



Beyond The Kerala Model: The Case For Integrating Happiness In Development Planning

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Abstract: Kerala's acclaimed "Model of Development," characterised by high literacy, robust healthcare, and gender equity, has long been viewed as a benchmark for social progress in India. Yet persistent challenges—rising mental health concerns, lifestyle diseases, unemployment, ecological vulnerability, and declining community vitality—highlight the limitations of conventional metrics like GDP and HDI in capturing true well-being. This paper argues for integrating Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework into Kerala's development planning, given the cultural, social, and environmental parallels between the two regions. GNH's multidimensional approach, encompassing psychological well-being, time use, cultural resilience, and environmental stewardship, offers a more holistic measure of progress. Through a critical review of Kerala's current socio-economic indicators, the study identifies policy gaps and proposes a locally adapted GNH-based framework, embedded in participatory governance and linked to resource allocation. By complementing economic indicators with happiness metrics, Kerala can move towards a development model that ensures not just material prosperity but sustainable, inclusive, and meaningful well-being for all citizens.

Keywords: Kerala Model, Gross National Happiness, development planning, well-being indicators, policy integration

1. Introduction

Kerala, a provincial state in India, has been able to achieve within a little less than two decades of its formation in 1956 a critical minimum of human development and welfare to its people despite a very low per capita income by international standards" (Kannan, 2023). The literacy rate in Kerala stood at 96.2 (Kerala state economic and statistics department, 2023), Sex ratio is 1084 females per men, Total fertility rate 1.35 which is below the replacement fertility rate of 2.1, infant mortality rate 0.68%, Maternal mortality rate 25 per one lakh live birth.

The traditional measures like GDP and even HDI are not capable to draw the true picture of development because the former includes only monetary side whereas the latter includes only Life expectancy, Educational attainment and Per capita income. In the new era, especially after the occurrence of Covid 19 and associated lock Down, we need a more comprehensive methodology to measure the development which should be capable to allocate a space to our psychological well being time use, cultural participation and social capital as well. So, the best method is of GNH penned by Bhutans officials which includes nine domains and 33

indicators and 124 variables. This holistic view of well being is capable to provide a more accurate view of Kerala's overall development and can be used without much alteration in kerala because of the geographical and cultural similarities of Bhutan and Kerala.

2. Strengths Of the Kerala Model

2.1 Education

The historical reforms and movements have contributed positively to Kerala's development through the activities of the social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Chattampi Swamikal etc .. who tried to ensure education for all stratas of the society. The missionary efforts also helped kerala to spread the literacy movements from the 16 th century onwards itself. The free and compulsory education policy of government of India, Kerala Literacy Mission and more focus and support on women's education helped the state to reach at its peak of Educational attainment. The wide network of schools and public investment in education along with adult literacy programmes and digital learning integration activities acted as a booster for this marvellous educational development.

2.2 Healthcare

Kerala's strong social foundations like high women literacy , a well operating public distribution system, and perfect implementation of decentralisation helped the improvement in the provision of primary health care. The state always did well in implementing National health policies like National Health Mission. The state itself implemented numberless programmes with this respect like The People's Campaign for Decentralised Planning was launched in 1996, followed by the Aardram Mission in 2017–18 aimed at transforming Primary Health Centres into Family Health Centres, and the e-Health Project in 2017 for statewide health record link-up. The Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme (CHIS) was introduced in 2010, followed by CHIS Plus in 2011, the Karunya Benevolent Fund (KBF) in 2012, and the Arogyakiranam scheme in 2013 providing free treatment for children aged 0–18 years. The Kerala State Mental Health Policy was formulated in 2013, and the draft Kerala State Health Policy was prepared in 2017. In 2022, the state launched MEDISEP, an insurance scheme for government employees and pensioners, and the One Health Programme focusing on human-animal-environment health. The Kerala Care – Universal Palliative Service was introduced in 2025 under Aardram Mission-2, along with KARSAP (Kerala Antimicrobial Resistance Strategic Action Plan) in 2025. The Thinkal Menstrual Cup Project is set for expansion in 2025–26, the Samaswasam Scheme was launched in 2024 to support chronic conditions, and the CARE Project & SMA Pre-symptomatic Treatment was initiated in 2024–25. The integration of modern medicine and AYUSH systems also helped kerala in achieving a good health status. Involvement of Public Private Partnership and Community participation are the two strong pillars of kerala model of health sector development.

