


Kerala's Differently Abled: A Socio-Economic and Demographic Perspective

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Abstract

The government of India has framed various laws from time to time for the inclusion of differently abled populations into the mainstream of society. The first step in this direction was taken in 1995 with the introduction of the Persons with Disabilities Act. Then, in 2016, the government replaced the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which aims to protect the rights of the differently abled. The Act provides a comprehensive framework for the inclusion of differently abled individuals in education and employment. Kerala is known for its sound education system, high human development rates, and progressive social and economic policies. The government has taken initiatives to include the marginalized sectors of society, including the differently abled. As a primary step for this initiative, the Government of Kerala conducted a Disability Census under the Social Security Mission in the year 2015 to gain an understanding of the exact number of the differently abled population in the state and to identify their socio-economic position. Any policy formulation for the development of differently abled people requires comprehensive and clear data. Kerala is the only state in India that has conducted an in-depth study about the position of the differently abled population in the state. The present study focuses on the socio-economic and demographic profile of the respondents, based on the Disability Census conducted in 2015 by the Government of Kerala. Through this study, the researcher aims to provide recommendations for the socio-economic development of differently abled persons.

Keywords: differently-abled, disabled, PwD Act, RPwD Act, disability, disability census, socio-economic

Introduction

The social and economic development of any nation is determined by an inclusive society where each person is involved in any form of economic activity. Without the inclusion of the marginalized sector of the economy, a large portion of the human resources is either unutilized or underutilized. This will create inconsistencies in the economy. The differently abled population constitutes around 2.21% of the country's total population (National Statistical Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, New Delhi, 2021). Identifying the importance of the empowerment of the differently-abled population, the Government of India introduced the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995. Through the implementation of the Act, special reservation for differently abled persons in both education and employment has become mandatory. Under the PwD Act, 3% reservation for the differently abled is mandatory for employment in the Government sector (Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, 1996). The PwD Act 1995 was replaced with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 to provide a more comprehensive, rights-based

approach (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016, p. 32). As per this Act, the job reservation in the Government sector was increased from 3% to 4%. The Act also has sufficient clauses to ensure the protection of the rights of differently abled persons.

Kerala is one of the most educated states in India. According to the 2011 Census, Kerala's literacy rate is 93.91%, which is significantly higher than the national average of 74.04% (Kerala State Planning Board, 2011). According to the National Statistical Survey 2018, the literacy rate of Kerala has further increased to 96.2% (National Statistical Office, 2020). Kerala is known for its higher education (Kerala State Higher Education Council, 2022), good healthcare facilities (Bhatt & James, 2024), and progressive social and economic policies. The Kerala Government has taken various initiatives to uplift the differently abled marginalized sector into the mainstream of the country. For the practical applicability of the same, comprehensive data about differently abled persons in the state is required. Therefore, the government conducted a disability census in the year 2015 to identify and understand the socio-economic and demographic profile of the differently abled population in the state.

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Kerala conducted a comprehensive Disability Census under the Social Security Mission as per G.O. (Rt) No. 44/2014 dated 16-01-2014 (Kerala Social Security Mission, n.d.). The Disability Census 2015 identified 7,93,937 differently abled individuals, accounting for 2.32% of Kerala's total population. The main purpose behind the same was to gather accurate and reliable data on disabilities, their causes, and the socio-economic status of affected individuals. The findings serve as a crucial foundation for policy formulators to frame appropriate programs for the socio-economic development of disabled persons.

Review of the Related Literature

Kerala has emerged as a leader in inclusive development by addressing the needs of the marginalized sector, particularly persons with disabilities (PwDs). The state's Disability Census 2015 aimed to create a comprehensive database for effective policy formulation for the empowerment of the disabled population. According to Chanda and Sekher (2023), Kerala's disabled population is approximately 2.2%, aligning with national estimates. The Disability Census 2015 was conducted under a two-stage enumeration process by trained health professionals. It helped to improve the accuracy of data collection and identification of PwDs, throwing light on better policy implementation.

