



BOOK REVIEW

Why Kerala Remains Exceptional?

Kerala's Demographic Transition

Editors : K.C. Zachariah & S. Irudaya Rajan

Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1997 Price : Rs 450

Review : William M. Alexander

FOR its many successes in literacy, education, long life, and low infant mortality — life-quality measures approximating high consumption societies — Kerala has received much international attention. Because it asks the right questions, *Kerala's Demographic Transition* is urgently important. Kerala within India began the 20th century with an economic-resource base and a cultural history similar to the rest of India. This book looks at the demographic transition which India must achieve, and asks, from the perspective of the Kerala success, why has India failed? Kerala demonstrates a classic demographic transition — a large-scale human behaviour change — declines first in death rates, followed in due course by falling fertility rates, reaching to a desired balance point, zero population growth, a balance of births and deaths. The success of the Kerala demographic transition and the all-India failure are clear facts.

Among the plethora of incomplete explanations, another hard-data difference is also clear — life expectancy for females has always been higher in Kerala than in India. The sex ratio (number of females per 1000 males) has been favourable to females and has regularly increased throughout the 20th century in Kerala, as in most hu-

man populations. The all-India experience has been opposite; the sex ratio has been unfavourable to females and the proportion of females has decreased throughout the 20th century. No other data consistently sets Kerala apart from the rest of India.

Kerala scholars, including Zachariah and Irudaya Rajan, point out that within India, Kerala is a poor state with a particularly bad record of agricultural and industrial growth. On economic growth measures, Kerala is the worst in India. Here is the importance of the book, *Kerala's Demographic Transition* takes a direct look at the desired goal, a demographic transition, while accepting as much as may be useful from Marxian and Keynesian dogma. The plain evidence of a rapid population transition in a large-but-poor population casts doubts over generations of scholarly studies based on the traditions of Marx and Keynes. For scholars this is scary, uncertain ground — each and every alternative to, or modification of, long-held beliefs in the redeeming power of economic growth is extremely controversial.

Kerala's Demographic Transition offers 16 papers presented at the 1994 International Congress on Kerala Studies. The foreword is written by the first chief minister of Kerala, E. M. S. Namboodiripad. E. M. S. led a freely-elected

communist government and established an egalitarian political agenda, surviving much opposition from the conservative centre in New Delhi and a dozen hotly-contested state elections since 1957. The dean of Kerala demographers, Zachariah offers this and some other historical background. The second editor, S. Irudaya Rajan, does the heavy lifting, supported by another much-published demographer, P. N. Mari Bhat.

Following the introductory chapter, the various papers are classified into four parts entitled Demographic Transition, Determinants, Consequences, and Migration. Overall the writers demonstrate that it is not necessary to wait for major action in the economic sector in order to usher in demographic changes. The contributors conclude that the Kerala experience demonstrates the effectiveness of well-thought-out social policies and programmes on the desired human behaviour, small-family choices. Tables abound, 156 of them. The list of acronyms is impressive, 95 — AERC (Agro-Economic Research Centre) to ZPG.

T. M. Thomas Isaac, chief economist at Kerala's Centre for Development Studies, offers a most complete analysis of the popular idea that Kerala's successes may be based on wealth

remitted from the Gulf states, income which does not enter directly into the calculations of state domestic product in India. Without complaining about the failure of the Indian government to maintain any semblance of control or records on remittance income, Isaac points to large numbers of Indian workers who have gone to the Gulf; their estimate is that 40 to 50 per cent of those who went to the Gulf came there from Kerala. Searching for potential effects on the comparative demographic transitions of India and Kerala, the essential question is raised by Isaac: How much has remittance income favoured Kerala contrasted to all-India?

On this point, Thomas Isaac marshals the recent Reserve Bank of India's estimates on remittance inflows on current account for India including Kerala. On the reasonable assumption that all RBI under estimates apply equally to the reports for India and Kerala, we can see a rupee impact of worker's remittances in the Kerala per capita domestic product versus the impact of such remittances on the India per capita domestic product. For the peak year of such remittances (to both Indian and Kerala), 1987-88, we see these numbers (p 187): Total remittances to India – 29,566, per capita share for Indians – 3.4, Total remittances to Kerala – 8362, per capita share for Malayalees – 28.8.

Isaac goes on to show that the per capita expenditures increases in Kerala relative to India (in view of the otherwise zero-growth economy of Kerala) could be attributed to increasing remittance income. In 1960-61 the ratio of Kerala per capita expenditures to India per capita expenditures was 0.828. And that ratio increased to 1.177 by 1989-90 (p 189). Particularly since this small increase in the low per capita incomes of Kerala has come so late in the demographic transition of Kerala, Isaac does not try to apply a weak

income argument against the robust diffusion explanations of Rajan and Bhat.

At the core of this book, Mari Bhat and Irudaya Rajan show that transition in fertility occurred in Kerala in the absence of a significant structural change in the economy. And they turn this coin over, explaining that large declines in fertility also did not have a desired impact on Kerala's economy. On this point, they conclude, that structural change is not a necessary condition for fertility to reach the replacement level (pp 71, 74). Although not politically correct, these evaluative observations on the record of Kerala's demographic transition are accurate.

