

Population Ageing and Demographic Shift in Kerala: Doesn't the State Need a Tailor-made Policy for Youth?

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Kerala ranks first in social and demographic indicators in India thanks to its early intervention, performance and improvement in school education and the health sector. It fared much better than the national average and other large states. It became the top Indian state with lower fertility rates and higher life expectancy at birth, resulting in a demographic shift where the relative size of the older people increased, and the young and working-age population decreased. This population ageing, a problematic phenomenon in the world's advanced economies, will hurt Kerala and negatively affect its socio-economic status in the near future. One of the solutions lies in empowering the youth through a holistic and tailor-made youth policy. This way, the State of Kerala can arrest and manage this negative growth trend and extend its social development excellence for a few more decades.

Keywords: Kerala, Demographic Dividend, Population Ageing, Kerala State Youth Policy, Youth Empowerment

Introduction

Youth is a common feature of human life, representing a transitional and preparatory phase between childhood and adulthood (Brown & Larson, 2004). This period is a socio-biological stage within the natural growth trajectory from birth to death (Spence, 2005). It is a critical juncture when a child gains independence and autonomy, breaking free from dependence on parents and others for support.

This life stage is pivotal in preparing children for their future, equipping them to confront opportunities and challenges, and cultivating the skills necessary for successful adulthood. During this phase of life, youngsters acquire a wealth of life lessons, displaying heightened vigour, confidence, vitality, and resilience compared to other segments of the population. They empower themselves by acquiring essential skills and capabilities.

The term 'youth' encompasses multiple meanings rather than a single, uniform definition. It can refer to a specific life stage, as previously discussed, or pertain to individuals, groups, or even abstract concepts. This inherent diversity in its interpretation underscores the notion that the concept of youth can vary significantly depending on the individuals, contexts, and geographic regions involved. Consequently, reaching a consensus or achieving universal agreement regarding the precise meaning of youth has proven to be a persistent challenge despite numerous debates. Rather than relying on a singular, universally accepted definition, youth is often elucidated through shared biological traits, as Spence (2005) emphasized, distinguishing this demographic category from others. Among these distinguishing features, perhaps the most paramount is the complete and mature development of both the physical body and the cognitive faculties. This distinctive characteristic aptly acknowledges that individuals who have undergone this transformation are no longer considered children but have not fully transitioned into adulthood. Accordingly, the United Nations defines 'youth' as individuals aged between 15 and 24 (UNDESA, 2013). This definition serves as a statistical tool for UN initiatives related to youth development while allowing member countries the flexibility to employ varying definitions that align with their unique national contexts and requirements.

Importance of Being a Youth

Young people constitute a crucial segment of any nation's population today. They are widely recognized as the most valuable asset and driving force capable of fostering community, national development, and societal improvement. These individuals typically embody many positive attributes, such as dynamism, passion, innovation, vitality, energy, speed, strength, vigour, power, and potential.

Youth are often regarded as catalysts for change and are known for their unparalleled and inspiring engagement in various programs and activities. They serve as change-makers and influencers who significantly impact the development cycle and yield outstanding results in their fields of work and expertise. It is imperative to equip them with adequate education and empowerment to harness their full potential and promote their involvement and participation at individual, societal, and community levels.

When effectively managed, youth possesses the power, potential, and vitality to reshape a nation's political landscape and social fabric. Extensive studies have examined how young people's active engagement and participation in governance have accelerated nation-building efforts. Conversely, research has highlighted the negative consequences of failing to provide meaningful avenues for youth involvement, resulting in disengagement and wasted potential. The presence of a substantial youth population can be both an asset and a liability for society and the nation. Empowering and equipping this demographic with skills presents a significant window of opportunity for fostering economic growth, social progress, and overall development. Governments, including that of India, must intensify their efforts and leverage this demographic opportunity. Addressing the needs and challenges faced by the youth, offering them targeted skill development, and entrusting them with responsibilities are crucial steps toward realizing their true potential and enabling them to contribute effectively to the growth and development of the nation. In doing so, nations can tap into the immense reservoir of talent, energy, and enthusiasm that young people inherently possess, ultimately driving progress and prosperity at the national level.