Kerala has made notable progress in the economic inclusion of the disabled population but still faces challenges. The labor force participation rate (LFPR) for PwDs in India is 23.8% and for Kerala, it is much lower than the national rate (Sunny and Xavier, 2023). Despite various government schemes and employment incentives, only 2.91% of PwDs have permanent employment in Kerala, highlighting the need for more effective inclusion strategies. In the context of education, Kerala performs better than the national average, with a PwD literacy rate of 81.3%, compared to India's 52.2% (Kunnath et al., 2023). At the same time, the opportunities for higher education and vocational training are limited for PwDs. This will affect their employment opportunities.

Statement of the Problem

The development of differently abled persons is possible only through socio-economic empowerment. Society should accept them as an integral part rather than adopting a sympathetic attitude that focuses on their limitations. True social development can only happen when people with disabilities are given equal opportunities and economic independence. Since social acceptability is often linked to economic status, it is important to recognize that social and economic development are interconnected. To achieve this, it is essential to understand the current socio-economic and demographic status of the differently

abled population. In this context, this study aims to analyze the "Socio-economic and Demographic Profile of the Differently Aabled Population" based on data from the Disability Census Kerala 2015.

Research Gap

There are very limited studies relating to the disabled population in Kerala based on the Disability Census 2015. In those studies, also, due importance has not been given to the social and economic aspects of this marginalized sector. The social status of a person is also determined by their economic position. In this context, there exists a gap in identifying the present social and economic status and in providing suitable suggestions based on the study for socio-economic development.

Objectives

1. To analyze the demographic profile of the differently abled population in Kerala based on Disability Census 2015.
 - 1.1 Gender
 - 1.2 District
 - 1.3 Education
 - 1.4 Marital status
 - 1.5 Employment
 - 1.6 Work Profile

Methodology

The present study was primarily based on secondary data sources gathered from the Disability Census 2015 conducted by the Government of Kerala under the Social Security Mission. Journals, articles, and various websites were also referred to for the present study.

Results

Table 1 shows the detailed breakdown of differently abled persons by gender across various districts. The total number of disabled populations is 793,937, out of which 44.6% are male and 55.4% female, and a small percentage of transgender individuals (0.15%). The gender ratio among differently abled persons remains almost consistent across districts, with the female ratio being higher as compared to males. Table 2 shows that the state's total disabled population is 2.32%. Malappuram (96,447) had the highest number of differently abled persons, while Wayanad (23,122) had the lowest. However, in terms of percentage, Wayanad (2.75%) and Kasaragod (2.63%) had the highest proportion of differently abled individuals, whereas Thrissur (2.09%) recorded the lowest. Similarly, Kozhikode (2.46%) and Kollam (2.46%) also showed a high percentage of differently abled persons.

Table 1
District and Gender-Wise Analysis of Disabled Population

District	Male	Female	Transgender	Total PwD	% of number of differently abled	Male-Female Ratio
Thiruvananthapuram	34823	42188	153	77164	2.34	55
Kollam	29849	36542	128	66519	2.46	55
Pathanamthitta	13309	17105	33	30447	2.42	56
Alappuzha	22762	28572	69	51403	2.37	56
Kottayam	20171	255554	56	45781	2.34	56
Idukki	11081	15102	43	26226	2.41	58
Ernakulam	33964	40039	124	74127	2.36	54
Thrissur	30055	36967	111	67133	2.09	55
Palakkad	28060	34623	131	62814	2.19	55
Malappuram	42520	53816	111	96447	2.15	56
Kozhikode	35089	43367	92	78548	2.46	55
Wayanad	10526	12561	35	23122	2.75	54
Kannur	26227	32242	66	58535	2.16	55
Kasaragod	15459	20175	37	35671	2.63	57
Total	353895	438853	1189	793937	2.32	55

Note. The data from *Disability census 2015: Report on differently abled persons in Kerala*, by Social Justice Department, 2015, pp. 89, 96. (<https://mis.swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Census%20Report/28855.pdf>). Copyright 2015 by Social Justice Department.

