

## **Uneconomic schools of Kerala**

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Literacy has been the bench mark for the qualitative development that any society has achieved. It is the major component of human resource development and the basic to any socio, economic and political programme. Over the years, Kerala has shown tremendous growth in this respect. National literacy rate is 65.31 percent according to census 2001, while that of Kerala 90.92 percent. The male and female literacy rates are 94.2 percent and 87.86 percent respectively. It is significant to note that regional and gender disparities in literacy rate are low in Kerala.

The gain in literacy rate in Kerala can be attributed to many factors but the most significant among them is the prevalence of schools at every nook and corner of the state. More than the Government schools, it has been the success of the private educational agencies managed schools played an important role in achieving the total literacy rate in Kerala. In real economic terms, it provided more number of schools thus offering competition and thus improvement to the sector. The state has a history about two centuries of private edupreneurs. The famous Education bill of 1957 legalised the role of private school management. Three categories have come into being; Government, Aided (Government paid the salary of the staff members of the private school) and Unaided (Management of the school has to meet the salary requirement of the teachers though the school is recognised). A healthy competition among these three categories proven to be a better market oriented solution to many issues faced in the education sector like infrastructure facilities, quality of the education and enrolment rate of the children. Teaching has become the most sought out profession in Kerala while Education sector evolved into a major service sector activity.

<sup>1</sup>The wide spread educational infrastructure facilitated easy access to Lower Primary (LP), Upper Primary (UP) and High School (HS) education in Kerala. 94.39 percent of the rural population is served by primary schools within a distance of 1 kilometer and 97.96 percent within a distance of 2 kilometers. With regard to U.P education 96.2 percent of population is served with an upper primary school/section within a distance of 3 kilometers. The rural population served by secondary schools within a distance of 2 kilometers is 24.71 percent and 97.82 percent has the facility for secondary education within a radius between 6 and 8 kilometers.

Economic Review of 2004 says that there are 12, 322 schools in Kerala for 48.94 lakhs enrolled students. Private sector manages 63.5 percent schools with 67 percent students and 66.6 percent teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> Kerala State Planning Board, *Economic Review 2002*, p. 234

**Table 1**

**Classification of schools in Kerala (Management wise) - 2004<sup>2</sup>**

Government	4, 498
Aided	7, 287
Unaided (recognised)	537
<b>Total</b>	<b>12, 322</b>

Source: Directorate of Public Instruction

The elementary education scene is very much vibrant in Kerala. Compared to other parts of India, Kerala has witnessed a healthy growth with regard to infrastructure required for elementary education concerned. Schools have been started by various players in the last five decades time. This has resulted in competition leading to the close down of the inefficient ones. Parents preferred the best in the lot in the area. Even this option offered plenty to choose from at most of the places. According to Government, this healthy scenario has given birth to the 'uneconomic schools', a syndrome difficult to be defined in its actual sense.

The Government defines uneconomic schools in the following fashion;

*"The strength of students in a school is the criterion for determining continuance of the schools. There are schools in the state with insufficient strength of pupils termed 'uneconomic schools'. However, the use of the word 'uneconomic' in describing such schools is considered a misnomer, because schools offer public service that cannot be evaluated against any meaningful economic yardstick. At the same time there is the need for a periodic assessment and consequent discontinuance of such schools in order to conserve resources and deploy them effectively"<sup>3</sup>*

In the last five years, the competition among the schools has become so high that uneconomic schools produced the class of 'protected teachers' in Kerala. The relevant rule in Chapter V of the Kerala Educational Rules (KER) stipulates that the effective strength of pupils in each standard should not be less than 25. The Director of Public Instruction is competent to waive the provision regarding effective strength in the interest of the students. The exemption is granted on the condition that the strength of students will improve in the subsequent years. If the school authorities are not in a position to improve the strength then the only alternative is to close down the school. Staff strength is granted as per the provision of KER, which prescribes the present pupil-teacher ratio as 1:45. In the case of Lower Primary and Upper Primary Schools, one post of the teacher is to be sanctioned irrespective of strength. No matter of time, this issue became the pet theme for political class of Kerala. Moreover, the issue has a larger impact on the treasury of the state as most of the teachers with drew their salary from the state account.

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<sup>2</sup> The schools listed here are those who follow the state syllabus only.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, *Selected initiatives in education*, p.9.

At the start of tenth five year plan (2002 -07), the plan document set two reforms for education sector at its priority;

- Redeployment of surplus teachers
- Closing of schools without minimum students except in remote areas.

As on the expected lines, it invited wrath from the cross section of political parties especially from teachers unions. To save the face, Government ascribed to the theory of 'low of birth rates'. Apparently, it has reasoning to justify the cause of action. But a management wise enrolment list presented a different scenario.