India and the Demographic Window of Opportunity

India, the world's youngest country with a mean age of 28 years, is presently in the midst of a demographic dividend. This phenomenon occurs when the working-age population (ages 15-59) surpasses the number of dependent categories, such as older individuals (ages 60+). National Youth Policy of 2014 highlighted India's highly favourable demographic profile, with a median age lower than that of developed countries like China, the USA, and Japan. A low median

age signifies a population with more young than older people (Shreya Shah, 2016). This demographic shift results in a 'youth bulge,' where a substantial portion of the population consists of children and young adults, presenting a unique opportunity for India to harness its youth as a valuable resource for economic development.

However, India's states exhibit significant variations in their demographic profiles. Kerala, for instance, is the oldest state, boasting a median age of 35.1 years, while Bihar, with a median age of 22, is the youngest (Rukmini S, 2020). Growth projections indicate that northern belt states will have a more youthful population in the future compared to the developed southern states. This correlation between median age and development levels suggests that traditionally backward states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh will have a more substantial working-age population. Consequently, they will possess more resources and potential to accelerate development within their regions. In contrast, socioeconomically advanced states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu will witness a decline in their young population and labour force, potentially leading to significant development challenges, particularly in the social sector, and potentially resulting in a loss of opportunities.

To maximize this demographic opportunity's potential, India and its states must empower young people by equipping them with the necessary skills and capabilities. Adequate education, skill development, training, and readiness for the future are imperative for youth to realize their true potential within the workforce, contributing to the nation's economic growth and social development. Failing to do so would render the youth unproductive, unskilled, and incapable of independent contribution to the economy, resulting in untapped and wasted youth resources. Ultimately, the youth bulge could lose significance, and the demographic dividend may become a demographic disaster, potentially impacting India's socio-economic and political fabric. In nutshell, India's demographic dynamics, with its youthful population, present a valuable opportunity for growth. However, recognizing the variations among states and strategically investing in the empowerment and education of youth is crucial to ensure that this

demographic advantage is harnessed effectively and does not become a liability.

Demographic Dynamics in Kerala

Kerala, a distinctive state in southern India, distinguishes itself with impressive literacy rates and a robust healthcare system. These factors have significantly influenced the state's youth, who are better educated and healthier than their counterparts in other Indian states. Kerala's youth is marked by social consciousness, political engagement, and unwavering commitment to progressive values. They have played a pivotal role in the state's remarkable achievements in various social indicators. However, Kerala is amid a significant demographic transformation characterized by a steadily ageing population. The state's emphasis on healthcare and social services has contributed to higher life expectancies and lower birth rates.

While this demographic shift reflects the success of Kerala's public health and education policies, it also presents a unique set of challenges. The ageing population in Kerala requires specialized healthcare, pension support, and facilities that prioritize their well-being and dignity during their later years. As the proportion of elderly residents continues to rise, Kerala faces the intricate task of crafting innovative policies and programs to address their distinct needs while preserving intergenerational equity. Managing the ageing population's needs alongside the aspirations and requirements of Kerala's youth represents a complex but indispensable task for the state's sustainable development.

In this context, the demographic dynamics of India, characterized by its youthful vigour, and Kerala, distinguished by its educated youth and an ageing population, underscore the critical need for achieving a delicate balance. Empowering the youth, providing them with opportunities, and ensuring the well-being of older people, all within the framework of inclusive growth and sustainable development presents a multi-faceted challenge that requires thoughtful policy interventions and societal cooperation. Balancing the demographic scales in Kerala transcends the realm of mere numerical considerations. It represents a profound societal endeavour to secure the well-being and prospects of the state's diverse population. The

demographic profile of Kerala, particularly regarding its youth and working-age population, holds substantial relevance as a subject of study. It necessitates a systematic and comprehensive analysis. The data presented below compare youth status in India and Kerala, elucidate the unique demographic characteristics of Kerala, and shed light on these dynamics' profound impact on the state's overall development. This information underscores the pressing need for state-initiated, tailored policy interventions specifically designed to address the evolving needs of the young people of Kerala in the very near future.

