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HIGHER EDUCATION IN KERALA: PATTERN OF ENROLMENT AND EMERGING ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study aims to examine the trends and patterns of higher education enrolment in Kerala across gender, academic level, institutional type and geographical regions, while evaluating the state's performance using key indicators such as the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI) in comparison with the national average and leading Indian states. Further, this study investigates the impact of the growing predominance of self-financing institutions on educational quality, accessibility, affordability and equity in higher education.

Research Methodology: The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design using secondary data obtained from the All Kerala Higher Education Survey (AKHES) and the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). Trend analysis, comparative analysis, district-wise assessment and descriptive statistical techniques were employed to evaluate enrolment patterns across gender, academic levels, institutional categories and geographical regions. Kerala's performance was benchmarked against national indicators and selected leading Indian states.

Analytical Outcomes: The results reveal that Kerala remains one of India's leading states in higher education, recording a GER of 45.6% in 2023–24 compared with the national average of 30.0%, while female GER reached 55.1%. The state also demonstrates exceptional gender equity with a GPI exceeding 1.40, indicating sustained female dominance in higher education participation. However, the analysis identifies significant structural concerns, including the overwhelming dominance of self-financing institutions (71.3%), considerable inter-district disparities in institutional distribution, declining male enrolment, relatively low research intensity and demographic pressures arising from a shrinking youth population. District-level analysis, however, reveals significant spatial inequalities with educational infrastructure concentrated in economically advanced districts such as Ernakulam and Thiruvananthapuram whereas districts including Wayanad and Kasaragod remain underserved. Institutional analysis further indicates a heavy dependence on self-financing colleges which account for over 71% of all institutions, raising concerns regarding quality assurance, affordability and equitable access.

Novelty: This study offers one of the most comprehensive and updated empirical assessments of Kerala's higher education system by integrating AKHES and AISHE datasets to evaluate enrolment patterns, regional inequalities, institutional composition, and emerging policy challenges. The research contributes to the literature by presenting a holistic framework for assessing the sustainability of higher education in a high-performing Indian state and provides policy insights applicable to other developing regions pursuing equitable and quality-driven higher education expansion.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, India, Kerala, Gender Parity Index, Gross Enrolment Ratio, Higher Educational Institutions

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala's social and economic development has traditionally relied heavily on education. The state has one of the highest Human Development Index (HDI) scores of any Indian state due to its emphasis on universal literacy and fair access to education. Kerala's 94% literacy rate is far higher than the national average, which has directly fuelled the state's ambitions for higher education. The state's fourteen districts have seen a notable increase in the number of institutions, enrolment and variety of specialities offered in higher education in particular. State universities, nationally significant university-level institutions (such as IIMs, IITs, NITs and SCTIMST) and an extensive network of associated colleges make up Kerala's higher education landscape. As of 2021–2022, the state's 1,463 colleges, which are dispersed throughout all districts, serve nearly 10.99 lakh students enrolled in a variety of academic programs, from PhD research to undergraduate diplomas. Even if this growth is remarkable, it also presents a number of structural difficulties and new problems that need to be carefully considered in order to promote fair and sustainable development. Under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which aims for a GER of 50% by 2035, higher education in India is expanding quickly. Kerala is in a good position to reach this goal, having already reached 41.3% in 2021–2022. However, rigorous study and proactive policy responses are required due to the quality-quantity debate, the difficulty of employing graduates, demographic changes, such as the decline in the youth population and the growth of self-financing institutions.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

(i) Historical Evolution of Higher Education in Kerala

In the late nineteenth century, missionaries and royal patronage founded the first colleges in Thiruvananthapuram and Kottayam, marking the beginning of institutionalized higher education in Kerala. The state's first affiliated institution was the institution of Kerala, which was founded in 1937. Due to significant grassroots demand and constitutional commitments to education, especially in the southern districts, the post-independence period saw fast expansion.

According to Mathew (1995), Kerala's distinctive feudal social history—which was marked by a fierce caste-community competition for social status via education—unintentionally sped up the growth of education. For many years, a dense network of assisted colleges served as the foundation of higher education after communities used colleges as symbols of social power.