2.3 Gender equality

Kerala's Sex ratio itself is highest among Indian states that of 1084 females per 1000 males(census 2011). Kerala also bagged the first position among Indian states in UNDP India's Human Development Reports (2024) , and it shows minimum gender gaps in education, health and income. Along with this, the All Kerala Higher Education Survey 2024 showed that Kerala has a higher Gender Partity Index in Higher Education that of ≈ 1.44 which is higher than the national average of ≈ 1.01 . The government also introduced programmes like Mahila Samakhya Programme 1987, Kudumbashree Mission 1999, Aardram Mission (health sector reforms) 2017-18, Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme (CHIS) 2010, Karunya Benevolent Fund 2012, Arogyakiranam 2013 and Kerala Institute for Gender Equity 2025 , all those programmes helped kerala to have a more genderly equal society.

3. Introduction To Gross National Happiness (GNH)

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a development approach introduced by Bhutan in the 1970s by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who emphasised that the well-being of people matters more than just the growth of the economy (Ura et al., 2012). Unlike Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which measures only economic

performance, GNH focuses on a balanced view of progress by considering social, cultural, environmental, and spiritual aspects of life. It is built on four main pillars: fair and sustainable economic growth, protection of culture, care for the environment, and effective governance. These pillars are reflected in nine areas—such as health, education, community vitality, and living standards—measured using the Alkire-Foster multidimensional approach. This allows policymakers to understand and address well-being gaps beyond income, making GNH a model that has inspired discussions in global forums like the United Nations (Thinley, 2007; Ura et al., 2012).

4. Cultural And Geographical Similarities Between Kerala And Bhutan

The adoption of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework in Kerala is economically and institutionally viable due to the state's socio-cultural and geographical parallels with Bhutan. Both regions exhibit a high degree of human development, with strong public investment in health and education, relatively equitable income distribution, and a policy orientation toward inclusive growth. Kerala's development trajectory—often described as the “Kerala Model”—emphasises social welfare over purely GDP-driven expansion, aligning closely with GNH's multidimensional approach to measuring well-being. Geographically, Kerala's environmental endowments, including the Western Ghats, extensive forest cover, and coastal ecosystems, mirror Bhutan's reliance on natural capital as a core determinant of sustainable development. Culturally, both societies exhibit collectivist social structures, strong community engagement, and value systems that prioritise social harmony and environmental stewardship over material accumulation. These structural similarities create a conducive environment for the institutionalisation of a GNH-based policy framework, enabling Kerala to integrate well-being indicators alongside economic metrics in development planning (Planning Commission, 2008; Royal Government of Bhutan, 2015; State Planning Board Kerala, 2021).

5. Problems With The Kerala Model Of Development

5.1 Psychological Well-being in Kerala

Kerala is well known for its strong public mental health care systems like District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) operates in all 14 districts, integrating services into primary care and schools and the examples include “Thaliru/Thalir” which is a school based mental health assurance programme for the school children for stress management, prevention of suicides etc. but, the paradox is that Kerala ranks first in the suicide rate among other indian states and is 28.5 per lakh (CMHLP 2022) with over 10000 suicide deaths that year and especially among young adults. in 2025 also, suicide rate is high in our surroundings. Kerala State Mental Health Authority (KSMHA) set up under the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, and was a strong foundation under this regime. unfortunately, the outcome of these programmes are not noteworthy mainly because of the loneliness and isolation faced by keralites as a result of mushrooming nuclear families, changes in the life style etc. Increasing vulnerability among youth and middle-aged groups is a major concern in kerala (CMHLP, 2023; Mony, 2023). Workplace stress among young adults is an emerging concern, often linked to precarious jobs, performance pressure, and lack of work–life balance (Kerala State Youth Commission, 2025). Social isolation, particularly among older adults, has intensified with the shift from joint to nuclear family systems, leaving many without adequate emotional support (Mathew & Joseph, 2022; Rajan & Bhavani, 2023).