Status of Youth – India and the World

| Year | Total Population (In crore) | Youth Population (In crores) | Per cent Share of Youth Population to Total Population |
|------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| 1991 | 83.8 | 22.2 | 26.6 |
| 2001 | 102.8 | 27.3 | 26.6 |
| 2011 | 121.0 | 33.3 | 27.5 |
| 2016 | 129.1 | 35.9 | 27.9 |
| 2021 | 136.3 | 37.1 | 27.3 |
| 2026 | 142.5 | 36.7 | 25.8 |
| 2031 | 147.8 | 35.6 | 24.1 |
| 2036 | 152.2 | 34.5 | 22.7 |

Source: Youth in India 2022, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

The world is currently home to an astonishing 1.2 billion young people, comprising nearly one-sixth of the global population. This demographic phenomenon represents the largest youth cohort in human history, accounting for approximately 15.5% of the world's populace. However, it is important to note that the relative and absolute proportions of youth in relation to the total population have undergone dynamic changes over recent decades. In 1950, the global youth population constituted 18.2% (46.2 crores) of the world's population. Today, that percentage has decreased to 15.5% (120.9 crores). This dynamic change in the youth population indicates that while the number of young people have increased, their proportion within the global

population is diminishing. Projections suggest that this trend will continue, with the youth population expected to stand at 15.1% in 2030 and further declining to 13.8% in 2050. By 2065, it is projected to drop to 13%, amounting to just under 1.4 billion young people, marking the peak of the global youth population (UNDESA, 2019b).

In India, *youth* are defined as individuals between the ages of 15-29, constituting 27.5% of the country's total population, which translates to just above 30 crores in absolute numbers (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2014). This substantial youth population makes India the world's youngest country, hosting at least one-fourth of the global youth population of 120 crores. Studies reveal that India's youth population has consistently grown from 1991 to 2011 in terms of percentage and absolute numbers. In 1991, India's youth population stood at 26.6% (22.2 crores), and it remained at the same level in 2001 at 26.6% (27.3 crores). By the time of the 2011 Census, it had risen to 27.5% (33.3 crores). Projections indicate that the youth population was on the verge of reaching its peak in 2016 in terms of percentage and 2021 in terms of absolute numbers. It was expected to reach 27.3% (37.1 crores) by 2021 (subject to the 2021 census results), after which it is anticipated to decline to 22.7% (34.5 crores) by 2036 (Ministry of Health and Family, 2020). There has been a noticeable decline in youth population growth from 2020 onwards, with percentages and absolute numbers progressively decreasing.

Population Status and the Growth Projections of Kerala Youth

| Year | India Youth Population | | Kerala Youth Population | |
|------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| | Numbers (in crore) | Percentage share | Numbers (in crore) | Percentage share |
| 1991 | 22.2747 | 26.6 | 0.8793 | 30.2 |
| 2001 | 27.3402 | 26.6 | 0.8755 | 27.5 |
| 2011 | 33.3365 | 27.5 | 0.7880 | 23.5 |

Source: Youth in India, 2022, National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

While the world's youth population continues to expand in absolute numbers, its share relative to the overall population is declining. In contrast, India boasts a sizable and youthful demographic with consistent growth over the past few decades. However, the trajectory is expected to change, with a declining trend projected for the coming years. This demographic shift or the change has already begun and is seen in advanced states like Kerala.

To begin, Kerala's youth population is 23.6% of the total population, roughly 78 lakhs, as of 2011 (Government of India, 2011). This figure is notably lower than the proportions seen in 1991 and 2001, which stood at 30.2% (87.9 lakhs) and 27.5% (87.5 lakhs) respectively. During this period, Kerala's youth population exceeded the national average. However, since 1991, there has been a consistent decline in percentage and absolute numbers. This decline is closely tied to Kerala's meagre population growth rate of 4.9%, significantly lower than the national average of 17.6%. This trend is expected to continue, with projections indicating a decrease to 22.1% (78.3 lakhs) in 2021, 20.0% (73.5 lakhs) in 2031, and 19.2% (70.6 lakhs) in 2036 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2022).

| Year | India | | Kerala | |
|------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Youth Population (in crore) | Percentage share in Total population | Youth Population (in crore) | Percentage share in Total Population |
| 2021 | 37.1426 | 27.2 | 0.7839 | 22.1 |
| 2031 | 35.6593 | 24.1 | 0.7356 | 20.0 |
| 2036 | 34.5498 | 22.7 | 0.7062 | 19.2 |

Source: Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections for India and States 2011 - 2036, July 2020, Ministry of Health and Family, Government of India

