Indian Public Policy Review 2022, 3(2): 29-42

Size of Government in Kerala: Bulging Department of Agriculture in a Decentralising Structure

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Abstract

Kerala has devolved a large number of functions, funds and functionaries to the local governments. The state reports the highest number of local government functionaries per 1000 population among the Indian states. Adhering to the principle of subsidiarity would suggest that line departments at the state level reduce in size. The paper analyses the size of the state government in terms of employment, and in particular examines the efficiency of the Department of Agriculture by comparing the number of employees per unit area under cultivation in Kerala with that in Karnataka and Telangana. The findings are that Kerala reports 86 percent higher number of total employees per lakh population compared to Karnataka and about 25 percent higher than that in Telanagana. As regards the Department of Agriculture, while in Kerala an employee attends to 141 hectares, it is five times that area at 778 hectares in Telangana and ten times that area at 1425 hectares in Karnataka. The proportion of drivers, typists and clerks in the department in Kerala is also high. Running revenue and fiscal deficits and facing fiscal stress year after year for the last twenty years, where salary accounts for over 30% of the total revenue receipts, the state can aim for rationalization of its administration in order to have more resources for capital spending.

Keywords: Government Size; Employment; Agriculture Department; Efficiency; Kerala; Decentralization

Publication Date: 18 March 2022

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I Introduction

Kerala is widely mentioned as a success story during the first wave of COVID-19. The state drew strength from the presence of empowered local government institutions and community participation in its fight against the pandemic. These have emerged as frontline institutions in containing the disease and in alleviating distress caused to the poor and vulnerable. Substantial devolution of funds, functions, and functionaries to the local governments over the last 25 years has helped strengthen these institutions. For instance, over 10% of the state's revenue receipts are devolved to the local governments (RBI, 2020: 73).

Democratic decentralisation got a boost with people's planning campaign launched in 1996 with the express intent of demystifying and *debureaucratising* planning at the local level (emphasis added) (Harilal, 2013). Local governments are 'entrusted with the responsibilities of public administration such as preparing project documents and estimates (working groups), technical vetting and issuing technical sanction (TAG/ committee system), selecting beneficiaries (gram sabha), and executing work (beneficiary committees)' (Harilal, 2013: 56).

It is generally believed that local plans have fared well in the service sector and triggered some notable success stories in agriculture (Harilal, ibid.). In particular, local governments have enabled commendable achievements in public education and health in the state (Isaac and Frankie, 2021). However, the record has been poor in productive sectors. For instance, in agriculture, area under paddy declined from 4.7 lakh hectares to 2 lakh hectares and production from 9.5 lakh metric tons to 5.2 lakh metric tons over the last 25 years (Isaac and Frankie, ibid.).

The devolution of more than 26 functions to local governments in Kerala has necessitated the enhancement of the number of functionaries at that level. The total number of employees under the local governments increased from 29,980 in 1995-96 to 36,480 in 2020-21. This is besides the local level offices of the development departments -- such as schools, primary health centres, anganwadis, and Krishi Bhavans -- which have been devolved (Isaac and Frankie, 2021). As a result, Kerala (along with Tamil Nadu) reports the highest number of local government functionaries - more than 2 employees per 1000 population - among states in India (Narayana, 2021).

According to the logic of subsidiarity, as functions are devolved to the local governments, one would expect the employee strength of line departments (i.e. at the state level) to fall, and the size of the state government to decrease. Kerala reports that more than 30% of the total revenue receipts (XV Finance Commission Report, Volume IV) go for paying salaries of employees, and a further 20% each for interest and pension payments. Under such fiscal stress, it is of interest to analyse the employee strength of the government and its efficiency. This paper takes up the issue of size of government in Kerala, and in particular, that of the department of agriculture, as the sector has been declining for the last three decades. In Kerala, the Agriculture department attends to only part of the sector, as a large proportion of the area under tree crops (such as natural rubber) is attended to by central government agencies.

The paper is organized in seven sections. Section 2 presents the relevant literature on size of government. Section 3 analyses distinct features of agriculture in Kerala. Section 4 examines the size and composition of government in Kerala in comparison with Karnataka and Telangana. Section 5

analyses the composition of the department of agriculture in the three states. Section 6 speculates on the possible factors behind the large number of drivers and staff in many departments. Section 7 concludes.