5.2 Health

kerala is notorious for having a large burden of non-communicable and lifestyle diseases despite the so-called tremendous progress made in the field of the health sector. Diabetes affecting almost 23.6% of the population while 18.1% experiencing pre diabetics and 44% suffering due to hypertension. Obesity, physical inactivity, high cholesterol (72 %), and unhealthy alcohol consumption act as threats over our healthy dignity. ageing population is an another concern and it demands more healthcare , requiring palliative support and straining workforce capacity. Many of our health care departments are understaffed and overburdened. Our public health care system is damaged due to drug shortages, delayed infrastructure upgrades, long wait times for diagnostic services like MRI/CT, and unpaid dues to suppliers , which is the main refuge of depressed sections of the society who are socially and economically non-privileged . The pity is that the privileged sector is grabbing the advantages and facilities thaose should be accrued to the poor people via illegal activities. Tribal communities are still out of span with respect to primary health care even with a numberless programmes and

policies for them are there. Vayomithram Project providing mobile clinics and palliative care for seniors introduced with vast objectives but its effectiveness and affordability is still a question mark. And the political interference beyond a certain range is also harmful for the growth and development of our health care system.

5.3 Education

Kerala is often celebrated for its literacy rate, but a closer look reveals that the education system still wrestles with some deep-rooted issues. In many classrooms, learning is still about remembering and reproducing textbook answers, leaving little room for questioning or creativity. Employers, meanwhile, often find that graduates lack the practical skills—especially in technology, communication, and problem-solving—that the modern job market demands.

The intense competition of board and entrance exams adds another layer of pressure, with anxiety and burnout becoming common among students. While programs like the Jeevani Mental Health Project aim to offer support, the stress culture remains a challenge to break.

Access to quality education is also uneven. Students from tribal villages, coastal belts, and other marginalized communities still face barriers, whether it's limited digital access or a lack of inclusive resources

5.4 Time Use

In Kerala, how people spend their time reveals persistent inequalities and pressures, especially for women. Across the state, women shoulder a far heavier load of unpaid work—spending nearly five hours a day on household chores and another two hours on caregiving—while men average less than half that time (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2025; Thankappan & Thomas, 2023). This imbalance leaves women with significantly less leisure and rest, a gap that is particularly stark in urban areas where long commuting times, sometimes exceeding two hours a day, further erode personal time (Nair & Rajeev, 2024). The state's ageing population adds another layer of strain, with many working adults—again, disproportionately women—juggling jobs alongside the responsibility of caring for elderly parents (Kerala State Planning Board, 2023). Meanwhile, growth in IT, healthcare, and tourism has introduced irregular shift work, disrupting sleep patterns and family routines, but without adequate workplace or policy support to mitigate these effects (Menon, 2024). While Kerala's cultural life is vibrant, these time pressures point to systemic gaps in gender equity, work-life balance, and recognition of unpaid contributions.