This declining youth population is linked to a more significant demographic shift in Kerala. While the youth (15-29 years) and children's (0-14 years) populations have been steadily decreasing in both percentage and absolute numbers, the elderly population (60+ years) in the state has been steadily increasing and is projected to

continue doing so. In 1991, 2001, and 2011, the elderly population stood at 8.8%, 10.5%, and 12.6% respectively. Projections indicate that this trend will persist, with expected growth rates of 16.5%, 20.9%, and 22.8% in 2021, 2031, and 2036 respectively (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2022). The simultaneous decline in the youth segment and the rise in the elderly population hold significant implications for the state's development and social structure. It reflects a crucial demographic transition, highlighting the need for strategic planning and policy adjustments to address the changing age distribution in Kerala.

| Sl. No. | District | Total Population 2011 (lakhs) | Youth Population 2011 | | Old Age (60+) Population | |
|---------|----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | | | Numbers (lakhs) | % Share | Numbers (lakhs) | % Share |
| | Kerala | 334 | 78.8 | 23.3 | 41.93 | 12.6 |
| 1 | Kasaragod | 13.07 | 3.46 | 26.47 | 1.27 | 9.7 |
| 2 | Kannur | 25.23 | 5.92 | 23.46 | 3.16 | 12.5 |
| 3 | Wayanad | 8.17 | 2.00 | 24.47 | 0.78 | 9.5 |
| 4 | Kozhikode | 30.86 | 7.37 | 23.88 | 3.60 | 11.7 |
| 5 | Malappuram | 41.12 | 11.64 | 28.30 | 3.41 | 8.3 |
| 6 | Palakkad | 28.09 | 7.17 | 25.52 | 3.33 | 11.9 |
| 7 | Thrissur | 31.21 | 7.05 | 22.58 | 4.28 | 13.8 |
| 8 | Ernakulam | 32.82 | 7.03 | 21.41 | 4.50 | 13.8 |
| 9 | Idukki | 11.08 | 2.47 | 22.29 | 1.28 | 11.6 |
| 10 | Kottayam | 19.74 | 3.97 | 20.11 | 3.12 | 15.9 |
| 11 | Alappuzha | 21.27 | 4.45 | 20.92 | 3.22 | 15.1 |
| 12 | Pathanamthitta | 11.97 | 2.46 | 20.55 | 2.13 | 17.8 |
| 13 | Kollam | 26.35 | 5.94 | 22.54 | 3.50 | 13.3 |
| 14 | Trivandrum | 33.01 | 7.81 | 23.65 | 4.29 | 13 |

Source: Census 2011, Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India.

The demographic disparities within the state of Kerala have become more apparent when examining data at the district level. A notable difference emerges between the southern and northern regions. Among the seven northern districts, all but Thrissur (22.58%) and Kannur (23.46%) have a youth population exceeding the state average

of 23.5%. Conversely, in the southern districts, except for Trivandrum (23.65%), the share of the youth population falls below the state average. Consequently, the percentage of older people (60 and above) in the southern districts tends to be higher compared to the northern districts. Of the seven southern districts, only Idukki (11.6%) falls below the state average of 12.6%. Conversely, among the northern districts, only Thrissur (13.8%) surpasses the state average in terms of the percentage of older people.

Malappuram, situated in the north, stands out as the youngest district with the highest share of youth population (28.30%) and the lowest share of older people (8.3%) in the state. Remarkably, it is the only district in Kerala with a youth population percentage greater than the national average (27.5%). There are other northern districts, such as Kasaragod (26.47%), Palakkad (25.52%), and Wayanad (24.47%), all of which have substantial youth populations, next to Malappuram in terms of youth population concentration. Conversely, the southern districts, including Pathanamthitta (17.8%), Kottayam (15.9%), and Alappuzha (15.1%), have the highest percentages of older people. These districts also lag in youth population, with percentages of 20.55, 20.11, and 20.92, respectively. All districts except Malappuram (8.3%) have a greater percentage of older people than the national average (8.6 %).

The district-wise distribution of youth and older populations reflects the demographic variations within Kerala. The decline in the youth population and the increase in the older population are not uniform across the state. Census 2011 data reveals that the northern districts have a relatively younger population, giving them a comparative advantage over their southern counterparts regarding demographic dividend. These northern districts have an opportunity to equip their youth with the necessary skills and capabilities, enabling them to participate in the economy and politics of the country effectively. In contrast, the southern districts have a relatively older population, exceeding the national average. The growing older population implies a decline in the younger and working-age population. This phenomenon of population ageing, coupled with a diminishing working-age population and an increasing dependency ratio, will have significant implications

for employment, healthcare, education, and other development sectors in South Kerala.