II Size of Government

Government is a vital institution in modern economic life although economists largely swear by the market. Much resource allocation takes place outside the market and consequently it is important, as succinctly put by Di Matteo (2013), to understand the appropriate size of government and its role in the economic life of its private citizens.

Size and growth of governments has remained an important subject of investigation since 1835 when Alexis de Tocqueville speculated on the subject. Wagner's (1883) well-known "law of increasing state activity" has spawned a vast literature on the subject. A new dimension was added to this debate by Peacock and Wiseman (1967) who argued that the rate of growth of public expenditure was driven by the desirable level of public spending and constrained by taxpayer perception of tolerable burden of taxation, and that this tolerance is greater during times of national or social crisis, which makes it possible to increase expenditures closer to the desired level.

As shown by Kliesen (2003), the 20th century saw a significant increase in the size and scope of government in the US because of two World Wars, economic depression of the 1930s, expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s and an upsurge in the environment regulations in the 1970s. Defense spending too has played an important role in boosting the size of the government. In countries with a federal structure of government, part of the increase was at the state and local level, as health and educational responsibilities of governments grew. The experience elsewhere in Europe and other OECD countries has not been different. Thus, governments have become large, multi-layered, and continue to grow in times of crises.

Measuring the size of government is complex as there is no single quantitative measure that conveniently summarises the role and functions of government. It is a producer of goods and services, an employer of labour and investor of capital. It also transfers resources, regulates individual and corporate activities, and incentivizes many market activities (Di Matteo, 2013). These functions are carried out by various levels of government depending upon the structure of government in each country. The size of government may be viewed from various angles. As stated by Di Matteo (2013): 'Two of the most common measures are government spending as a share of national output (GDP) and government revenues as a share of GDP. Other measures may include government spending per capita, the number of public sector employees, or public sector employment as a share of total employment' (p. 6).

Confining to the view of government by employment, three dimensions of it have become important. One is the sheer size in numbers, that is, the total employment in the various departments of government. Following Baumol (1966), the second dimension is the price of labour. And thirdly, the efficiency of providing service: 'The depth of government involvement in the economy gives rise to one common denominator for measuring government activity: is it efficient? Efficiency in government spending is a benefit that generates value for taxpayers, ensures that the costs of taxation

and government intervention for economic growth and market performance are minimized, and demonstrates stewardship on the part of political leaders for their nation.' (Di Matteo, 2013: 5).

Local government efficiency has attracted some interest in recent years. A systematic review of the existing literature by Narbon-Perpina and Witte in 2018 identified 84 empirical studies on the subject. The countries covered range from many in Europe to Australia, Brazil and Chile in Latin America to Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia in Asia, Morocco and South Africa in Africa and the United States. India, with one of the largest numbers of local governments, does not find a mention in the survey. The studies measure local government efficiency using a wide variety of input and output variables. The selection of variables depended on the availability of data and the specific services the local governments must provide in each country. The output variables included by the studies range from aggregate of various municipal services in a global index to a set of specific local services. As regards input variables, mostly expenditure variables such as total expenditure, current expenditure, personnel expenditure, capital expenditure, and other financial expenditures are taken. Only a few studies have used number of local government employees as input.

Along with studies on the performance of local governments, there are studies on the size and efficiency of governments or departments. Recall that 'the greater the output for a given input or the lower the input for a given output, the more efficient the activity is' (Mandl et al., 2008: 3).

When specific outputs and outcomes could be measured, it is possible to conceive output per unit of input (whether money or personnel). What happens when outputs are not easy to measure, such as services provided by government? For a department like agriculture, efficiency may be measured in terms of the number of employees per unit area, or area normalized for crop combinations. For these ratios to be analytically useful, we have to either have some benchmarks in relation to which the performance can be assessed, or we have to place the observed ratios in a comparative frame. Here we have adopted the latter, where Kerala is compared with Karnataka and Telangana. A simple measure of number of employees per unit area is taken. The data used is from the staff appendix presented to the legislative assembly along with the state budget. It contains details of the number of employees by department and designation. It is a rich source of data, seldom used by researchers.

III The Plantation Crop-Centred Agriculture of Kerala

Among the three states Kerala is the smallest in terms of population as well as geographical area (Table 1). The population of Telangana is slightly larger than Kerala, and it has three times the area of Kerala. Karnataka has 83% more population than Kerala and almost five times its area. Further, Kerala has over a quarter of its geographical area under forests, compared to 23% in Telangana and 16% in Karnataka. All three states have about 12 to 13% of the geographical area not available for cultivation. Thus, the net cropped area in Kerala is around 20 lakh hectares, compared to over 40 lakh hectares in Telangana and 100 lakh hectares in Karnataka.

