Kerala History and Studies Journal
Published by the Kerala History Conference
ISSN No. XXXX-XXXX

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Publication Vol. 1 / Issue 1 / 2026

Stable URL https://journal.keralahistoryconference.org/article/30

Date of Release 28.11.2026

IP Address 216.73.216.174

Downloaded 26-Nov-2026 04:36 IST

Relevance of 'Extreme Poverty Eradication Project'(EPEP) In Kerala- An Analysis

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Introduction

On Kerala's 69th Formation Day, November 1, 2025, the state achieved a historic milestone — the eradication of extreme poverty. This success was not a coincidence, but the outcome of a four-year-long, people-centric initiative called the Extreme Poverty Eradication Programme (EPEP)

According to the NITI Aayog progress review report (2023) on multidimensional poverty, based on NFHS- 5 survey data, only 0.55 percent of Kerala's population is multi-dimensionally poor–the lowest in the country compared to the national average of 14.96%. This gave Kerala an exclusive opportunity to focus on the "last mile" of poverty alleviation.

Many government programs were presented as a model of inclusive growth in Kerala. However, it was noticed that some families were still left behind. In response, the Ashraya program was launched in 2002 to identify and rehabilitate destitute families, the Gram Panchayats were entrusted to identify families and prepare micro plans. After identification and micro plan preparation, the Kudumbashree mission was designated as the agency for implementing the scheme. Extreme Poverty Alleviation Programme (EPAP), launched in 2021, has been instrumental in identifying and supporting extremely poor families, with over Rs 1,000 crore spent on the initiative.[1]

The State has recorded low deprivation levels across multiple dimensions, including nutrition, child and adolescent mortality, maternal health, school attendance, housing, basic amenities, assets and bank accounts. Kerala has long been celebrated for its high human development indicators, progressive social policies, and robust local governance. Yet, pockets of extreme poverty persisted—hidden from conventional

welfare mechanisms. In 2021, the Government of Kerala launched the Athidardrya Nirmarjana Padhathi (EPEP) to identify and uplift the most marginalized households. On November 1 2025, Kerala declared the elimination extreme poverty, a first in India's history.

Historical Context

Kerala's poverty alleviation journey is rooted in decades of social reform:

- Land reforms(1950s–70s)
- Redistributed agricultural land,
- Weakening feudal structures.
- Public health and education investments created a literate and healthy population.
- Decentralization(1990s) empowered local self-governments
- Welfare delivery
- Destitute-Free Kerala (DFK) initiative in 2007 revealed that some families remained outside the welfare net. These insights laid the ground work for EPEP Program.

Design and Methodology

The EPEP adopted a multidimensional approach: It was based on a customized, household-level approach.

- Identification: 64,006 families (103,099 individuals) were identified using a deprivation index developed through field trials. Criteria included lack of income, shelter, food, healthcare, and social inclusion.
- Community participation through local self-governments and Kudmbashree networks and local bodies created micro-plans for each household.
- Integrated support: Tailor-made interventions.

Each family received a personalized plan addressing their specific needs: housing, healthcare, education, or livelihood support. Beneficiaries received housing, education, employment, and psychological support. The program was implemented over four years, with over 4 lakh enumerators conducting door-to-door surveys was implemented over four years, with over 64,006 families were identified as living in extreme poverty, based on factors like access to food, shelter, livelihood and health care. Special micro plans were prepared for each family to deliver focused welfare support, combining various schemes and services under one umbrella. Of these, 4,421 families (mostly single-

member households) were found to have passed away during the project period. Another 261 nomadic families, mostly migrated to other states, could not be located despite repeated efforts. Meanwhile,47 families had members listed across multiple local bodies and were consolidated for planning purposes. Excluding these, the remaining 59,277 families were officially rehabilitated, leading to the state's declaration of being free from extreme poverty. Many listed families didn't have basic identity documents like voter ID, Aadhaar or ration cards.[2]

Process of implementation

The identification and implementation process was carried out in a decentralized manner, led by local governments and supported by networks of community extension workers such as ASHA and Anganwadi workers, Kudumbashree members, activist organizations and residential associations. In addition to deprivation based on the four key indicators, 4,557 poor families lacked essential entitlement documents such as ration cards, Aadhaar cards or electoral IDs.