5.5 Cultural Resilience

Kerala's rich tapestry of cultural heritage—expressed in classical and ritual arts like Theyyam, Kathakali, Ottamthullal, and Thiruvathira—is facing a clear generational shift as younger people gravitate toward global pop culture and digital entertainment, reducing everyday engagement with these traditions (Live Kerala, n.d.; Mathrubhumi, 2025). Gulf migration has further reshaped cultural rhythms: returning diaspora have introduced new styles of dress, cuisines, and marketplaces that enrich yet sometimes overshadow local practices (Seethi, 2022; All Things Kerala, 2024). While institutions like the Kerala Folklore Academy, Vasthuvidya Gurukulam, and the Theyyam Kala Academy are striving to preserve what remains—offering training, documentation, awards, and cultural festivals—the pull of tourism drives commercialization too, turning sacred rituals into staged performances and threatening their authenticity (Kerala Folklore Academy, n.d.; Sustainable Tourism Alliance, n.d.; NCTICH, 2021). Meanwhile, Malayalam remains the heart of daily life, but the growing dominance of English in schools and workplaces risks narrowing the linguistic richness that underpins Kerala's identity (Live Kerala, n.d.).

5.6 Community vitality

Kerala's community vitality is facing multiple challenges, particularly in urban areas such as Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram, where rapid urbanisation has eroded the traditional close-knit neighbourhood structures that once supported strong interpersonal bonds. The high migration of the working-age population, particularly to Gulf countries, has contributed to elderly isolation, with many senior citizens living alone or

depending on hired caregivers. Although Kerala's Panchayati Raj system and initiatives like Kudumbashree foster community participation—especially empowering women—social divides based on caste and class still subtly shape social relations in certain regions. While volunteerism remains a strength, as evidenced during the 2018 and 2019 flood relief efforts, digital communities such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups are increasingly replacing face-to-face interaction, altering the nature of community engagement (Devika & Thampi, 2021; Nair, 2020).

5.7 Good Governance

Despite Kerala's reputation for strong governance, persistent issues undermine effective service delivery: decision-making is often delayed by procedural bottlenecks and red-tape; corruption, though less prevalent than in many other states, still emerges sporadically in sectors such as tourism infrastructure (e.g., the Kannur tourism circuit scandal, involving alleged misappropriation of over ₹46 lakh) and energy development projects; the ambitious People's Plan Campaign of 1996, designed to decentralize planning and budgeting to local levels, often faltered due to weak administrative capacity, political interference, and technical shortcomings in project design; while e-governance initiatives—including e-district services and e-health platforms—have expanded digitally mediated access, their effectiveness is hampered by uneven adoption across districts and continued reliance on paper-based processes; welfare schemes, though well-designed, frequently fail to reach intended beneficiaries due to limited awareness and gaps in last-mile delivery; and the proactive role of the judiciary in public interest matters, although commendable, is often offset by persistent case backlogs and procedural inertia that delay justice.

5.8 Ecology

Kerala's fragile ecological balance faces mounting threats from multiple fronts. The unchecked expansion of granite and laterite quarrying has scarred landscapes, contributing to soil erosion and devastating landslides, particularly in districts like Idukki and Wayanad. Rapid urbanisation has eaten away at wetlands and paddy fields, eroding biodiversity and weakening the state's natural water retention capacity. Waste management continues to falter, with plastic pollution and poor segregation practices undermining existing community initiatives. Climate change compounds these pressures, as erratic monsoon patterns and extreme events such as the 2018 and 2019 floods, coupled with rising sea levels, place coastal zones like Alappuzha and Kochi at severe risk. Encroachment into forested areas further threatens the unique biodiversity of the Western Ghats, pushing several endemic species closer to the brink.

5.9 Living Standards

In Kerala, life carries a mix of promise and pressure—behind the façade of high literacy lies a frustrating reality: spots in decent jobs are scarce, and a disheartening 29.9% of those aged 15–29 remain unemployed, with young women bearing the brunt at nearly half (47.1%) (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2024; Times of India, 2025). Even as families bask in the glow of Gulf remittances, the cost of everyday life—from housing to healthcare to schooling—keeps climbing, leaving low-income households struggling just to stay afloat amidst swan-historic consumption habits (Sunny et al., 2020). Many live in flood-vulnerable, poorly built homes, while migrant laborers often endure cramped, substandard lodging (Varma & Deepa, 2025). While programs like the LIFE Mission, Karunya Benevolent Fund, and pension schemes aim to provide safety nets, gaps in awareness, complex application processes, and bureaucratic delays often leave them out of reach for the most vulnerable. And relying so heavily on remittances makes the economy—and many homes—vulnerable to global shocks, reminding us just how fragile comfort can be when it's tethered to external forces.