Table 1: Land Use Pattern in Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana

	Karnataka	Kerala	Telangana
Population(2011) (lakh)	610.95	334.06	350.04
Geographical Area(sq.km.)	191791	38863	112077
Land Use Types		**Area (000 hectares)**	
Forests	3073 (16.0%)	1081 (27.8%)	2540 (22.7%)
Not Available for Cultivation	2248 (11.8%)	538 (13.8%)	1492 (13.3%)
Net Area Sown	10044 (52.7%)	2043 (52.6%)	4377 (39.1%)
Net Cropped Area	10006	2016	4175
Gross Cropped Area (GCA)	12009	2584	4893

Source: First four items are from the Forest Survey of India, India State of Forest Report 2019, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.
Note: The data are for the year 2014-15. Items 5 and 6 are from the publications of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics of the respective state governments for 2016-17 or 2017-18.
Percentages shown are of the Reporting area which is different from the geographical area.

Kerala is one of India's largest producers of natural rubber, coconut, cardamom, and other plantation crops. These are tree crops (cardamom is a bush) with long life and not easily reversible -- once planted, the area cannot go back to field crops. As may be seen from Table 2, area under coffee and coconut is large in Karnataka as well; for every other tree crop, the area under the crop in Kerala is significantly more than in Karnataka. Telangana does not have any area under any of these crops, as the agro-ecological conditions of the state are not conducive for the cultivation of any of these crops. In total, the five crops listed in Table 2 account for close to 15 lakh hectares in Kerala and over nine lakh hectares in Karnataka. The share of plantation tree crops in the gross cropped area of the state is 57 % in Kerala, compared to 8% in Karnataka.

Table 2. Land under Plantation Tree Crops in Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana

Tree Crop	Area in Hectares		
	Karnataka	Kerala	Telangana
Tea	2,172	35,871	-
Coffee	2,45,288	84,976	-
Cardamom	14,629	39,080	-
Natural Rubber	55,000	5,51,050	-
Coconut	6,15,260	7,56,890	450
Total	9,32,349	14,67,687	450
% of Gross Cropped Area	7.76	56.81	0.009
GCA less Tree Crops	110,76,234	11,16,320	48,92,698

Source: indiacoffee.org; teaboard.gov.in; ecostat.telangana.gov.in; ecostate.kerala.gov.in; des.kar.nic.in.

In the case of each of the tree crop listed in Table 2, commodity boards support the cultivation, processing and trade of the crop. For instance, the Coffee Board of India is actively involved in the production and trading of coffee in India. It has a large extension wing spread over the coffee cultivating areas of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Joint Director of Extension in Kalpetta, under the overall supervision of the Director of Research, monitors and guides the extension activities of two Deputy Directors of Extension, eight liaison officers and 13 junior liaison officers in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The extension wing of the Board is engaged in the supply of seed coffee to coffee growers, conducting village-level group meetings, and holding awareness campaigns and seminars on various aspects of coffee for the benefit of growers (Coffee Board of India).

There are organisations similar to Coffee Board for promoting the cultivation of tea, cardamom, coconut and natural rubber. The overall development of cardamom (small and large) is the responsibility of the Spices Board. The Coconut Development Board was established in 1981, with the specific objective of promoting coconut cultivation in non- traditional belts, rehabilitation of senile palms, integrated management of diseases and pests, and so on. Natural rubber has a board of seventy years' standing, which is one of the most integrated organisations dealing with rubber production, research, and exports.

Overall, Kerala has close to 60 % of its gross cropped area under plantation tree crops, which require very different support systems compared to field crops. In addition to the commodity boards for the development of tree crops, there are two directorates under the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare entrusted with the development of crops in the country. The Directorate of Arecanut and Spices Development looks after the development of spices and arecanut (dasd.gov.in). The Directorate is responsible for spices such as pepper, ginger, turmeric, and nutmeg. Similar functions are carried out by the Directorate of Cashew and Cocoa Development. All these crops are cultivated in Kerala, and they account for about 2.3 lakh hectares of area (that is almost nine % of GCA in the state). Thus, commodity boards and directorates play a decisive role in the development of almost two-thirds of the GCA in the state.