Table 2, based on the 2015 Disability Census, Table 2 offers a thorough education-by-education breakdown of Kerala's differently-abled population, highlighting notable differences in educational attainment. Just 4.04% of the disabled population have completed higher education (2.83% with degrees, 0.77% with postgraduate qualifications, and a startling 0.03% with Ph.D.s). More than half of the population (50.47%) has only completed primary school (21.01%) or no formal education at all (29.46%). Systemic gaps, even in urban centers, are highlighted by the stark differences at the district level: Malappuram has the highest number of people without formal education (22,362), followed by the capital district Thiruvananthapuram (16,430). Regional disparities are highlighted by the disproportionately high rates of educational deprivation in smaller districts like Wayanad (2.75% disabled

population) and Kasaragod (2.63%). Participation in technical and vocational training is shockingly low (ITI: 0.69%, Tech Diploma: 0.55%), while further education stays almost unreachable, with just 266 Ph.D. holders statewide. These educational shortcomings directly correlate with poor employment outcomes (82.89% unemployed, as per Table 4) and financial dependency, as 24.52% rely solely on disability pensions (Table 6). The data underscores the urgent need for inclusive educational policies, including expanded access to vocational training, targeted interventions in underserved districts, and systemic reforms to address infrastructural and societal barriers, which are critical for breaking the cycle of poverty and marginalization faced by Kerala's differently-abled population.

Table 2
Education-Wise Analysis of Disabled Population

District	No education	Primary	7th Class	10th Class	ITI	Another certificate	Up to 12	Tech Diploma	Degree	PG	Prof. Degree	Ph.D.	Total
Thiruvananthapuram	16430	19069	12172	18618	767	234	5542	462	2614	827	347	82	77164
Kollam	12317	17606	11668	16301	697	208	4426	404	2029	585	265	13	66519
Pathanamthitta	4945	7261	5224	8341	395	103	2329	287	1055	324	166	17	30447
Alappuzha	8813	14251	8679	12950	677	153	3347	319	1556	408	234	16	51403
Kottayam	7647	12839	8393	9775	372	191	3731	339	1688	517	272	17	45781
Idukki	5877	7826	4534	5063	117	64	1675	151	673	143	98	5	26226
Ernakulam	14781	22870	12103	14807	778	304	4305	543	2495	709	409	23	74127
Thrissur	14042	19917	11600	13611	471	218	3822	451	2149	526	316	10	67133
Palakkad	17486	17628	9683	12274	254	126	3113	223	1474	379	165	9	62814
Malappuram	22362	32149	15954	17388	241	230	5022	314	1927	514	326	20	96447
Kozhikode	15423	24852	14521	15638	326	191	4549	343	1918	461	299	27	78548
Wayanad	5760	7337	3715	4124	52	53	1278	92	508	126	73	4	23122
Kannur	11071	19173	10583	11061	229	143	3730	285	1655	384	203	18	58535
Kasaragod	9846	11124	5712	5700	138	75	1936	128	726	192	89	5	35671
Total	16680	23390	13454	16565	551	229	4880	434	2246	609	326	266	79393
	0	2	1	1	4	3	5	1	7	5	2		7
Percentage	21.01	29.46	16.95	20.86	0.69	0.29	6.15	0.55	2.83	0.77	0.41	0.03	100

Note. The data from Disability census 2015: Report on differently abled persons in Kerala, by Social Justice Department, 2015, p. 153. (<https://mis.swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Census%20Report/28855.pdf>). Copyright 2015 by Social Justice Department.

Table 3
Marital Status of Disabled Population

District	Unmarried	Married	Widow/widower	Divorced	Separately living	Total PwDS
Thiruvananthapuram	30389	40959	3643	550	1623	77164
Kollam	25433	36480	2894	449	1263	66519
Pathanamthitta	12455	15966	1332	206	488	30447
Alappuzha	20796	27926	1599	342	740	51403
Kottayam	19766	23904	1273	254	584	45781
Idukki	11307	13321	911	150	537	26226
Ernakulam	29856	39883	3031	440	917	74127
Thrissur	29595	34049	2335	472	682	67133
Palakkad	27851	31173	2369	571	850	62814
Malappuram	42818	45589	4114	2471	1455	96447
Kozhikode	31563	41412	3593	1037	943	78548
Wayanad	8706	12932	951	156	377	23122
Kannur	28200	27045	1999	492	799	58535
Kasaragod	15889	17536	1285	390	571	35671
State	334624	408175	31329	7980	11829	793937
Percentage	42.14	51.41	3.95	1	1.5	

Note. The data from Disability census 2015: Report on differently abled persons in Kerala, by Social Justice Department, 2015, p. 159. (<https://mis.swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Census%20Report/28855.pdf>). Copyright 2015 by Social Justice Department.