The Changing Demographic Profile of Kerala State

Over the past three decades, Kerala has experienced a demographic transformation (Vandana Menon, 2022) distinct from most Indian states, mirroring trends in developed nations worldwide. During these periods, the state gradually lost the demographic advantage it had enjoyed in previous decades. Kerala's achievements in social and demographic indicators, such as the decrease in Total Fertility Rate (TFR) and the increase in Life Expectancy at Birth, have yielded indirect and contrasting outcomes. Specifically, these developments have resulted in a decline in the population of children and working-age individuals, alongside a simultaneous increase in the elderly population and median age. This demographic transition has led to population ageing, a significant challenge some of the world's most developed nations face.

Total Fertility Rate (TFR)

Kerala has the lowest Total Fertility Rate among Indian states, currently standing at 1.5, compared to the national average of 2. Notably, it was the first state in India to achieve a replacement fertility rate of 2.1 in 1998. In contrast, Bihar, the youngest Indian state, is projected to reach this milestone in 2039, marking nearly a forty-year gap between the two states. A state achieves replacement fertility when the average woman is expected to have no more than 2.1 children in her lifetime, a level that only maintains the existing population (Rukmini S, 2020).

Life Expectancy at Birth

Kerala boasts the highest Life Expectancy at Birth rate in India, currently at 75 years, surpassing the national average of 70 (Government of Kerala, 2022). Life expectancy at birth indicates the average number of years a new-born can expect to live if exposed to the sex- and age-specific death rates prevailing at the time of birth for a specific year in a given region.

Median Age

Kerala's median age is 35.1 years, whereas the national average is 28 years. This figure rose from 24.36 years in 1991 to 28.87 years in 2001 and 31.9 years in 2011. Projections indicate that by 2036, Kerala's median age will reach 39.6 years, while the national average will be 34.7 (Government of Kerala, 2022).

Working Age Population

Analysis of previous Census data reveals a decline in the proportion of children (0-14 years) in Kerala, decreasing from 43% in 1961 to 23.4% in 2011. The percentage of children, relative to the total population, has almost halved over the past six decades. Moreover, this trend is expected to continue, with projections indicating further declines to 20.4%, 18.4%, and 17.7% in 2021, 2031, and 2036, respectively (Ministry of Health and Family, 2020). Simultaneously, the population in the older age group (60 years and above) in Kerala has increased from 5% in 1961 to 12.6% in 2011. It is anticipated to increase to 16.5%, 20.9%, and 22.8% in 2021, 2031, and 2036, respectively.

These demographic shifts reflect a complex and multi-faceted transformation within the state of Kerala. The declining youth population, increasing life expectancy, rising median age, and changing age distribution have far-reaching implications for the state's social and economic landscape, necessitating careful planning and policy considerations to address the challenges and opportunities this evolving demographic profile presents.

The Demographic Impact on Kerala's Social and Economic Landscape

As previously mentioned, Kerala's impressive performance in social development indicators has positioned it as the leading state in India in terms of lower fertility rates and higher life expectancy at birth (Government of Kerala, 2022). However, this achievement has triggered a significant demographic shift within the state. This transformation has been characterized by an increase in the elderly population and a simultaneous decline in the youth population (Government of Kerala, 2022). This pattern, where the size of the older age group (60 and above) grows faster than other population

segments, is commonly referred to as population ageing. It is noteworthy that declining fertility rates, increased life expectancy, and the resulting population ageing also translate into lower workforce participation and a surge in unemployment, placing greater social security obligations on the government (Government of Kerala, 2022).

Population Ageing

Population ageing is a global phenomenon steadily increasing in most parts of the world (UNDESA, 2019a). In India, the proportion of older individuals within the overall population has been steadily rising and is expected to continue. Kerala has been at the forefront of this demographic shift within the country. According to the 2011 Census, Kerala boasts the highest proportion of elderly population (aged 60 years and above) in India, standing at 12.6% (41.93 lakhs), compared to the national average of 8.6% (10.4 crores). Growth projections indicate that this figure is set to increase to 22.8% (84.1 lakhs) for Kerala, whereas, at the national level, it is expected to reach 15.0% (22.8 crores) by 2036.