(ii) Policy-driven Expansion

Kerala's distinct socio-political history has allowed it to attain enrolment rates that are significantly higher than the national norm. They attribute this to robust governmental intervention and community-driven educational programs (Nair and Ajith Kumar, 2015). According to Ramachandran (2018), the liberalisation policies of the 1990s, which allowed for self-financing colleges and significantly increased the institutional base, brought about the crucial change. Although this made physical access more accessible, it also raised serious issues with fee exploitation, quality degradation and regulatory inadequacies. According to George and Lal (2017), the proliferation of self-financing professional colleges in districts such as Ernakulam, Malappuram and Kozhikode in the 2000s was primarily motivated by commercial interests rather than educational requirements, leading to an excess of some disciplines while undervaluing others. The difficulty of systemic governance has been highlighted by the Kerala High Court and the Supreme Court's repeated decisions on fee regulatory matters pertaining to self-financing colleges.

(iii) Gender and Social Equity

Thomas Isaac and Franke (2002) emphasised that education was a crucial component of social mobility, especially for women. Their research emphasised that although the quantity of schooling increased significantly, problems with quality and graduate employability persisted. Devika (2016) offered a nuanced gender perspective, contending that Kerala's female enrolment in higher education has continuously exceeded the national average, reflecting the cultural value

placed on educated brides in Kerala's marriage market, deep-rooted social investments in girl-child education and comparatively higher female autonomy. In Kerala's gender-education narrative, Kannan (2019) noted a paradox: whereas female enrolment in higher education is remarkably high, female labour force participation is still relatively low, indicating a gap between educational attainment and economic empowerment. Policy design is significantly impacted by this "Kerala paradox" in employment and education.

(iv) Quality and Accreditation

A large percentage of Kerala's educated youth migrate to Western and Gulf countries, according to Zachariah and Rajan (2012) and later migration studies. This raises concerns regarding the compatibility of Kerala's higher education production with its potential for domestic economic absorption. A significant portion of Kerala's colleges still lack NAAC accreditation, according to the UGC's regular reports, which raises questions over basic quality standards. A study on the quality of higher education in southern India (Kumar, 2020) found that while Kerala's colleges do well in the arts, sciences and commerce, they fall short of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in terms of research production, patent development and industry connections. This is a crucial area that needs deliberate development.

(v) Recent Developments

The main empirical foundation of this study is the AKHES 2021–2022 report, which is the most thorough evaluation of Kerala's higher education. By providing detailed, disaggregated data at the college and university levels throughout all fourteen districts, it closes important gaps in previous studies. This article aims to shed light on and resolve the tension that the literature collectively exposes between infrastructure adequacy and equal access, as well as between expansion and quality.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Studying Kerala's higher education system is important since the state serves as an example for other Indian states and emerging countries. Kerala's accomplishments in human development, which are mostly attributable to educational attainment, provide repeatable insights into state-driven social investment. However, there are important concerns regarding quality control, regional equity and demographic sustainability raised by the quick growth of higher education institutions, especially self-financing colleges.

The following factors make this study noteworthy:

1. Policy Relevance: It offers a current empirical view of the industry utilizing data from 2021–2022, which is essential for evidence-based planning under Kerala's Higher Education Mission and the NEP 2020 framework.
2. Disaggregated Analysis: This method allows for a more sophisticated understanding of structural disparities that aggregate state-level data tends to obscure by breaking down data by district, gender, institution type and academic level.
3. National Benchmarking: Kerala's GER and GPI are compared to peer states and national averages to provide a calibrated picture of the state's current situation and areas for improvement.
4. Identification of Emerging Issues: Research gaps, demographic pressures, diminishing male enrolment share, self-financing college domination and geographical inequities are just a few of the issues it methodically tracks.
5. Contribution to Academic Discourse: This study adds to the expanding corpus of research on India's state-level higher education systems and their function in sustainable development by combining survey data with previously published material.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the trends and patterns of higher education enrolment in Kerala with respect to gender, academic level, institutional type and regional distribution.