Table 3 shows the marital status of Kerala's differently abled population, collected from the 2015 Disability Census, therefore providing insights on their social integration and vulnerabilities.

Reflecting their capacity to create family ties, most (51.41%) of the disabled population at the state level are married; a notable 42.14% stay single, maybe as a result of social stigma, financial

constraints, or partner-seeking accessibility issues. Smaller groups experience more complex marginalization: 3.95% are bereaved, 1% divorced, and 1.5% living apart, suggesting fragility in maintaining marital ties after disability. District-wise differences show significant patterns: Malappuram, with the most married people (45,589), also has the highest divorce rate (2,471 cases), implying particular socio-cultural or economic pressures. On the other hand, Wayanad, with the least impaired population, has the fewest married people (12,932), maybe related to limited economic prospects or demographic size. Urban districts like as Thiruvananthapuram and Ernakulam have greater absolute numbers across categories because of their larger populations.

These results underline the need of focused interventions to handle marriage-related stigma, strengthen support systems for divorced or widowed people, and promote economic empowerment to increase social inclusion for Kerala's differently able population since they correspond with the study's focus on the interdependence of social acceptance and economic independence.

Table 4 provides a district-wise breakdown of employment status among Kerala's differently abled population, based on the 2015 Disability Census. The data reveals stark disparities, with only 2.91% of the disabled population engaged in permanent employment, while 14.20% work in temporary roles. Alarming, 82.89% remain unemployed, underscoring systemic barriers to economic inclusion. Districts like Thiruvananthapuram (3.5% permanent employment) and Ernakulam (3.5%) report marginally better rates, whereas Malappuram (2.2%) and Kasaragod (2.3%) lag behind. The study attributes this low employment to limited access to education and vocational training, as well as the absence of mandatory job reservations in the private sector under the RPwD Act 2016. Despite Kerala's progressive policies, the high unemployment rate highlights gaps in policy implementation and the urgent need for targeted interventions, such as skill development programs and expanded job quotas in both public and private sectors, to enhance economic participation among differently abled individuals.

Table 4
Employment-Wise Analysis of Disabled Population

District	Permanent employment		Temporary employment		No Employment	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Thiruvananthapuram	2673	3.5%	10271	13.3%	64220	83.2%
Kollam	1780	2.7%	8899	13.4%	55840	83.9%
Pathanamthitta	888	2.9%	3300	10.8%	26259	86.3%
Alappuzha	1551	3%	7731	15%	42121	82%
Kottayam	1466	3.2%	5748	12.6%	38567	84.2%
Idukki	910	3.5%	4591	17.5%	20725	79%
Ernakulam	2563	3.5%	10788	14.5%	60776	82%
Thrissur	2060	3%	10865	16.2%	54208	80.8%
Palakkad	1620	2.6%	10205	16.2%	50989	81.2%
Malappuram	2127	2.2%	13230	13.7%	81090	84.1%
Kozhikode	2199	2.8%	10510	13.4%	65839	83.8%
Wayanad	692	3%	4027	17.4%	18403	79.6%
Kannur	1745	3%	7478	12.8%	49312	84.2%
Kasaragod	837	2.3%	5076	14.2%	29758	83.5%
Total	23111	2.91%	112719	14.20%	658107	82.89%

Note. The data from *Disability census 2015: Report on differently abled persons in Kerala*, by Social Justice Department, 2015, p. 156. (<https://mis.swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Census%20Report/28855.pdf>). Copyright 2015 by Social Justice Department.