Dependency Ratio

The dependency ratio is a crucial metric that reveals the average number of young (0-14 years) and elderly persons (60 years and above) dependent on every 100 economically active individuals within the working-age population (15-59 years) (Rajan & Mishra, 2019). This ratio can be divided into the young dependency ratio, the old-age dependency ratio, and the total dependency ratio. Currently, the total dependency ratio at the all-India level is 64.6%. This ratio is projected to decrease to 53.6% by 2036. Conversely, Kerala had a total dependency ratio of 56.5% in 2011, expected to rise to 68.1% by 2036 (Ministry of Health and Family, 2020). While the national dependency ratio is decreasing, Kerala's is increasing over time.

Kerala's young dependency ratio (the number of persons aged 0-14 years dependent on every 100 economically active persons aged 15-59 years) was 36.7% in 2011, compared to the national level of 50.8%. By 2036, Kerala's young dependency ratio is projected to decrease to 29.8%, still lower than India's 30.5% (Ministry of Health and Family, 2020). These statistics indicate that Kerala has consistently

maintained a lower young dependency ratio than the rest of India, which suggests that the state's dependency is more influenced by its elderly population. Conversely, in India, Kerala has had the highest old-age dependency ratio (the number of persons aged 60 and above dependent on every 100 economically active persons aged 15-59 years) since 1991. This ratio is expected to rise further, reaching 38.3% in Kerala compared to India's 23.1% by 2036 (Ministry of Health and Family, 2020). This trend signifies that the dependency burden in Kerala is increasingly placed on the working-age population, highlighting the state's need for additional support in socio-economic development.

Workforce Participation

The impact of demographic changes, including an ageing population and higher dependency ratios, is particularly evident within the workforce (15-59 years), which bears the responsibility of supporting older individuals and ensuring their well-being (Government of Kerala, 2022). The level of support required and the associated risks are proportional to the size of the older population. Consequently, states with higher old-age dependency ratios, such as Kerala, face a greater socio-economic and demographic burden. A skilled workforce and their work participation are crucial to navigating this challenge effectively. They can be assessed using indicators like the Labour Force Participation Rate and Unemployment Rate, which provide insights into how effectively a country utilizes its demographic opportunities.

Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)

The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) reveals the percentage of the population (the labour force, comprising both employed and unemployed individuals between the ages of 15 and 59) either engaged in work or ready to work given employment opportunities (Government of Kerala, 2022). In 2017-18, the LFPR for Kerala and India stood at 53.6% and 53%, respectively. These figures slightly increased to 58.1% for Kerala and 58.4% for India in 2020-21. It is noteworthy that Kerala's LFPR is lower than the national average despite the state's advanced social development indicators.

Unemployment Rate

The unemployment rate is a widely used indicator for analysing labour market outcomes and demographic transition trends (Government of Kerala, 2022). India's all-India unemployment rate decreased from 4.8% in 2019-20 to 4.2% in 2020-21. In contrast, Kerala's unemployment rate, which was already the highest in the country, increased from 10.0% in 2019-20 to 10.1% in 2020-21. Moreover, Kerala reported a high youth unemployment rate of 33.7%, nearly triple the national average of 12.9% in 2020-21. This change in unemployment rate highlights a substantial challenge in the state's labour market, especially for its young population (15-29 years).

Employment Exchange Placement

The glaring disparity between the number of registered job seekers and those who secure employment through the employment exchange serves as a stark example of Kerala's challenging employment landscape. In 2021, there were approximately 38 lakh registered job seekers, and by July 2022, this number had fallen to 28.4 lakh (Government of Kerala, 2022). However, the number of individuals placed through employment exchanges in 2021 was 10,705, compared to 9,366 in 2020. These figures indicate that not even one percent of applicants could find jobs in the state's labour market. Consequently, Kerala faces a chronic unemployment situation, particularly in terms of employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for its young population.

In summary, Kerala's demographic transition, marked by an ageing population and higher dependency ratios, has substantial socio-economic implications, especially in the workforce. While the state excels in social development indicators, it faces unique challenges regarding labour force participation and unemployment, necessitating comprehensive strategies to address these issues and effectively harness its demographic potential.