2. To evaluate Kerala's higher education performance using key indicators, including the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI), through comparison with the national average and selected leading Indian states.
3. To analyse regional disparities in the distribution of higher education institutions and student enrolment across districts, with particular emphasis on accessibility and equity.
4. To investigate the impact of the growing predominance of self-financing institutions on educational quality, accessibility, affordability and equity in higher education.
5. To identify and critically assess the major structural challenges affecting Kerala's higher education system, including demographic transition, declining male participation, research and innovation deficits, graduate employability and institutional sustainability.
6. To develop evidence-based policy recommendations for enhancing the quality, inclusiveness, research capacity and long-term sustainability of Kerala's higher education system in alignment with the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the patterns and emerging issues of higher education in Kerala. The analysis is based entirely on secondary data collected from the All Kerala Higher Education Survey (AKHES) and the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for the period 2021–22 to 2023–24, supplemented by reports published by the Ministry of Education, the Kerala State Higher Education Council and other relevant government sources. These datasets provide comprehensive information on enrolment, institutional distribution, gender composition and key higher education indicators. The study analyses enrolment trends across gender, academic level, institutional type and geographical regions to assess the current status of higher education in Kerala. A combination of trend analysis, comparative analysis and descriptive statistical techniques, including percentages, ratios and growth rates, was employed to evaluate key performance indicators such as the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI). Kerala's performance was further benchmarked against the national average and selected leading Indian states to identify comparative strengths and structural gaps. Furthermore, district-level analysis was undertaken to examine regional disparities in institutional distribution and student enrolment, while institutional analysis assessed the implications of the increasing dominance of self-financing colleges on access, equity and quality. The methodological approach enables a comprehensive evaluation of Kerala's higher education system and provides an empirical foundation for identifying emerging challenges and formulating evidence-based policy recommendations for enhancing the quality, inclusiveness and long-term sustainability of higher education in the state.

6. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

6.1 Differences in College Distribution by Region

There is a noticeable disparity in the distribution of colleges throughout districts, as shown in Table 1. In comparison to their population and size, educationally and geographically marginalized districts like Wayanad (33 colleges) and Kasaragod (50 institutions) are severely underserved. In order to pursue higher education, students from these areas frequently have to relocate or travel great distances, which adds to the financial and social pressures, especially for women, tribal students and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The disparity still exists despite efforts to close it through the state government's Higher Education Mission and special tribal education programs. Here the Table 1 presents the district-wise distribution of colleges in Kerala, categorised by management type: Aided, Government and Self-Financing. The data reveals significant regional disparities in the distribution of higher education institutions.

Table 1: District Wise Number of Colleges (govt., Aided and Self-Financing) -2021-22

District	Aided	Government	Self-Financing	Grand Total
Alappuzha	13	12	35	60
Ernakulam	22	16	147	185

Idukki	6	12	43	61
Kannur	13	19	71	103
Kasargod	3	11	36	50
Kollam	15	11	59	85
Kottayam	26	19	66	111
Kozhikode	10	26	109	145
Malappuram	19	18	123	160
Palakkad	10	18	83	111
Pathanamthitta	10	11	59	80
Thiruvananthapuram	16	33	106	155
Thrissur	17	21	86	124
Wayanad	4	9	20	33
Grand Total	184	236	1043	1463

Source: Compiled from AISHE 2021-22 and AKHES 2021-22

Self-financing institutions make up the majority of the 1,463 colleges (1,043; 71.3%), followed by government colleges (236; 16.1%) and assisted colleges (184; 12.6%). Wayanad (33) and Kasaragod (50) continue to be severely underserved, whereas Ernakulam leads with 185 institutions. In districts like Ernakulam ($147:16 = 9.2:1$) and Malappuram ($123:18 = 6.8:1$), the ratio of self-financing to government colleges is startlingly high, suggesting strong private sector domination. Due to concentrated state investment in the capital area, Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital, has the most government colleges (33). There are just 33 colleges in the distant, tribal-majority Wayanad district, which presents significant access issues for its student body.