Table 5
Work Profile-Wise Analysis of Disabled Population

District	Self-employment	Government Employ	Daily wages	Private employment	Pension	Remittances	Agriculture	Begging	Another source	No income
Thiruvananthapuram	1819	2410	5391	733	21372	4232	687	150	9919	30451
Kollam	1545	1478	4534	777	19929	3262	1047	46	8876	25025
Pathanamthitta	677	759	1589	435	5688	1451	1194	15	4868	13771
Alappuzha	1595	1196	3860	608	14982	1633	468	37	5856	21168
Kottayam	1039	1071	3600	704	8267	1105	1401	15	5885	22694
Idukki	486	541	2842	416	3113	519	2409	24	2619	13257
Ernakulam	1740	1791	6899	1274	14988	1976	1178	18	8481	35782
Thrissur	2003	1318	5805	1246	15511	1914	798	22	8246	30270
Palakkad	1423	1102	6863	837	16813	1459	1094	44	6858	26321
Malappuram	1643	1382	7954	1186	25013	3605	912	49	11087	43616
Kozhikode	1195	1670	7384	752	19830	2962	1381	26	10535	32813
Wayanad	387	456	2591	237	4175	558	1531	18	3244	9925
Kannur	1050	1245	4350	717	16499	1832	1299	23	7618	23902
Kasaragod	728	572	3431	342	8468	1089	1206	14	4241	15580
Total	17330	16991	67093	10264	194648	27597	16605	501	98333	344575
Percentage	2.18	2.14	8.45	1.29	24.52	3.48	2.09	0.06	12.39	43.4

Note. The data from *Disability census 2015: Report on differently abled persons in Kerala*, by Social Justice Department, 2015, p. 158. (<https://mis.swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Census%20Report/28855.pdf>). Copyright 2015 by Social Justice Department.

Table 5, titled Work Profile-Wise Analysis of Disabled Population, outlines the primary income sources and employment status of Kerala's differently abled population based on the 2015 Disability Census. The data reveals that a staggering 43.4% of the disabled population has no income, underscoring widespread economic vulnerability. Dependency on disability pensions (24.52%) emerges as the most significant income source, followed by daily wage labor (8.45%). Formal employment remains minimal, with only 2.14% engaged in government jobs and 1.29% in private sector roles. Self-employment accounts for 2.18%, while remittances (3.48%) and agriculture (2.09%) contribute marginally. Notably, districts like Thiruvananthapuram and Malappuram reflect higher reliance on pensions, while others like Ernakulam and Kozhikode show modest engagement in daily wages. The table highlights systemic barriers to economic inclusion, with most disabled individuals lacking stable livelihoods. These findings align with the study's discussion on financial constraints and the urgent need for targeted interventions, such as expanding self-employment opportunities, enhancing vocational training, and improving access to formal employment to foster financial independence among Kerala's differently abled population.

Discussion

The study focused on the socio-economic and demographic profile as well as the challenges faced by the differently abled population in Kerala. The study primarily depends on the Disability Census conducted by the Social Security Mission in the year 2015. The census identified that 2.32% of the state's total population is disabled, with a higher proportion of females (55.4%) compared to males (44.6%). This disparity aligns with national trends, where disability tends to be slightly higher among women due to disparities in the accessibility of healthcare facilities (Chanda & Sekher, 2023).

A significant portion of the differently abled population does not have proper education. Around 50.47% have either no education or only primary-level education. According to Kunnath et al. (2023), the education level of the differently abled population in the state, though above the national average, lags behind that of the general population. The lack of proper education limits accessibility to employment opportunities. The Disability Census reveals that only 2.91% of the disabled have permanent employment, while the remaining 82.89% are either underemployed or unemployed. The labor force participation of the disabled population in Kerala is lower than the national average (Sunny & Xavier, 2023). Vocational training programs and job reservations in the private sector could be viable solutions for increasing job opportunities among the differently abled.

Financial constraints are another crucial problem faced by the differently abled. Out of the total population, 24.5% depend on disability pensions for their livelihood. Though Kerala offers various social welfare programs for the differently abled, their implementation is not effective due to practical constraints (National Statistical Office, 2020). The government should focus on promoting financial independence among the differently abled through self-employment and microfinance schemes.

Conclusion

The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and demographic profile of the differently abled population in Kerala, focussing on key challenges in education, employment, and economic factors. Despite progressive policies and legal frameworks, differently abled population lacks proper education, employment, and economic security. The study suggests self-employment, job reservations in the private sector, and training programs in collaboration with educational institutions to uplift the socio-economic status of differently abled populations. Government policies should be framed to

enhance accessibility, inclusive education, and also microfinance schemes to enable them to be financially independent. The study concludes by highlighting the need for a multi-dimensional approach to the socio-economic inclusion of differently abled populations by applying successful models from other countries. Future studies should explore the scope of technology-driven solutions and inclusive educational policies for the empowerment of differently abled populations in Kerala.

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