In Kerala, the area under tree crops has more or less been maintained during the last ten years. While yield increases have varied among the crops, it may safely be said that production of these crops has not witnessed any significant fall during this period. Despite this, the share of agriculture in GSDP has witnessed a steep fall, as may be seen from Table 3. It is not unusual for agriculture, forestry, and fishing to see its share fall -- this has happened in all three states -- but Kerala has seen the largest drop in the share of crops sector in GSDP, of more than four percentage points in seven years. Clearly, the non-tree crop sector in Kerala is on a steep decline.

Table 3. Share of Agriculture in Gross State Domestic Product at Current Prices

Share in GSDP (%)	Karnataka		Kerala		Telangana	
	2012-13	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19	2011-12	2018-19
Crops	9.67	7.44	8.64	4.29	9.60	7.10
Livestock	2.44	2.39	3.35	3.25	5.60	6.80
Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing	14.90	10.97	14.39	10.67	16.3	14.8

Source: For Karnataka, Economic Survey, Various Issues available at des.karnataka.gov.in;
For Kerala, ecostat.kerala.gov.in; For Telangana, ecostat.telangana.gov.in

IV Size and Composition of Governments in Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana

Size of a government is here taken in terms of the number of employees. Table 4 presents data on total number of employees and their distribution by some major departments. The data are taken from the Staff Appendix presented along with the Budget each year.

There is little uniformity in the presentation of the information among the state governments. For the purpose of comparison of number of employees of a department across the three states the numbers had to be carefully aggregated. For instance, some states show the employees in the Department of State Goods and Services Tax and Department of Excise under Finance. So, Finance is taken to consist of Audit, Finance, Commercial Taxes, Small Savings and so on. Similarly, Department of Agriculture includes horticulture but not sericulture.

Table 4. Staff Strength under Some Major Departments in Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana, 2019-20

Department	Karnataka	Kerala	Telangana
Agriculture	7775	**7903**	6292
Animal Husbandry and Dairy Development	**9584**	8116	6323
Home & Transport	92826	72566	**99548**
Education	**241765**	224753	156008
Public Works	7689	**8576**	2966
Forest Ecology and Environment	**8713**	6762	6803
Water Resources	2544	7900	**10566**
Finance[$]	10226	**15728**	13413
Revenue	21759	**24438**	18375
Food and Civil Supplies	1357	**2447**	1349
Rural Development and Panchayati Raj	15475	11508	**25646**[&]
Social Welfare	12973	2973	**15216**
Labour and Skill Development	**4678**	2383	3060
Health and Family Welfare[#]	38,708	**63,941**	48,827
Total Number of Employees	512521	**521531**	440025

Source: Staff Appendix, Budget Papers available at http://finance.kerala.gov.in; http://finaance.karnataka.gov.in; http://finance.telangana.gov.in.

Notes:

[$] includes staff in the departments of commercial taxes, excise etc;

[&] includes Panchayat employees numbering 19,971;

[#] includes medical education.

It may be seen (Table 1) that Kerala is the smallest among the three states in terms of geographical area as well as population. But Kerala has the largest government in terms of employee strength. It is about 2% higher than that of Karnataka and 19 % higher than that of Telangana.

It is often said that the higher human development achievements of Kerala are owing to the larger government spending on health and education over a long stretch. So, one would expect a higher proportion of the total number of government employees contributed by these two sectors. While the bulk of the employee strength is contributed by these two departments in the three states, the share of these two departments in the total -- at 55 % for Kerala -- is higher than that for Telangana at 47 % but only equal to that for Karnataka (Table 5).

Table 5. Number of Employees per Unit Area and Population

State	Proportion in Health and Education (%)	Number per lakh Population	Number per 100 Square Km.
Karnataka	55	839	267
Kerala	55	1561	1342
Telangana	47	1257	393

Source: Author's calculations based on data in Tables 1 and 4

With the argument of larger number of employees in health and education sectors as a reason for the larger total number out of the way, let us take the number of employees per lakh population and per 100 square km. area. It may be seen that Kerala reports a much higher number compared to Karnataka and Telangana (Table 5). Kerala reports 86 % higher number of employees per lakh population compared to Karnataka and about 25 % higher than that in Telangana.

The primary function of the state governments in the Indian context is the provision of public services. Indicators such as the proportion of employees in the departments of health and education tell us the relative importance governments assign to these public services. In this respect Kerala is not very different from Karnataka. Note that the number of employees per lakh population does not tell us whether the citizens are under-served (in Karnataka) or over-served (in Kerala). Such an assessment would call for an analysis of the quantum of service provided in relation to the units requiring service. As the services provided by different departments are very different, this would call for a disaggregated analysis.