6.2 Reduced Male Enrolment Share

The diminishing percentage of male enrolment calls for attention, even though female domination in higher education is a favourable social indication. After completing secondary school, young men in Kerala, especially those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds—particularly those from the Gulf migration stream—tend to enter the workforce without further education. This leads to a large enrolment disparity between men and women, which could have long-term effects on men's attention. After completing secondary school, young men in Kerala, especially those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds—particularly those from the Gulf migration stream—tend to enter the workforce without further education. Male human capital development and social mobility may suffer in the long run as a result of this large male-female enrolment disparity. Making higher education more financially appealing for young males without jeopardising the progress gained in female enrolment is the policy dilemma.

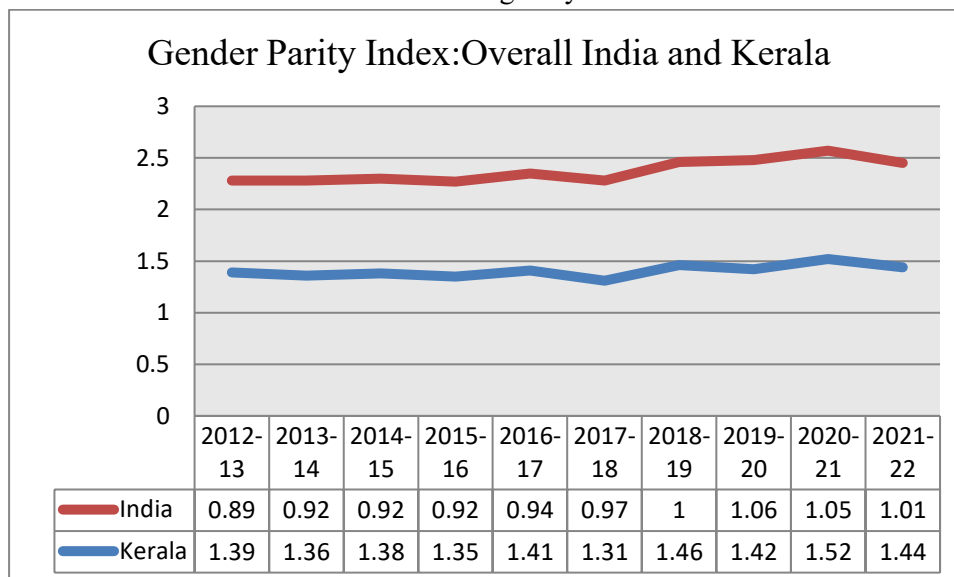
Table 2: GER of Kerala and India from 2012-13 to 2023-24

Year	Kerala			All India		
	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female
2012-13	22.1	18.5	25.8	21.5	22.7	20.1
2013-14	24.9	21.1	28.7	23	23.9	22
2014-15	28.7	24.1	33.3	24.3	25.3	23.2
2015-16	30.8	26.6	35	24.5	25.4	23.5
2016-17	32.4	26.4	38.6	24.1	24.3	23.8
2017-18	34	29.6	38.7	24.6	24.5	24.6
2018-19	34.5	28.2	41.1	24.9	24.4	25.5
2019-20	35.9	29.8	42.3	25.6	24.8	26.4
2020-21	43.2	34.5	52.3	27.3	26.7	27.9
2021-22	41.3	34.1	49	28.4	28.3	28.5
2022-23	44.2	35.7	52.7	29.5	28.9	30.2
2023-24	45.6	36.2	55.1	30.0	28.9	31.2

Source: AISHE 2018-20246

6.3 Demographic Stress and the Sustainability of Institutions

The state's youth population (those in the 18–23 age range) is expected to drastically diminish over the next several decades, and Kerala's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has dropped substantially below the replacement level of 2.1. Numerous colleges have already seen a decrease in student enrolment as a result, especially in districts with a significant number of self-financing schools. Numerous universities claim that non-professional course seats are empty, and some have started to close departments. Kerala may have serious problems with institutional viability, faculty unemployment, and resource misallocation if the institutional structure is not strategically rationalized.



