a direct link between these societies in the past. Likely, Keralites and eastern Africans shared a common ancestry. Original Keralites presented in tribal clans that exhibited features of the proto-australoids. This indicated origins from the Mediterranean region. From available descriptions of both Chinese and Arab travelers, it is understood in Kerala that *every home forms the basic unit of society*. The elder person in each home made decisions in accordance with the full confidence of family members. Every member of the family had his or her voice in decision-making of the family. Historically, the King was an executive only: a person to work according to the local councils. Ministers were present to support kings, but none of the ministers enjoyed any preferential treatment or benefits from their relationships with the kings.

Wars were rare until the latter BC years of Kerala's history. The people fought a "Dharmma Yudha" (War with Regulations). The Dharmma Yudha included parameters such as no war after sunset and no treason. This era and its structure waned with the arrival of Brahmanism and over politicization of Buddhism (around 500AD).

From then, and until 1947AD, the caste system came into existence. The Brahmin dominance became most intensive during 1000AD – 1500AD. During the Dark days, (at the time of Brahmin's dominance and thereafter) the caste system was followed in Kerala.

In 1800, the people were classified as:

1. Untouchables
2. Should not have been looked at, and
3. Should not even talk with

In short the "untouchable rules" negated the very right to live. A Nair should keep 16 feet distance away from Nambuthri (the highest caste). A Ezhava should keep 32 feet away from Nambuthiri and 16 feet from Nairs. Pulayas and Prayas had to stand 64 feet from Nambuthiri. An Ezhava should not go near to Pulayas (and in the case if he did, he should not come near to the Nambuthiri). People of the Ulladar caste should never come in front of Nambuthiris and Nairs. One had to undergo separate rituals, even in casual interactions. (Paduva, 1973)

Rulers accepted these caste systems. The State looked into protecting this hierarchy of social interaction and acceptance and promulgated many orders during in 18th century, in order to strengthen the system. From 1820AD onward, Missionary activities slowly provided enhanced status to Christians in Kerala's society. This dynamic created an internal tension in the State which led to the reformist movement. Following Christian reformism were Ezhava reformism, Nair reformism and even Brahmin's reformation movements. Modern Education transformed Kerala's society from the dark ages to the modern era.

Modern Day Kerala

Kerala is divided into fourteen Districts with Trivandrum as the State Capital. This State is the first place in the world where a Communist Ministry came into power by General Ballot Election in 1957 (OurKeralam.com). Even after the split in the communist movement in 1964, following international divisions, the Communist ideology is still strongly subscribed to in Kerala's society (even with full knowledge of its ebb in Soviet Russia and eastern Europe). The 2006 State elections redeemed this favoritism of the State for communism by re-electing the Communist party's Left Democratic Front to power.



According to several resources, Kerala, India's most idyllic state, one of the most sought after tourist destinations in Asia. Secluded beaches, palm trees, fringed backwaters, mist clad hill stations, lush tropical forests, waterfalls, exotic wildlife, monuments, art forms and festivals provide a

distinctive charm.

Apart from its role as an attractive tourist destination, Kerala is India's most advanced society. With a 100% literacy rate, this is the State holding India's highest density of science and technology personnel. Kerala also holds India's highest Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI), India's highest life expectancy and lowest infant mortality rates. Kerala is known as India's cleanest, most peaceful State. Keralites mirror a rich tradition and cultural heritage. The people are highly hospitable and



inviting.

Hosting immense natural beauty, the highest literacy rate, the best health care systems and higher educational systems in India, one may believe life in *God's Own Country* is serene. This state hosts seven universities and 186 art and science colleges. The medium of instruction is English. Kerala, as compared to other Indian states, ranks first in law and order and also in education and health expenditures. Compared to other states of India, Kerala has high quality in its standard of living from a social perspective, but not in per capita income.

The migrant population includes nurses, clerks and primary teachers (even though Kerala has powerful and efficient higher education and health education). Some people migrate to the USA, Europe, or Australia. A majority migrate to Western Asia.

Migration from Kerala has transitioned as the differentiation of the workforce evolved. The earlier forms of work division, (agriculturalists, shepherds, and fishermen), thrived as a result of effective man and land linkage. This continued under poverty during the Dark Age of Kerala. But later, through education, the emancipation has enabled residents consider searching for opportunities outside the region. Improper land usage encouraged heavy migration, especially for people of lower educational levels.

Keralites have experience positive growth in trades, hotels, transportation and communication (7.8%); construction (7.2%); community, social and personal services (6.8%); manufacturing, financing, insurance, and real estate business services (6.1%); and mining/quarrying (5.1%). In contrast, agriculture, forestry and fishing registered a growth rate of (-) 3.2 percent. (kerala.gov) Kerala's working men and women enjoy greater rights and a higher minimum wage than anywhere else in India. Its vast pool of skilled human resources readily meets the requirements of both public and private sector enterprises. The state, with its impeccable track record in law

and order, has a peaceful, progressive society with a unique work culture. This successfully promotes aspirations of investors. (<http://www.technopark.org/aboutkerala.htm>)

One factor, in particular, encourages migration. This is the unemployment rate in Kerala.

