

The puzzling fact of a good life in Kerala

Kerala's demographic transition: determinants and consequences.
K.C. Zachariah, S. Irudaya Rajan
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he editors have already written extensively on the demographic situation in Kerala. Zachariah earlier recommended "the undertaking of research projects on Kerala's demographic transition... (including) an in-depth analysis of the educational revolution in Kerala since 1950, and impact of this revolution on fertility, mortality and migration trends. Similar analysis should be undertaken on the health transition, the economic transition (particularly on land reform, wage rates, wage structure, employment and unemployment) and the development of the family planning programme in the state. Much of the needed data are already available but the contribution of private sector in education, health and family planning needs to be documented through additional data collection." (1)

Kerala's achievements are distinctly different from those of other Indian states. Keralite women are better educated and live longer than Keralite men, and the sex ratio favours females. And despite the widely-accepted link between economic prosperity and declines in fertility and mortality, leading to the demographic transition, Kerala has a poor record of industrial and agricultural growth.

Ratcliffe's decades-old study of the demographic transition in Kerala noted that a small, densely populated state — with a per capita income just 75 per cent of the already low Indian average, and a population suffering from the lowest per capita calorie intake — had the lowest infant and child mortality rates and the highest life expectancy among Indian states.

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This is an anomaly, even if Kerala does lead Indian states in other aspects of social development: literacy levels, female education, women's status and fertility control. Many states spend more per capita on health. Kerala does not have particularly well-equipped health services, but shows the highest utilisation rate of available facilities. Ratcliffe argues that Kerala's success owes much to wide-spread education and political participation that enabled the introduction of a distributive economic strategy characterised by more equitable distribution of the existing limited resources, goods and services and their more intensive utilisation. "... neither mortality nor fertility declined to modern low levels until the organised sector was made demonstrably

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responsive to the needs of Kerala's broad majority. As education and income levels rose as a consequence of distributive policies, fertility and mortality declined in response." (2)

In *Kerala's Demographic Transition...*, Zachariah notes that till 1971-81 Kerala had one of the highest rates of population growths in the country. Today the growth rate is below replacement level, indicating that population size will soon start declining. Zachariah says that in 1968-78, about one-third of the fertility decline was due to an increase in age at marriage. Such a dramatic change in societal behaviour in such a short span is unheard of, and one would want to understand how it was brought about. The article also notes that the decline in marital fertility has been much faster than in the total fertility rate. Here, too, underlying factors need explanation.

One factor affecting education, marriage and fertility behaviour, according to Zachariah, is the state's exposure to a variety of cultures. However, such exposure is not unique to Kerala. Similarly, Zachariah writes: "the high population density and peculiar settlement pattern in the state make land reforms and other socioeconomic reforms more relevant for fertility decline in Kerala than other states of the country." Population density in Kerala was more than twice that of the rest of India even in 1901.

A number of unsupported statements are made in the Overview. How exactly does education bring about changes in attitude and behaviour? Data from other states do not demonstrate the same relations as in Kerala. It is also unclear what is meant by the statement that with a changed economic perspective, children of "higher quality" became desirable.

The contributions of Irudaya Rajan and Mari Bhat, with many details on fertility and mortality, present the reality in Kerala and also enable the understanding of demographic techniques used to analyse the available data.

Substantial migration to countries in the Gulf has changed economic conditions for families and also disturbed life patterns in the state. Thomas Isaac and Leela Gulati discuss the economic and social consequences of this migration. Among the problems now faced by people in Kerala are the the impact of the demographic transition on aging, the quality of education and unsatisfactory levels of morbidity in the face of declining death rates.

The book puts together several issues in the context of Kerala's population. However, much needs to be known from other social scientists.

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References

1. Zachariah KC. *Demography India*. 1990.
2. Ratcliffe John. Social justice and the demographic transition: lessons from India's Kerala state. *International Journal of Health Services*; 1978 8(1):123-144.