6. Pathways For Implementing Gnh In Kerala

Kerala and Bhutan share deep cultural and geographical similarities that make Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) approach a natural fit for the state. Both places are blessed with rich natural landscapes—Kerala's backwaters, lush Western Ghats, and tropical forests mirror Bhutan's Himalayan foothills and pristine forest cover. In both societies, there is a long-standing tradition of valuing community life, collective

well-being, and harmony with nature—principles that lie at the heart of the GNH philosophy. Kerala's strong record in education, health, and social development is comparable to Bhutan's progress in human development, even with differing economic sizes. These shared values and achievements suggest that Kerala already has the social and cultural foundation needed to shift towards a development model that measures progress in terms of well-being rather than just economic output (Ura et al., 2012; Government of Kerala, 2023).

7. Policy Gaps In Kerala's Development Model

Despite Kerala's celebrated achievements in literacy, life expectancy, and public health, several welfare indicators reveal stagnation or decline in recent years. Rising unemployment—particularly among educated youth—persistent gender gaps in labour force participation, and increasing lifestyle diseases indicate that quantitative gains in health and education have not necessarily translated into holistic well-being (Government of Kerala, 2023). Domains central to the Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework, such as psychological well-being, time use, and environmental sustainability, continue to face challenges; for example, Kerala reports some of India's highest suicide rates and significant stress-related morbidity (NCRB, 2022), alongside climate-induced housing vulnerability in flood-prone regions (Kumar et al., 2021). These qualitative deficits are often masked by the state's high rankings in GDP per capita and Human Development Index. Integrating happiness and well-being indicators alongside conventional economic metrics could help policymakers identify hidden gaps—such as declining community vitality and work-life balance—and design interventions that address not just material prosperity but the deeper determinants of life satisfaction.

8. Recommendations & Framework For Adapting Gnh In Kerala

If Kerala were to adapt a GNH-inspired framework, the indicators should go beyond conventional metrics to capture psychological well-being, community vitality, cultural participation, and environmental responsibility—domains where progress is harder to measure yet deeply impacts quality of life. Local self-government bodies, such as Panchayats and Municipalities, could take a lead role by embedding happiness metrics into participatory planning, ensuring that policies reflect lived experiences rather than only statistical averages. Kerala's strong traditions of community networks, cooperative movements, and social solidarity could be leveraged to make the framework more inclusive and grounded. To avoid the trap of becoming a symbolic exercise, happiness measurement should be tied to budget allocation, policy evaluation, and regular public reporting. Borrowing from Bhutan, Kerala could adopt time-use surveys, citizen well-being audits, and cultural vitality assessments, but these would need tailoring to the state's urbanised, digitally connected, and economically diverse context. Rather than replacing GDP or HDI, a GNH-based index could complement them, revealing hidden vulnerabilities and ensuring that economic growth translates into real human happiness.

9. Conclusion

The adoption of a Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework in Kerala is both relevant and timely, given the state's advanced human development achievements and its ongoing challenges in mental health, lifestyle diseases, and ageing (Government of Kerala, 2023). The comparison with Bhutan shows that cultural cohesion, decentralised governance, and a strong public health system position Kerala to successfully adapt GNH principles while tailoring indicators to its own socio-economic context. This study adds to the growing Indian discourse on development beyond GDP by offering a state-specific pathway where economic growth is complemented by well-being metrics (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). Future research could involve pilot projects in select districts, testing the integration of GNH-based planning into existing panchayat development frameworks. Ultimately, for Kerala's policymakers, the message is clear: GNH is not a replacement for GDP or HDI, but a tool to ensure that economic progress translates into genuine well-being for every citizen.

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