

# Impact of Mortality and Fertility Transitions in Kerala on Migration and Its Implications for the State's Economy

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Kerala is currently experiencing advanced demographic transition. The mortality and fertility levels have touched near saturation bottom levels and migration plays a critical role in shaping the future demographic scenario. This has policy implications for the state's economy.

Pioneer among the Indian states undergoing demographic changes, Kerala is currently experiencing advanced demographic transition while most of the other Indian states are way behind. The mortality and fertility levels have touched near saturation bottom levels in Kerala and therefore migration remains critical in shaping the future demographic scenario. This policy brief summarises the changes in mortality and fertility in the state since its formation in 1956, along with the impact of

such changes on the migration scenario of the state and its economy.

### **Mortality and Fertility Transitions in Kerala**

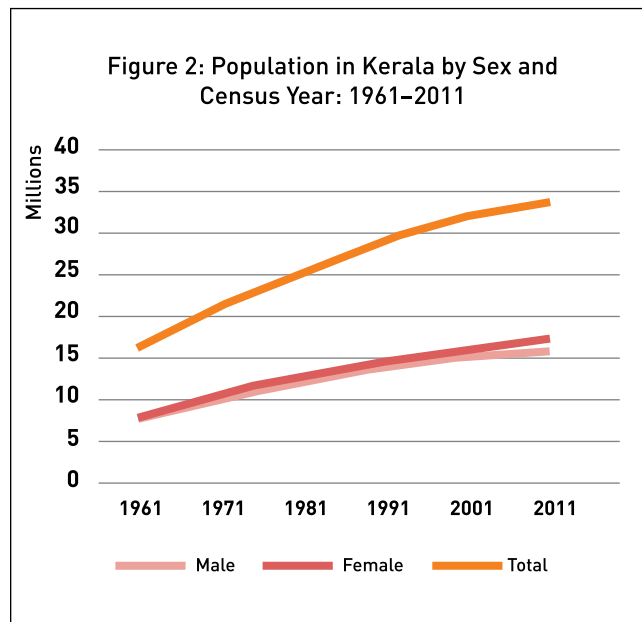
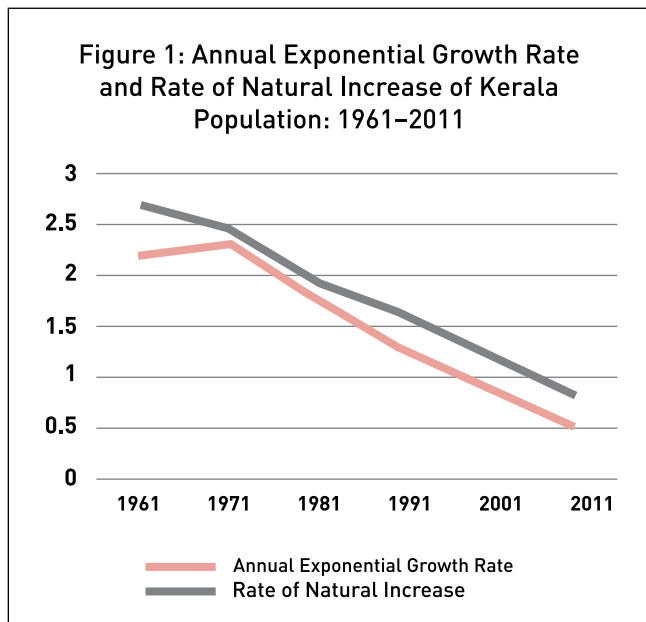
Kerala was the first Indian state to achieve Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) below 25, in 1989.<sup>1</sup> While the state further reduced the IMR to 10 in 2016, with an IMR of 34 in 2016, India has a long way to catch

up with Kerala.<sup>ii</sup> Significant strides were also made by the state in improving the life expectancy at birth. During 1951-60, the male and female life expectancies at birth for Kerala were 44.2 years and 48.1 years respectively which have advanced to 72.2 years and 78.2 years during 2011-15.<sup>iii,iv</sup> With the significant fall in levels of mortality, the fertility levels also have come down considerably. Kerala was the first Indian state to achieve below replacement level fertility, three decades ago in 1987.<sup>v</sup> India is yet to achieve this demographic milestone even during 2015-16 while Kerala's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has further dipped to 1.6.<sup>vi</sup>

