

*Brief invited talk in the 21-02-2026 symposium on the “International significance of Kerala’s development experience” in the 5<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Kerala Studies*

**Insights in comparative perspective from Kerala’s efforts at democratic alternatives in times of reactionary nationalism**

**Olle Törnquist**

Dear friends. Thanks for inviting me. It’s a privilege to be here.

As we meet, the wave of democracy for citizens with human rights that emanated in Portugal 50 years ago has been replaced by a conservative tsunami of autocratic rule of citizens defined by historical empires, race, suitable cultures and opinions. A tsunami led by mercantile autocrats and oligarchs like Putin, Trump and Musk on the one hand, and party bosses like Xi with state-led capitalism in sweet union with free trade on the other. Along with pro-business ethnic and religious nationalists, like Israel’s Netanyahu, India’s Narendra Modi, and similar European leaders. The old Scandinavian heartland of social democratic politics is no exception.

The conservative wave is certainly rooted in reactions against the negative effects of the unequal division of labour and neoliberal globalisation. But in case after case around the world that concerned Scandinavian scholars recently brought together studies of in a huge anthology,<sup>1</sup> asking questions about the roots of and resistance against conservative nationalism, it is clear that people continued to resist until it was obvious that the centre-leftist alternatives didn’t help much and that progressive popular movements couldn’t make a difference within the shallow democratic systems.

This applied from the chock therapy in Russia and rise of Putin, to the Blairite third-way-policies in Europe that nourished conservative nationalists. As well as from the rise of Trump in the US and the Dutertes in the Philippines, to the coming to power of Modi in India. ‘To mention a few.

In short, people tried to resist, but in face of the insufficient alternatives they either accepted successful autocratic developmentalism as in China and Vietnam, or shifted to support for strongmen, or tried insurrectionary pressure politics, like the Gen-Z-activists.

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief summary in English, see a text at [www.olle-tornquist.com](http://www.olle-tornquist.com)

But there were a few exceptions which showed that alternatives are possible. Such as Lula's Brazil, Petro's Colombia, AKD's Sri Lanka and a few more. Plus Kerala, which stands out because of its remarkable twin foundations.

Firstly, the progressive movements with roots in the historical struggle for equal citizen rights and education, and then also social equality. Much like the Scandinavian free church, temperance and educational movements in the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Which were supplemented by the labour movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Back in Kerala, it was this emancipatory base that made the leftists hold on to democracy when it deteriorated in much of the third world from the late 50's till the mid 70's, and in India during Mrs Gandhi's emergency. And it was these foundations that nourished the Kerala's celebrated human development.

There were downturns, but the efforts were resurrected from the late 80's by the People's Science Movement. Which facilitated the People's Planning Campaign 1996-2001, in the context of political and administrative decentralisation. Reforms which were then brought back to life from 2016, and immediately proved decisive in the struggle against the floods and pandemic.

The second foundation, in my view, is that even if these efforts did not generate the local resource mobilisation and economic growth that were expected, there have been remarkable attempts from 2016 at a New Kerala model. A model that combines welfare policies with advanced knowledge- and innovation-based economic development. A new model rooted in the historical achievements within the field of education, social security and local government, *but most importantly* combined with new cooperation between state and capital in the context of the global economy. As well as with efforts to train and involve labour and jobless educated people with the use of IT and social media. In addition to *kudumbashree* and similar projects.

Again, this too reminds of the Scandinavian social democratic model until the 1980s in terms of social pacts. Social pacts between capital (i.e. the productive oriented employers' organisations) and labour (the unified unions) along with universal public welfare reforms and education.

Innovative and competitive export-industry was in the forefront, along with state-promoted active labour market policies to educate and train huge

numbers of people, who would shift from the rural areas, and later on from rust belts to the urban and regional centres of economic growth, to become skilled labourers and engineers.

So now Kerala may thus be trying a similar social and societal pact as once upon a time in Scandinavia – as an alternative to the conservative nationalist reaction, in India and elsewhere. And Kerala may do that by combining the old emancipatory and inclusive ethos *and* new capital-dominated development within the framework of international markets.

So far, that is fine, I think. Probably the best possible. My only worry is how this pact and societal contract shall be governed, democratically. And what social- and popular movements that will back it up.

One must not forget, that at least the Scandinavian social democratic oriented combination of public welfare and social pacts to foster inclusive (but unfortunately not so ecologically sustainable) development was accompanied by a whole set of not only natural science and technological research and education packages, but also very many academic faculties and public institutes for the study and research of the *democratic governance* of the cooperation between state-capital and-labour. Plus the active involvement of the various unions, as well as organisations of various professional experts, often as propelling forces. In addition to public consultations,

This was thus in sharp contrast to the authoritarian Korean state directed cooperation with the chaebols and trans-national cooperations. Or the Singaporean variant. Which I trust (and hope) Kerala is not opting for.

So what makes me worried is why there is almost nothing about something similar with regard to democratic governance in the Kerala discourse and emphasis on a New Kerala Model. How shall the state-capital-labour cooperation be governed democratically? And what social/popular movements and professional associations will back it up?

I may have my suspicions, but I am not sure what is preventing this attention and additional focus – only that it is missing. And that it's necessary, from an international comparative point of view.