Bhat and Rajan enumerate the facts supporting their analysis that Kerala's fertility decline is more consistent with the diffusion hypothesis:

(i) increase in female age at marriage was not an important factor in the decline of fertility in Kerala. It accounts for only 15 per cent of the decline between 1961 and 1981;

(ii) fertility declined as knowledge of contraception was becoming widespread;

(iii) decline of fertility was extremely rapid; within 30 years fertility has reached near replacement level while it took over 50 years for mortality to reach current levels and its transition is not yet complete;

(iv) the statistical analysis shows that fertility declined even more from the changes in the effect of adult female literacy than from the changes in the level of literacy; and

(v) fertility declined more among non-Muslims than Muslims, suggesting that compatibility of contraception with religious and social norms and values is an important factor in the diffusion process (p 75).

A demonstration of demographic transition requires good data, enough time, and a large population. India is

large enough, the 20th century may be time enough, and the hard data will just do. The base line of the hard data was evident in the earliest population counts in India. The numbers of females per 1,000 males, called the sex ratio, was abnormally low in India, and has declined ever since. Kerala's contrary behaviour was also noticed early. The female-to-male ratio in Kerala was normal and has regularly increased. We should not be surprised that India, observed by western-trained economists and demographers trying to apply a Marxian or a Keynesian analysis to the whole of India, would need to see Kerala as an anomaly. The fact that Kerala has an indigenous population larger than Canada (or the sum of 6 small European nations) has presented an overpowering difficulty for the anomaly characterisation.

World-wide policy makers are concerned with the tardiness of the Indian demographic transition, and this reviewer cannot resist adding a few comments from other sources. Barbara Miller has looked at Indian population growth, exclusive of Kerala, and provides us with a tool to see the cause of India's abnormality, the declining female-to-male ratios, especially in locations where the birth rates remain stubbornly high. The measurable key to this phenomenon may be called a fatal daughter syndrome which engenders negative (social psychological) impacts on the capacity of females to create life-quality levels necessary to encourage small-family choices.

Important differences in the Indian heartland, contrasted to Kerala, can be seen in the family structures of two important land-owning castes, leaders in the diffusion processes, the Raputs of North India and the Nayars of Kerala. Rajput family structure appears like an extremely-rigid characterisation of the upper level of the middle class

in Victorian England, a central theme in many 20th-century romantic novels. The contrasting family structure of the Nayars is more difficult for Western scholars to perceive.

Consider the population-growth effects of the differences in the family building strategies among the Rajputs and the Nayars within their respective class hierarchies. Among the highest classes of the Nayars, a few daughters entered into marriages with Nambudiri sons. Going down the Nayar class hierarchy at each step a potential for a few daughters to marry up was created. In addition, Nayar permission to not marry at all, further reduced the number of brides in the marriage market. Daughters available for marriage were valuable family assets—a potential for improvement of the status of each family up the Nayar hierarchy.

With no status utility for daughters at the top of the Rajput class hierarchy and no allowance for non-marriage, the Rajput class-improving strategy became more son oriented. Families with wealth impoverished themselves by paying large dowries to marry their daughters up. Ranking families could replenish their wealth by accepting the daughters and dowries from families lower in the class hierarchy. At each level of the hierarchy, from the top to the bottom, the perceived status solution was having more sons. Within the Rajput caste the more-sons solution long ago became a strategy of less daughters.

The effect of the Rajput less-daughters strategy may be first noted in the ratio of females to males in the surviving populations of Indian states following the Rajput pattern. In addition, the effect of the less-daughters strategy is further revealed in the abnormally high death rates of Rajput girls ages 0 to 10 as contrasted to the death rates of Rajput boys of the same age. This abnormally high death rate

for girls, found in lesser degrees throughout India (excepting Kerala), accounts for the abnormal long-time decline in the Indian ratio of females to males.

This Rajput solution to a perceived excess-daughter problem, when emulated by other communities and other localities throughout India, is a fundamental cause for delay of the demographic transition in India.

Robin Jeffrey provides the most-readable account of Nayar family structure, its empowering effect on Nayar females, and the diffusion of this female power throughout all Hindu castes and the large Muslim and Christian communities of Kerala.

Concurrently, Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen also note the wide gender-status contrast. In fact, it is rather striking that the demographically backward regions of India (where mortality, and also fertility, are particularly high) tend to be those where gender relations are highly unequal. . . gender inequality does not decline automatically with the process of economic growth (pp 175, 178).

With the more recent data in hand, Zachariah is no longer able to refer to the fertility decline of Kerala as an

anomaly as he could in his 1984 World Bank report. Quality of life and standard of living are different.

Zachariah and Rajan have set a benchmark. The widely-held belief that declines in mortality followed by declines in fertility are primarily a consequence of high economic growth is not supported by real-life evidence. As a policy-leading theory, demographic transition needs a larger ecosystem definition. This reviewer ventures an oversimplification of the lesson of the Kerala experience within India: men can create standard of living within the limits of ecosystem capacity, but only women create the higher life-quality levels which inspire small-family choices.

References

- # Barbara Miller, *The Endangered Sex*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- # Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- # Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Change*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996. □

Women Bhakt Poets

Available in an attractive hardbound edition with laminated jacket. Contains accounts of the life and work of Mirabai, Andal, Avvaiyar, Muktabai, Janabai, Bahinabai, Lal Ded, Toral, Loyal and translations of their poetry, many appearing for the first time in English.

120 pages, profusely illustrated, Price: Rs 100 (India), US\$ 10 (Overseas)

Send advance payment to the **Manushi** address.

Makes A Beautiful Gift