

# BRAHMAPURAM AS A POLICY GAME-CHANGER FOR KERALA

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'Brahmapuram defines our treatment of the earth' | Photo Credit: PTI

For over a week now we have been absorbed in news from Kerala [of a fire and its aftermath at a landfill](#) of over a 100 acres, at Brahmapuram on the outer fringes of Kochi. Though [the fire was doused within a couple of days](#), with assistance from the Indian Navy, a haze of smoke remained. The [after effects have reportedly been experienced](#) even in the neighbouring district of Alappuzha, a tourist destination prized for its extraordinary natural beauty. In Kochi, schools had to be shut to ensure the safety of children and residents advised to wear masks and stay indoors. While the precise medical implications of burning plastic and metal are yet to be ascertained, there is speculation that there may be carcinogens in the air. All this must be disheartening for the population as may be gathered from television grabs of residents preparing to leave for areas further away in the State to escape from the stench and the toxins.

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Kochi's future as a congenial home and a major tourist centre is at stake, but no one can say that its garbage crisis came as a surprise. Over a decade ago, the Kerala High Court had ordered the closing down of the city for a couple of days so that it could be cleared of garbage. At a more personal level, when the serving Chief Minister of Kerala, V.S. Achuthanandan, had called on the writer, Kamala Das Suraiyya, as she was preparing to leave for good the city that had been her home, she said that a reason for her departure was that the garbage problem in Kochi was unbearable. Finally, even when he had been the State Chief Minister, A.K. Antony had pointed out that while the effort to keep Kerala clean with an eye on the revenue from tourism may be laudable, we needed to be motivated by the desire to keep our home clean for our own well-being.

At the heart of the problem being faced at Brahmapuram is the failure to see that economic growth, and thus consumption, is limited by Nature's capacity to supply the 'goods and services' we all rely on. This has defined our treatment of the earth. The practice is manifest at two levels — at the level of public policy, which is the domain of the government, and of the public itself. Only a response from both these sections in Kerala can result in a lasting solution.

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First, public policy. The approach of the managers of the State may be seen in the speech given by the State Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, during the welcome extended to a visiting Nobel Laureate in Economics last week. The Chief Minister spoke of how public policy in Kerala had enabled an improved standard of living for the majority of the population. This is incontestable. But, ironically, Mr. Vijayan was speaking at the time when Brahmapuram was smouldering.

The natural environment has never been a part of the official discourse in Kerala even as there has been signs of its degradation for some time now. Instead, the focus has been on what may be termed distributivism or the distribution of goods, services and cash by the State. The meta narrative seems to be that the public are entitled to these goods, and the government's principal duty is to respond to this. Kerala may have over-reached itself with its distributivism, which has meant that limited public funds have been spread thin.

Consider this. If you move to cash transfers before you have well-provisioned public health and education, the quality of the latter would be sub par. This extends to all the services that only the State can provide. It has long been recognised that poorly-funded and badly-managed public services, including power supply and transportation, with prices not aligned with costs, means that the utilities will not only run into financial ruin but also hold back the generation of income elsewhere in the economy due to unreliable services.

Now, Brahmapuram has shown that poor public services in the form of waste management can induce deep insecurity among the public. However, from the point of view of the environment, the failure has also been the ineffective regulation of harmful human activity. Kochi's current predicament is not unique. All over Kerala, there is no arrangement in place for the scientific disposal of garbage, and the government machinery appears to be unconcerned and incapable. It is just that the crisis emerged first, and in an extreme form, in a city with high consumption levels and poorly-managed infrastructure.

The direction in which public policy in Kerala must now re-orient itself is clear. The first is specific to the crisis at Brahmapuram. That the situation must be brought under control immediately goes without saying, but it would be unfortunate to treat it as a fire-fighting exercise. There must be a determination to avoid a similar incident in the future. This would involve the following.

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Responsibility for the scientific treatment of garbage at the site must be fixed with the Kochi Municipal Corporation, given its proximity to the action. Garbage segregation by households must become a condition in order for a person to reside in the city. Adequate funding for garbage clearance would have to be ensured. This may require revisiting the municipal taxes levied on property ownership and the user rates for municipal services. Finally, there must be a periodic independent review of the functioning of the site, and the assessment made public. Once the specific case of Brahmapuram is resolved, public policy in Kerala must pivot towards conservation of natural capital, the central aspect of which would be to ensure that the carrying capacity of the earth is recognised.

The Narendra Modi government, bent on leaving a mark before the general election of 2024, has shown scant regard for the consequence of building elevated highways in a geography with laterite presence, vulnerable to subsidence induced by heavy concrete structures. For the State government, on the other hand, to press on with its high-speed SilverLine rail project after the disaster at Kochi would be rather like fiddling after the city burned. The government's 'Make in Kerala' is a much delayed and welcome recognition that public policy must go beyond distributivism and actually encourage production, which alone can provide employment to the

population. But Brahmapuram has flagged an ecological aspect of life in Kerala which should now take priority over all else. A government machinery attuned to delivering private goods must be re-directed to building public goods, of which waste management is among the most important.

But leaving any part of the responsibility to politicians or persisting with a complacent discourse on Kerala would be to evade the issue. Starting with economists, public commentators close to the establishment have propagated the idea that Kerala's development path, characterised by the public provision of health and education, is ideal. Not only has the natural environment been kept out of the assessment but this also gives the impression that the public have no responsibility for their own condition.

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As Kerala is almost continuously inhabited, all transportation channels, be it road or rail, are littered with refuse on either side. It reflects the general attitude that 'clearing up after me is, somehow, someone's else's responsibility'. This combined with conspicuous consumption is what has inevitably led to Brahmapuram. It is only by consuming less and disposing of the waste in a responsible manner that we can avert the repetition of a similar disaster. If we continue to act as if we are entitled to nature's indulgence, we stand to lose our home.

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