According to Kerala.gov, the work participation rate is 32.3% (2001). This translates to an unemployment rate of 67.7%

Unemployment computations in Kerala are more realistically reported than measurements of other Indian states. In most areas, if a farm laborer works one day during the year, he is recorded as being 'employed' (even though throughout the remainder of the year his cupboards remain empty). Thus, unemployment rates in India-at-large would not depict the true labor surplus that exists. The State of Kerala records employment and unemployment rates in a similar computational fashion as the United States.

Acculturation

Globalization has accelerated the need for enhanced multicultural communication and acculturation. As defined by Encarta, *acculturation* has two definitions:

Cultural change: a change in the cultural behavior and thinking of a group of people through contact with another culture, and

Absorption of culture: the process by which culture of a society is integrated from birth onward

Early Keralites, due to the geographical predisposition of early foreign visitors, acculturated through cultural change. In contrast, over time, acculturation further developed through absorption of culture.

Acculturation is a complex concept. Two distinct models have guided its definition: a linear model and a two-dimensional model (Maxwell). The linear model is based on the assumption that a strong ethnic identity is not possible among those who become involved in a mainstream society. Acculturation is inevitably accompanied by a weakening of ethnic identity. This theory

of acculturation does not describe the successful acculturation of Kerala. According to *The Hindu's* author Shashi Tharoor, (also the Under Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, United Nations, New York): “One cannot put better ingredients into a national melting pot. One sometimes wishes other Indians would, in this sense, be more Malayali. Kerala's ethos is a reflection of what, I have called the "Malayali miracle"

The two-dimensional model of acculturation suggests both the relationship with the traditional or ethnic culture and the relationship with the new or dominant culture play important roles in the process. This model has suggested four possible outcomes of the acculturation process: assimilation (movement toward the dominant culture), integration (synthesis of the two cultures), rejection (reaffirmation of the traditional culture), or marginalization (alienation from both cultures). Successful integration of multiple cultures has created a desirable ethos in Keralites. “In India, and especially in Kerala, there is no uniform standard, no fixed stereotype, no ‘one way’ of doing things. This pluralism emerges from the very nature of the place; for both Kerala and India as a whole. For Kerala, it is made inevitable by geography and reaffirmed by history” (Tharoor).

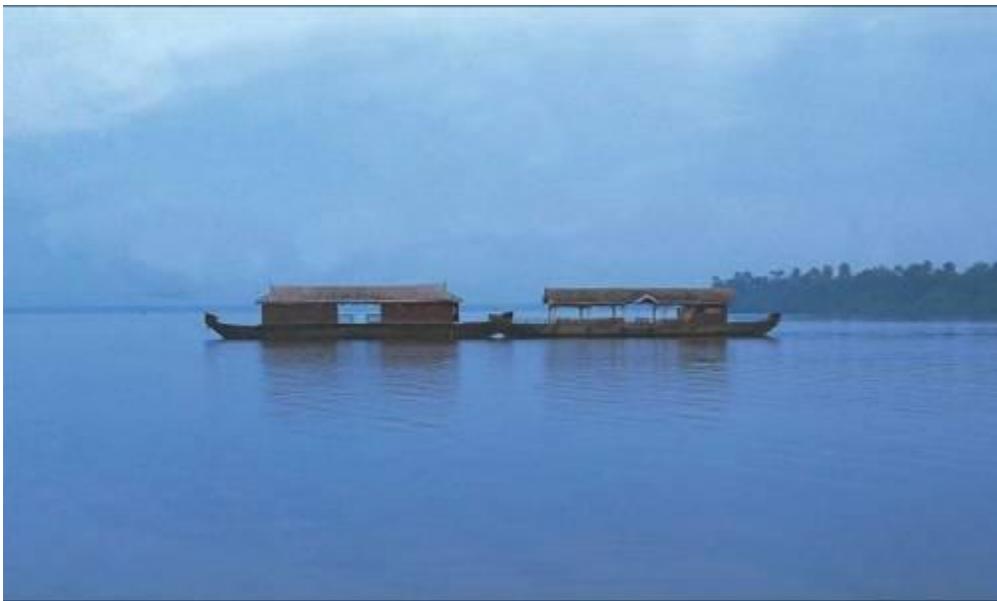
“Keralite liberality and adaptiveness foster good citizenship anywhere. The ethos has developed a State that has practiced openness and tolerance from time immemorial; which has made religious and ethnic



diversity a part of its daily life rather than a source of division; which has overcome caste discrimination and class oppression through education, land reforms, and political democracy; and which has honored its women and enabled them to lead productive, fulfilling and empowered lives.” (Tharoor)

Race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are interrelated. There are marked variations in health status among racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Although several factors can contribute to these variations, the level of acculturation of a particular group is an important consideration. When one considers the high quality health care, low infant mortality rates, and high educational opportunities available to Keralites, acculturation, as evidenced by these parameters, is rather high in Kerala.

Conclusion



Keralites see the best guarantee of their own security and prosperity in the survival and success of a pluralist India. The Malayali

ethos is the same as the best of the Indian ethos — inclusionist, flexible, eclectic, absorptive. The central challenge of India as they complete the sixth decade of independence is the challenge of

accommodating the aspirations of different groups in the national dream. Kerala has shown the way.

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