To address these deprivations, sub-plans comprising several micro plans were developed to tackle the specific needs of each poor family. Multiple government departments were involved in the effort, including Health, Civil Supplies, Higher Education, Women and Child Development and the Kudumbashree State Mission. The range of assistance provided included food kits and cooked meals, medical treatment and medication, palliative care, healthcare equipment, organ transplants, land and housing under the LIFE Mission, shelter homes for single-member families, and support for income-generating activities, enrolment in MGNREGS and free travel and scholarships for students.

Several other departments, including the Revenue Department, Akshaya Centres and the Co-operative Department, also joined the effort, extending support by providing electoral cards, Aadhaar cards, and grants and loans respectively. Although the micro plans were prepared using LSG resources, the state government provided additional backing by allocating Rs 50 crore as first installment.

Kerala becoming the first Indian state to achieve this, through targeted social welfare, housing (Life Mission), pensions, and micro-planning for vulnerable families, building on

decades of focus on education and healthcare.[3] This involved identifying 64,006 households in deprivation and providing specific support like housing, land titles, health access, and social security pensions to lift them out of severe destitution, a milestone in inclusive development.

There was individualised micro-plans for each identified family, together with regular digital tracking and monitoring of service delivery by local self-governments and departments. Local bodies made interventions in all these plans, whereas Kudumbashree served as both a community monitor and a service provider. Kerala's approach reflects broader national priorities of scaling up targeted social investments to promote inclusive growth, strengthen social protection, and enhance overall well-being.[4]

Poverty

Poverty refers to deprivations that human beings face. In the early days, poverty was determined based on food availability and calorie intake. These were the fundamental criteria for preparing the BPL list. In addition to mere food availability, clothing, housing, education, health, service availability, infrastructure, basic income, and the inadequacy of social welfare measures were later included in the poverty assessment framework. [5]Along with this, the Human Development Index, which considers income, education, and health, has become an important indicator for estimating human development. Kerala is one of the leading states on the Human Development Index. [6] However, studies show that pockets of poverty remain in Kerala. It is essential to delineate poverty from extreme poverty while addressing extreme poverty. If poverty is the lack of general capabilities, those facing the most extreme conditions are the poorest. The poor often face difficulties in obtaining basic entitlements such as food, clothing, and shelter. But they do not always have to struggle to survive. Among the poor mentioned above, the family finds it difficult to buy food on non-working days. They may have difficulty constructing a safe place to live, but they may have the facilities to stay in. The Extreme Poor are those who are unable to meet their basic needs (food, clothing, safe accommodation, basic income) for survival, and their survival is in crisis.

The following conditions can be seen as **characteristics of the Extreme Poor.**

1. Individuals who cannot effectively communicate their circumstances or address them.
2. People who are both physically and mentally unable to generate income for their livelihood and survival.
3. Individuals who face difficulties progressing in their daily lives due to mental challenges, advanced age, or chronic illness.

Poor families with members of working capacity, basic income, and basic living conditions should not be considered Extreme Poor. Instead, the label should be reserved for homeless, helpless, and destitute families who generally cannot earn even basic rights and cannot sustain themselves without external assistance.[7] Those living on the streets, individuals with disabilities, without other income sources or assets, the elderly, people facing physical and mental challenges, families encompassing only these categories, households headed by individuals without any income potential, assets, or employment capacity, and families solely caring for bedridden patients without working members or other income sources are considered as Extreme Poor, without any means of survival beyond sheer poverty.