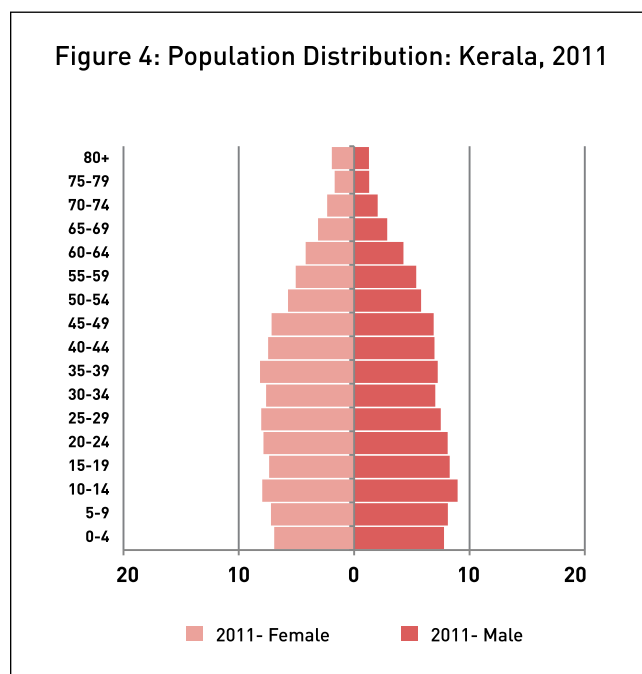
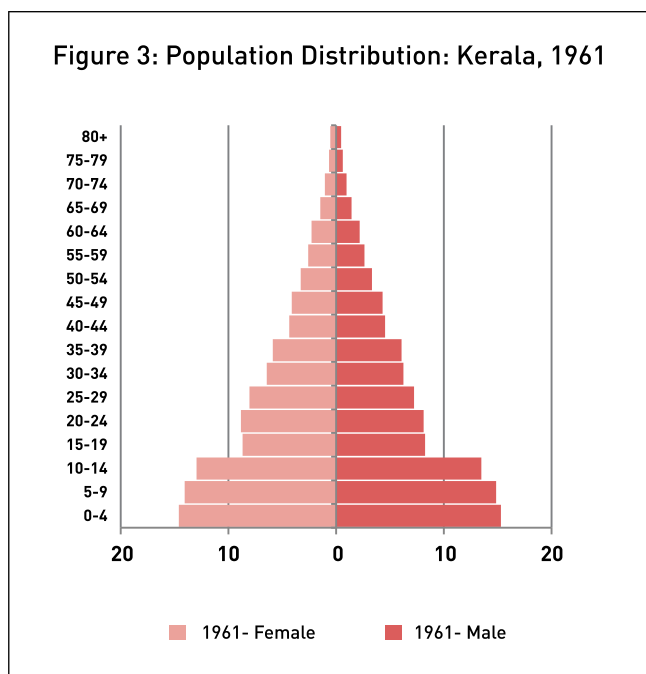
## Population Growth and Changes in Age Structure

The combined effect of the reduction in mortality and fertility rates in Kerala has been a decline in the natural growth rate of the population. However, the population of Kerala has doubled from 16.9 million in 1961 to 33.4 million in 2011 given its momentum.

In the past six decades since the formation of the state, the age-specific growth rates too have significantly declined in line with the overall population growth rates, with an exception of population 60 years and



Source: Calculated from various Censuses: 1951-2011, Registrar General of India.

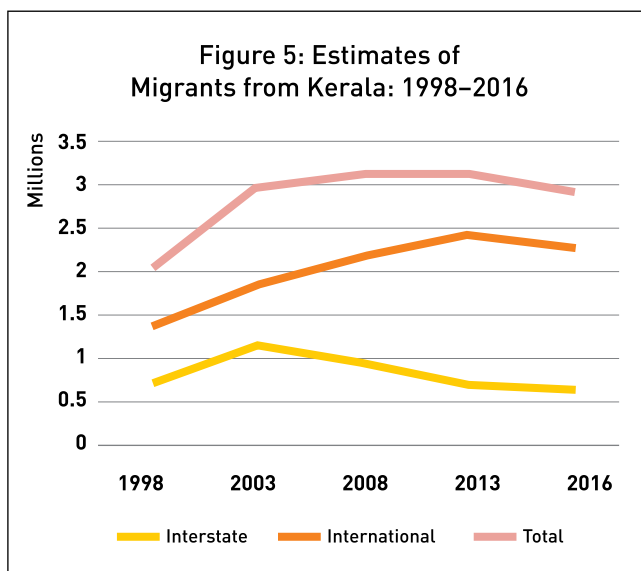


Source: Census 1961, 2011, Registrar General of India.

above.<sup>vii</sup> Negative growth rates are observed in the case of young population (0-14 years) during the past three decades. The shape of the population distribution has gradually transitioned to that of a barrel over the period from its original pyramid shape in 1961.

## Impact of Mortality and Fertility Changes on Migration

Migration has been and continues to be a significant catalyst in the development of Kerala. The mortality and fertility changes accompanied by a host of social determinants facilitated this inward and outward migration.



Source: Kerala Migration Survey, Various Waves, C.D.S.