A first look at some of the departments suggests the following:

- In the Public Works Department, Kerala has 1000 more employees compared to Karnataka and almost three times the number in Telangana. Given that the geographical area of Kerala is significantly less than that in the other two states and that many functions and assets are devolved to the local governments, it is difficult to visualize that the requirement would be so much higher in Kerala.
- More or less similar conclusions may be drawn regarding the Forest Department. As presented in Table 1, the extent of forest area in Telangana is 2.5 times and in Karnataka three times that in Kerala. The size of the department in Kerala is almost equal to that in Telangana and about 77% of that in Karnataka.

- In the departments of Finance, Revenue, and Food and Civil Supplies, the employee strength in Kerala is more than that in Karnataka and Telangana. This contrast is most glaring in the Department of Food and Civil Supplies. If Telangana offers the services of food and civil supplies with 1349 employees, then why does Kerala require 2447? Almost double the population in Karnataka gets services of the department with close to half the number of employees of Kerala.

Turning to agriculture, a measure of the quantum of service provided may be taken as the area cultivated (it could be the number of cultivators, or a combination of area and number of cultivators and crop types and so on). As shown in Table 2, gross cropped area less tree crops receiving extension services from other organisations in Telangana is over four times and in Karnataka around ten times that in Kerala. Computing the GCA per employee in the department, it may be seen that while in Kerala an employee attends to 141 hectares, it is five times that number (778 hectares) in Telangana and ten times that number (1425 hectares) in Karnataka. An employee tending to just 1.4 square km. area looks very low by any standard. One is compelled to draw the inference that the agricultural department in Kerala is bloated.

Table 6. Total Number of Livestock during 20th Livestock Census 2019 (in 000)

State	Cattle	Buffalo	Sheep	Goat	Pig	Horses	Total Livestock
Karnataka	8459	2985	11051	6169	32384	7	29003
Kerala	1333	102	1	1359	104	-	2899
Telangana	4218	4226	19063	4935	178	4	32626

Source: Basic Animal Husbandry Statistics- 2019 available at dadf.gov.in

The picture is not much different in the animal husbandry and dairy development department. Table 6 presents the livestock numbers from the 20th Livestock Census of 2019. Both Karnataka and Telangana report livestock numbers ten times or higher than those of Kerala. If the number of cattle and buffalo are taken, it is over six times and eight times that of Kerala in Telangana and Karnataka respectively.

The number of employees in the department in Kerala is about 2000 more than in Telangana, and is only about 1000 less than that in Karnataka. Effectively these numbers suggest that while an employee in Kerala tends to 357 livestock numbers, employees are responsible for eight and fifteen times that number in Karnataka and Telangana respectively. If we take only cattle and buffalo, then while in Kerala an employee attends to 177 heads, it is 1194 in Karnataka and 1335 in Telangana.

Thus, a comparison with these two states in agriculture and animal husbandry gives us a perspective regarding the size of the departments in Kerala. The employee strength of the departments in Kerala does not bear a meaningful relationship to the area under crops, or the livestock numbers, or the performance of the sector in terms of their contribution to the GSDP of the state.

V. A Department of Clerks, Drivers and Mechanics

A department such as agriculture or horticulture entrusted with the primary responsibility of providing timely extension service and promote scientific agriculture is expected to have more technically qualified staff. In an era when information on soil and plant health, pests and diseases, land use etc. is accessed through satellites and other digital modes, where extension has acquired a new meaning, the department is expected to draw expertise from research institutions to interpret data and inform practices.

Across the three states, fairly high proportions of staff are directors and officers – 52 % in Karnataka, 59 % in Kerala and 63 % in Telangana (Table 7). These numbers suggest that Kerala is not very different from the other two states in this respect. But what is different is that while a director has around 16,930 hectares of GCA falling under their area of operation in both Telangana and Karnataka, it is 3017 hectares in Kerala -- only around 18 % of the area attended to by a director in Karnataka and Telangana. Similar differences may be observed with regard to the workload of officers as well – per capita area is 3280 hectares in Karnataka, 1328 hectares in Telangana, and only 261 hectares in Kerala.