**Table 2**

**Management wise Enrolment of students in Schools in Kerala 1999-03**

Year	Enrolment of Students (in lakhs)			
	Govt.	Pvt. Aided	Pvt. Unaided	Total
1998-99	19.25	31.75	2.35	53.35
1999-2000	18.69	31.39	2.41	52.49
2000-2001	18.42	31.19	2.58	52.19
2001-2002	17.71	30.68	2.63	51.02
2002-2003	17.08	30.29	2.65	50.02

Source: Directorate of Public Instruction

Though it shows a decline in the total number of students enrolled over the years as a result of the low fertility rate in Kerala, there is an increase in the enrolment to the Private unaided schools. This generates an interesting debate for the reasons behind less enrolment of students in other two categories. Though the Government has to yield to the pressure of unions, it succeeded in closing down some the unviable schools in the last five years and conveying the message to the managements for the need of quality education be provided in order to attract parents as well as students.

Another reason cited for the fall in the enrolment schools has been the mushrooming of other syllabi schools. It has underlined the fault with the present system though no one was ready to look at it with a positive frame work. Both these tables can be better analyzed after reading an interesting data given in Economic review of 2003;

*"As per Kerala Education Rules, a school in which the minimum strength per standard/batch in LP/UP/HS is be-low 25 is called an "uneconomic school". In schools where Arabic or Sanskrit is taught as Part I and II of the first language, the minimum strength per standard is 15. Based on this norm there are 2541 uneconomic schools in 2003 against 2720 in 2002. This shows that the number of uneconomic schools decreased by 179. Of the total uneconomic schools, 1201 (47%) are government schools and 1340 (53%) are private aided schools. Further, of the total uneconomic schools, 2085 (82%) are LP schools, 373 (15%) UP schools and 83(3%) high schools<sup>4</sup>"*

<sup>4</sup> Government has only a moderate share of average 30 percent in the management of total schools in Kerala. Among them, 47 percent of the schools are uneconomic as per the economic review.

**Table 3**

**Schools in Kerala (those follow state syllabus)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Government schools</b>	<b>Aided Schools</b>	<b>Unaided schools</b>	<b>Total</b>
2002	4, 511	7, 320	500	12, 331
2003	4, 492	7, 282	497	12, 271
2004	4, 498	7, 287	537	12, 322

Source: Directorate of Public Instruction

**Table 4**

**Schools in Kerala (other than state syllabus)**

<b>Board</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
CBSE	331	396	373
ICSE	71	75	78
Kendriya Vidyalaya	24	27	26
Jawahar Navodaya	13	13	13

Source: Directorate of Public Instruction

Modernisation in Government Programme (MGP) outlines the following objectives behind the closure of uneconomic schools;

*"A detailed study is to be conducted on the need for continuance of all schools where the student strength is below the prescribed level and where adequate schooling facilities are available nearby. The savings arising from the closure of all such schools and the deployment of the teachers to other schools according to requirement can be utilized for providing more infrastructure facilities in the existing schools. The involvement of the local bodies and the community will help in the decision-making process in this regard"*

It has been decided to deploy the excess teachers in other aided and Government schools as a result of the closure of schools. Protest from various quarters including the private aided management regarding the redeployment of their teachers forced the Government to review the decision.

Of the total protected teachers in 2002, 2165(58 percent) were primary level teachers, 968(26 percent) special teachers and 605 (16 percent) high school teachers<sup>5</sup>. The pressure on the Government is reflected in the economic review of 2003;

<sup>5</sup> Kerala State Planning Board, *Economic Review* 2003 p.273

*"In the previous year, Government had taken a policy decision to close down 148 schools (both government and aided). However due to representations of the PTAs and other well-wishers of the schools, some of the schools have been allowed to continue after re-verification of pupils strength. In closed down schools, pupil strength in all standards was only less than 50. However the schools where there is no alternative schooling facility nearby, have not been closed. There are at present over 1000 schools that are liable to be closed down due to very low pupil strength. Clearly, continuing schools without the minimum strength is a drain on the state exchequer, which eventually erodes the capacity of the educational system to deliver quality services"*

To sum up, various equations play an important role in the closure of schools. Main feature among them is the lack of quality education and infrastructure in the schools which drives the students opt for better ones. Those aided schools who have given least preference to the education also faced the consequences out of it. But the glaring fact is that it is the Government schools which suffered a lot among all. Accountability, dedication and commitment of the teachers and staff are under the watchful eyes of parents. Any diversion on these respects would have to be paid at the cost of their careers. At the same time, an economist can look at the developments as a result of consolidation of the sector which has a history of two centuries. It is the requirement of the day and best augur for the future.

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