Extreme poverty is the most severe form of poverty. Those living in extreme poverty cannot progress or escape poverty without strong support from the government and the public. In contrast, ordinary poor individuals can still make a living with their Income and employment, even though they face various challenges. In general, the government employs various methods to uplift the poor from poverty. These methods include employment guarantee schemes, ration programs, and housing initiatives, which generally enable the poor to sustain themselves. However, families in dire circumstances who lack access to these basic services may be at risk of falling into extreme poverty.[i]

The Implementation Strategy: People First Approach

- Through Scientific Identification, 4 lakh trained enumerators and Kudumbashree workers carried out field-level surveys to identify the poorest families. This avoided errors common in self-enrolment-based systems. A total of 64,006 families (1,03,099 individuals) were identified using four key deprivation indicators — lack of food, healthcare, livelihood,

and secure housing. Each family received a customised micro plan addressing specific needs, ID documentation, housing under Life Mission, skill training, microcredit for livelihoods, and access to medicines or palliative care. Local bodies implemented and monitored plans.[8] Kudumbashree's women-led collectives acted as frontline workers. District collectors tracked progress. This structure reflected Kerala's decades-long experience with decentralised planning- a practice deeply rooted in its governance model since the 1990s.[9] Women, NGOs, and local self-government institutions worked collaboratively, ensuring community ownership of the programme.

Criticisms and Challenges

Even with its success, Kerala faces certain limitations:

- Tribal and remote areas remain under-reached due to geographical and infrastructural barriers.
- Unemployment and economic stagnation pose sustainability concerns.
- Critics argue that welfare policies need to be coupled with strong industrial and green growth strategies to maintain prosperity. Acknowledging these, the government has already launched EPEP 2.0 — focusing on preventing relapse into poverty and ensuring quick coverage for newly vulnerable families.

Evaluation and Impact

Human Development at the Core: Kerala confirmed that poverty alleviation must go beyond economic parameters to ensure dignity, access, and opportunity.

1. Empowered local bodies through decentralisation
2. Women as Agents of Change through Kudumbashree's leadership proved how gender-inclusive governance can enhance efficiency and empathy.
3. Welfare connect to employment generation and green growth for long-term poverty eradication to ensure Sustainability through Livelihood

4. Continuous Policy Evolution: The launch of EPEP 2.0 shows that

development is not a destination but a process that requires constant revision.

The achievements are more.

- Visibility and inclusion: The program reached families invisible to census and welfare databases.
- Public engagement: The initiative adopted a sense of collective responsibility and dignity for beneficiaries
- Decentralized governance: Kerala's strong panchayat system enabled effective local implementation. Local bodies' customised interventions, enhancing effectiveness.
- Holistic methodology: The program went beyond income metrics, addressing social and psychological dimensions of poverty. Beyond material aid, the program addressed mental health and dignity.

Limitations:

- Verification challenges: Critics argue the declaration of "zero extreme poverty" lacks independent validation and premature or politically motivated.
- Political framing: Some view the announcement as politically timed, raising questions about transparency.
- Verification and transparency: ▪Sustainability concerns: Long-term monitoring and support are essential.
- Data gaps: Independent audits and third-party evaluations are still limited
- Comparative Perspective

  Kerala's model contrasts with national poverty programs that often rely on income thresholds. Its emphasis on multidimensional deprivation aligns with global best practices, such as the UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI).[10] The state's success offers a replicable framework for other regions with strong local governance.

Irrespective of these criticism, Kerala's experiment offers valuable insights:

- Poverty is not just economic—addressing social exclusion is key.
- Local governance matters— empowered communities can drive transformative change.
- Metrics must evolve—traditional poverty lines may miss the most vulnerable.

Conclusion

Kerala's journey toward eradicating extreme poverty is not merely a governance success —

it is a human story of collective effort, decentralisation, and empathy. Through data-driven planning, women-led participation, and community ownership, the state has provided a replicable model for inclusive development in India. Kerala almost eliminated severe deprivation through investments in health, education, and equitable distribution, combined with well-targeted safety nets and community-led monitoring. The milestone reflects positive efforts to go the last mile to identify and reach the "invisible" poor, using multidimensional poverty measures and ground-level authentication to ensure no one was left behind. Kerala's EPEP is a brave experiment in inclusive development. It redefines poverty not merely as economic deficiency but as social exclusion. While the claim of eradication invites analysis, the program's participatory, data-driven, and compassionate approach sets a new benchmark. The real challenge lies in nourishing these gains and institutionalizing the model. The Kerala experience shows that, amongst vast development gaps, when social priorities are brave monitoring is transparent, and local participation is genuine, eliminating extreme poverty is possible even with modest economic growth

Endnotes

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