Table 7. Staff Composition of the Department of Agriculture in Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana

	Category	Karnataka	Kerala	Telangana
1	Director-Joint, Additional, Assistant ...	**654**	370	289
2	Officers-Agriculture, Horticulture, Asst Agrl, Asst Horti, Agrl Extension ...	3377	**4271**	3684
3	Publicity Officer, Editor, Artist, ...	9	**17**	10
4	Engineer, Overseer, ...	20	**63**	5
5	Superintendent – grade I, II ...	**514**	375	81
6	Gardner / Mali	**539**	20	413
7	Research Assistant, Scientific Assistant, Technical Assistant, ...	-	**87**	-
8	Betel Picker, Binder, Helper ...	**30**	11	-
9	Driver – Senior, Grade I, II etc/ Cleaner	126	**340**	97
10	Borer, Fitter, Machinist, Mechanic ...	-	**214**	18
12	Duplicator, Dupl. Operator, ...	-	**62**	2
13	Clerk/Typist/Adm. Assistant/Confidential Assistant- all grades,	1394	**1544**	1191
14	Peon/Attender/ ...	**587**	302	147
15	Others*	**525**	227	355
16	Total	7775	**7903**	6292
	Officers/ Directors as a Proportion of Total (%)	51.85	58.72	**63.14**
	Sl Nos. 13 and 14 as a proportion of Total (%)	**25.47**	23.36	21.27
	Sl Nos. 7 to 14 as a proportion of Total (%)	27.49	**32.27**	23.12

Source: Same as Table 4.

Note: * includes Accountants of all grades, watchmen, soil chemists, lab attenders, tracers, draftsmen etc.

As regards the strength of other categories of employees, it may be seen that the departments in the three states have over a fifth of their employees falling in the categories of typists, clerks, assistants and peons of all grades. In this respect Kerala is no different from Karnataka; Telangana has a slightly lower proportion of such category of staff.

However, what is different is that when categories listed in Serial numbers 7 to 12 are added, the proportion rises to 32 % in Kerala compared to 27 % in Karnataka and 23 % in Telangana. There is a high load of drivers in Kerala, with almost one driver per director, compared to one driver for three directors in Telangana and for five directors in Karnataka. There is a similar high load of duplicating machine operators and mechanics in Kerala. Many of these categories have disappeared in other states but continue to remain in Kerala.

We may assess the need for drivers from a different angle, namely that of the geographical area to be covered for field visits. Taking measures like 'geographical area less forest area' to be covered per driver, it may be seen that in Karnataka a driver has to cover 1278 square kms., in Telangana 894 sq. kms., and in Kerala only 83 sq kms. As regards net cropped area, it becomes 794 sq kms in Karnataka, 430 in Telangana, and 59 in Kerala. If we apply the geographical area covered per driver in Telangana to Kerala, then Kerala would need only 31 drivers. If it is net cropped area, then the need would rise to 47. This would suggest that overstaffing of drivers in Kerala is of the order of 300. A similar computation done for the category of Directors and Officers of all types would suggest that around 80 % of them are surplus in Kerala.

We looked at the number of employees in different categories at an earlier time (2011-12) to see whether there has been any conscious effort to rationalise the staffing pattern. It is seen that while the number of superintendents and engineers has seen some reduction, the number of clerks/typists has hardly seen any reduction. The number of Directors has fallen by 30 but the number of officers has risen by close to 200. Most stunning is that the number of drivers has increased by 50 % during this period!

In sum, the characteristic of agriculture in Kerala is very different from that in the other two states. The area under field crops in the state is only around 40 % of the GCA, as the rest are plantation tree crops with their own systems of extension. The Department of Agriculture, which has the responsibility for less than 40 % of the net cropped area, is overstaffed to a very large extent and there has hardly been any effort at rationalising the workforce. It is also not very clear what the large number of clerks/typists, drivers, and mechanics in the Department do. Thus, Kerala -- acclaimed for the achievements of its local governments -- does poorly in terms of efficiency of its Department of Agriculture.

VI. Spoils of Power and Unionisation behind the Large Number of Drivers?

It is natural to ask the question, "why has there been such a large number of drivers in Kerala?" A definitive answer to the question would require a detailed examination of the issue which is not attempted here. Speculation on two possible factors may persuade researchers to take them up for rigorous analysis. The two factors that readily come to mind are, spoils system in coalition

governments alternating every five years with thin majorities, and prevalence of unions affiliated to political parties in power. Two important pieces of evidence are offered in support of this argument.