## International Migration from Kerala

International migration from Kerala was initially directed towards a few South Asian countries. By 1960, Keralites had found a place in the British colonies such as Malaysia and Singapore, countries in the African region and had also moved to developed countries in North America and Western Europe.<sup>viii</sup> The oil boom in the Middle East region triggered heavy migration from Kerala to countries in this region. The number of international migrants from Kerala peaked during 2013 with 2.4 million migrants from Kerala living outside the country and then declined to 2.2 million in 2016.<sup>ix,x</sup>

## Inter-state Migration from Kerala

During 1961-81, most of the migrants from Kerala moved within India; there was a significant outflow of persons from Kerala to Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Delhi and other states of India.<sup>xi</sup> Neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and the state of Maharashtra continue to be the major destination states for migrants from Kerala even during 2013.<sup>xii</sup> According to Kerala Migration Survey (KMS), migration from Kerala to

other states declined from 1.1 million in 2003 to 0.9 million in 2008 and further declined to 0.65 million in 2016.<sup>xiii, xiv</sup>

## Migration to Kerala

Since its formation, Kerala has been witnessing increasing in-migration due to the shortage in the labour force that catered to low-skilled, low-valued jobs involving arduous physical labour. Initially the flow was from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.<sup>xv, xvi</sup> Labour migration from beyond southern India started significantly with the arrival of migrants from Odisha during the early nineties. Gradually, except the traditional sectors, most sectors in Kerala depended on migrant workers.<sup>xvii</sup> Construction, plywood manufacturing, plantations, hospitality industry, iron and steel industry, marine fishing and fish processing, mining and quarrying, textile and apparels etc. are some of them. In 2013, 2.5 million migrant workers from other states were estimated to be present in Kerala.<sup>xviii</sup> Given the growth patterns indicated by Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation and accounting for the migration from neighbouring states, 3.5 to 4 million workers from other states were estimated in 2017.<sup>xix</sup> However, the economic stagnation during 2017-18 has adversely affected this flow in the recent past.

## Impact of Migration on Kerala's Economy

Migration has become an all-pervasive phenomenon in Kerala influencing every facet of life, even impacting female education, infrastructure, prices, wages, transportation and status of women.<sup>xx</sup> It has been a key factor that sizeably reduced the unemployment rates in Kerala.<sup>xxi</sup> In 2016, remittances to the state constituted 36.3 per cent of Kerala's Net State Domestic Product and were also capable of wiping out 60 per cent of the state's public debt.<sup>xxii</sup> Such significance of migration in the state's economy had prompted the Government to establish a Department of Non-resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA) in 1996.

Given the transformation in the age structure of the population, migrant workers from outside Kerala have become an important and integral part of the Kerala economy. Their presence is very evident from the agriculture sector to service sector and from urban centres of the state to remote corners.<sup>xxiii</sup> Besides fuelling the industrial growth in the state, these workers also spend nearly one-third of their earnings in Kerala which could range around ₹100 billion in 2017.

## Evolving Trends in Migration and its Implications for the State's Development

Increasingly, migration is at the centre of global politics. As a consequence, there will be a further decline in the international migration from Kerala



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to the traditional destinations. The ageing of the population and decline in the number of people in the migration-prone age groups are also likely to accentuate this downward trend. The nationalisation schemes and similar measures in the Middle East region may further reduce migration of Keralites to the region that accounted for more than four-fifths of the international migrants from Kerala. As more and more countries in the region adopt similar regimes, more Keralites will be forced to either return to Kerala or opt for alternate destinations. This is likely to result in a reduction of remittances, adversely affecting the economy. However, it is also likely that the African region may emerge as a prominent destination for migrant workers from Kerala.

The inter-state migration from Kerala also has been declining. Attempts of states such as Karnataka to reserve significant proportion of the jobs even in the private sector for the natives, can also spoil the prospects of Keralites in other states. However, as avenues outside India are not promising in the near future, Keralites will have to vigorously tap the opportunities within the country as the urban India expands. Migrant workers from other states fill in an important vacuum and play an indispensable role in the current labour market in Kerala. The state's economy is to a large extent dependent on the migrant workforce in the emerging demographic scenario. This migration is likely to grow once the current industrial stagnation is over.

## Way Forward

The rate of growth of Kerala's native population will turn negative within a decade or so. The fertility and mortality indicators of the native population have already reached near saturation levels. Migration is the only component that can significantly alter

the emerging population scenario in Kerala. Both international migration and migration to the other states from Kerala have registered downward trends. However, due to the limited scope of employment within the state, the migration propensity of Keralites is likely to increase. This calls for rigorous and gender sensitive investments by the state and other relevant actors towards equipping the native population job ready for the international labour market. Simultaneously, efforts are needed to facilitate the creation of employment opportunities within the state that cater to the requirements of the unemployed Keralites. Addressing the challenges related to the ageing of the population and reintegrating the return migrants as well as their families are two other major areas of interventions in the case of the native population.

The available estimates indicate that migration to Kerala from other states has either surpassed or is on the verge of overtaking the quantum of migration from Kerala. The future of human development in Kerala is also dependent on how fast this migrant population catches up with the current level of development in the state. Given the saturation of most of the human development indicators, migrants' access or lack of access to products and services is likely to influence the overall achievements. Kerala needs to realise that the state requires the migrant workers more than they require the state. Creating this awareness among key stakeholders is fundamental in developing migrant inclusive policies. It is important to expand the scope of NORKA to a Department of Migrant Affairs to manage the heavy in-migration to the state. Kerala now has the opportunity to diffuse its much acclaimed social development to some of the most deprived regions of India while these workers help the state tide over the worsening human resource crisis.

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May 2018

This policy brief was prepared by the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) with Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID). Financial support was provided by the Work in Freedom Programme of the International Labour Organization. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ILO.

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