Findings, Solutions, and Suggestions

The ongoing trend of an increasing elderly population and a declining youth population in Kerala poses a significant challenge and threatens the state's demographic advantage. Moreover, the out-

migration of students and youth to developed countries further exacerbates this situation. This migration is driven by various factors, including a higher quality of life, greater personal freedom, cross-cultural exposure, and educational opportunities in top-ranking universities, job prospects while studying, and concerns about issues like work culture, salaries, and attitudes toward women. This emigration compounds the declining youth workforce participation in the state.

To address these challenges, the Government of Kerala, in collaboration with policymakers, must take timely and appropriate measures. To fully leverage the current demographic dividend and youth bulge, the government should first intervene in the economy to create more employment opportunities and establish support structures for entrepreneurship. Equipping young people with education, skills, health awareness, and other essential tools is equally crucial to ensure their productive contributions to the economy. Therefore, the government should adopt a multi-faceted strategy to tackle the youth challenge effectively and lay the foundation for their and the state's future success.

Youth are a critical component of any functional democracy, and their potential can either drive a country forward or hinder its progress. They must have the requisite skills and abilities to unlock their potential and become productive contributors to the nation's growth and development. In this context, the Government of Kerala should develop a dedicated State Youth Policy explicitly tailored to the needs and circumstances of Kerala's youth. While drawing inspiration from the National Youth Policy, this state-level policy should be carefully crafted, extensively researched, and exclusively designed for the youth of Kerala. It should align with the youth profile, address their unique needs and challenges, and complement existing education, health, employment, and entrepreneurship programs.

The success of this policy hinges on several critical factors, including political will, youth involvement, policy coordination, a well-defined action plan, resource allocation, and regular policy evaluation and review. Policymakers, authorities, and politicians in the state must demonstrate their commitment to addressing youth issues

comprehensively. The policy document should outline the roles and responsibilities of a coordinating agency, establish clear timelines for action plans, and specify mechanisms for policy evaluation and review. Adequate financial and human resources should be allocated to ensure the successful implementation of youth programs across government ministries, departments, and agencies. A collaborative approach and stakeholder partnerships should be fostered among key players and organizations working toward holistic youth development and active youth participation. These programs should be innovative and responsive to emerging youth needs and challenges, offering modern courses, life skills, and financial literacy.

Active engagement of youth at every stage of the policy process is paramount for the policy's success. Kerala's youth should be encouraged to participate in policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation, ensuring their perspectives are considered and their voices heard. The state's economic and societal progress depends significantly on the active involvement of its youth, who constitute a significant portion of the population. Engaging youth in decision-making allows them to provide valuable insights, suggest solutions, facilitate smooth policy implementation, conduct periodic reviews, make necessary adjustments, and recalibrate priorities accordingly.

The involvement of institutions and organizations dedicated to youth is equally crucial. Government agencies such as the Kerala State Youth Commission, Youth Welfare Board, and State Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan play essential roles in youth development. Numerous youth clubs, arts and sports organizations, and youth-oriented groups operate in various domains. The government and policymakers should create avenues for collaboration and dialogue between these entities and policymakers to gain insights into youth issues and perspectives. The government should actively engage youth organizations in youth affairs and policy discussions.

Conclusion

The demographic shifts in Kerala, particularly the declining youth and working-age population relative to the elderly population, directly affect the state's development. A higher youth population can

represent a significant demographic opportunity. However, this potential remains untapped without quality education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and skills development. As India enters a critical 30-year period between 2020 and 2050, where the working-age population will boom (ET Bureau, 2022), empowering youth becomes paramount.

Kerala, which was the first state in India to enter the demographic dividend period nearly 30 years ago, is now among the first to exit. It boasts the highest median age in India at 35 years and the highest proportion of the elderly population. The proportion of its working-age population, including youth, has been shrinking. This trend, if unabated, could negatively impact the state's economic and demographic profile. Kerala's youth represents a valuable asset that can drive growth and development when nurtured and equipped with the right skills and resources.

Therefore, the Government of Kerala should develop a tailor-made State Youth Policy that considers the unique needs, aspirations, and challenges of Kerala's youth. This policy must be rooted in political will, youth participation, and stakeholder coordination, with clear action plans, resource allocation, and a robust evaluation mechanism. Empowering Kerala's youth through education, skills development, and active participation is essential for the state to harness its demographic advantage and secure a prosperous future for both the youth and the state.

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