It is well known that membership of state public service commissions, boards of state public sector enterprises, welfare funds and corporations are distributed among political parties and other interest groups to ensure their continued support to the governing coalition. Taking Public Service Commissions (PSC) of the three states, it may be seen that the Kerala PSC has 20 members, Karnataka 13, and Telangana 8 (in addition to the chairperson in each case). The ruling coalition in Kerala is made up of 11 political parties, whereas both Karnataka and Telangana are now ruled by single parties. Karnataka had a history of coalition politics in recent decades. The composition of the PSCs reflects this pattern.

When members are nominated by different political parties, they have to be treated on par, and the way this is done in Kerala is to offer official car with driver, staff, and other perquisites. The result is that Kerala PSC has 29 drivers on its rolls compared to five in Karnataka and only two in Telangana. Other staff are distributed similarly. In Kerala, there are 226 section officers, compared to 14 in Karnataka and 32 in Telangana. Number of stenographers and typists too are aplenty in Kerala PSC. In total, the staff strength of the Kerala PSC is 1784, compared to 225 in Karnataka and 166 in Telangana.

The total number of employees in government is not very different among the three states. Hence, the annual recruitment and the related workload cannot be very different in the three states. The increase in the number of PSC members (1.5 times as many as Karnataka, and more than twice as many as Telangana) and the eight-to-tenfold number of employees in the PSC can be seen as part of a spoils system. Ministries and departments too are distributed among the political parties of the coalition, who turn a blind eye to perquisites of officers and are often lenient with the unions affiliated to the coalition partners.

Examples of redundant worker groups continuing for years are also readily available. In recent years the use of road rollers by the Public Works Department has decreased, with the introduction of modern machinery by the contractors. The Government identified 140 posts of Roller drivers and 110 post of cleaners as surplus in 2003, and abolished 80 posts of drivers and 60 posts of cleaners. But as of October 2019, 26 drivers and 57 cleaners were still in their posts. They had hardly worked six days in *a year*. The Government did not explore the possibility of redeploying the idling crew despite several proposals being submitted by the Chief Engineer of Public Works Department (CAG, 2021: 49-50). It is possible that union pressure to not displace them was too strong. This example is comparable to that of borers, fitters and duplicators in the Department of Agriculture, noticed earlier (Table 7, row 10). In a unionised environment, numbers are strength, and efforts are made to protect them.

It may be fruitful to pursue an understanding of the higher number of employees in government in Kerala along these two directions, namely spoils system and unionisation. The few examples presented here suggest as much.

VII Conclusion

Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, village (Gram) Panchayats came into existence and have created participatory structures of grassroots democracy. The Panchayats are mandated to provide essential services such as drinking water, rural sanitation, preventive health etc., and are also agencies of the state for implementing schemes of Central and State governments. As per the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, 'agriculture, rural housing, watershed development, farm forestry and minor forest produce, rural electrification - all are functions [that] by their very nature "belong" to rural local bodies' (p. 34). While Article 243 G along with the Eleventh Schedule indicates the kind of functions to be discharged by the Panchayats, their assignment is left to the state governments by enacting enabling legislations. Kerala has been in the forefront of devolving functions, funds and functionaries to the local governments to make them more responsive, transparent, and accountable to citizens.

Subsidiarity is 'a principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level' (Oxford Dictionary). In this scheme the citizen and the community are the centre of governance. Agriculture by its very nature is to be devolved to the Panchayats, and the state Department has only a subsidiary role. It is for the Panchayat to decide whether they need an office of the department, and if so, what functions it is to carry out. In Kerala, this question is all the more relevant and significant as over 60 % of the cropped area falls under tree crops, the development of which does not fall under the purview of the state's Department of Agriculture. In many Panchayats, this proportion would be significantly higher, making the Department largely irrelevant.

A government which spends over 60 % of its revenue receipts on salary and pension and runs huge revenue and fiscal deficits to run the government cannot afford to have departments such as the Department of Agriculture staffed so inefficiently. Especially difficult is the situation when massive floods (as in 2018) and pandemics (as in 2018 and 2020) necessitate funds for lifesaving, livelihoods, and reconstruction. These are over and above the funds needed for filling the infrastructure deficit, that has grown owing to insufficient and/or low quality capital spending over a long period. It is time the state examines many of its departments from the lens of subsidiarity, as it has striven to decentralise many functions earlier carried out by these departments.

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