Source: AISHE 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21 & 2021-22

Figure 1: Gender Parity Index-Overall Kerala and India

Over the course of the decade, Kerala's GPI has fluctuated slightly but has continuously maintained above 1.3. Even the lowest GPI of 1.31 in 2017–18 was still well over national parity, with the highest recorded GPI of 1.52 in 2020–21. Only in 2018–19 did India's GPI surpass the parity level (1.0) and as of 2021–2022, it is only marginally above it at 1.01. The growing difference between Kerala's GPI and India's GPI (from 0.50 in 2012–13 to 0.43 in 2021–2022) indicates that Kerala maintains a structurally ingrained female advantage in higher education while India is gradually catching up. The GPI of 1.80 for SC students and 1.41 for ST students shows that the female advantage extends to historically marginalised groups as well as upper and middle-class communities.

6.4 Imbalance between Quality and Quantity

Higher education institutions, especially self-financing colleges, have grown quickly, but there aren't enough quality control systems to keep up. Concerns regarding the worth of degrees granted is raised by the fact that a sizable percentage of Kerala's colleges are either unaccredited by the NAAC or have poor grades. Despite recent expansions, the NAAC accreditation procedure has not kept up with the expansion of institutions. Universities differ greatly in terms of curriculum relevance, facility requirements, and faculty quality, resulting in a two-tiered higher education system that is separated into funded (government and aided) and unfunded (self-financing) universities.

Table 4: Enrolment in Institution-Overall

Gender	All HEIs Across the State			University Level Institutions Others			State HEIs		
	All Universities	All Colleges	Total	University Level Institutions	Other Affiliated Colleges	Total	State Universities	State Affiliated Colleges	Total
Male Students	150511	303076	453587	47187	745	47932	103324	302331	405655
Female Students	180728	464677	645405	48568	1325	49893	132160	463352	595512

Transgender Students	5	116	121	2	5	7	3	111	114
Total	331244	767869	1099113	95757	2075	97832	235487	765794	1001281

(Source: AISHE, 2023-24)

In terms of total enrolment, female students (6, 45,405; 58.7%) outnumber male students (4, 53,587; 41.3%). One of the biggest disparities in female-male enrolment among the major Indian states is this 17.4 percentage point discrepancy, which represents a structural aspect of Kerala's higher education system rather than a recent development. Notably, women predominate in colleges (60.5% female) compared to universities (54.6% female), which may be due to the fact that neighbourhood colleges allow women to pursue higher education while staying closer to home. Even though there are only 121 transgender students enrolled overall, this figure is noteworthy because it shows the effect of progressive inclusion policies and the Kerala government's proactive efforts to promote transgender welfare in school.

6.5 Deficit in Research and Innovation

Kerala lags behind peer states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in terms of research production, patent generation, and innovation measures, despite its high enrolment levels. For a state with more than 10 lakh students, the number of PhD enrolments (4,652 among state universities and affiliated colleges, according to Table 5) is comparatively low. The majority of universities lack the infrastructure necessary for cutting-edge research, and industry-academia ties are still poor. Although there are still large gaps, the creation of the Kerala University of Digital Sciences, Innovation and Technology (Digital University Kerala) and increased financing for research at conventional universities are positive developments.

Table 5: Comparative Higher Education Indicators-Selected States (2023-24)

State	GER*(%)	GPI*	Total Colleges	Govt.Colleges (%)	Female Enrolment (%)
Kerala	41.2	1.46	1450	20.1	57.8
Tamil Nadu	52.3	1.03	2933	12.5	49.2
Maharashtra	36.4	0.98	5301	6.0	48.9
Karnataka	41.9	1.04	4280	14.3	49.3
Telangana	46.6	1.11	1780	14.9	51.1
All India	30.0	1.08	46468	17.1	49.7

Source: AISHE 2023-24 (Note: College counts and percentages are approximate, compiled from AISHE state summaries) GER*: Gross Enrolment Ratio, GPI*: Gender Parity Index

This comparison investigation reveals several significant findings: GER Leadership: With a GER of 52.3%, Tamil Nadu leads all major states and is quite near to the 50% NEP 2020 target. Kerala is ranked among the top states with 41.2%, significantly less than Karnataka (41.9%) and higher than Maharashtra (36.4%). Kerala is now among the few states in India that has attained nearly universal participation in higher education. Gender Parity: Kerala's GPI of 1.46 is significantly higher than the national average of 1.01 and the highest of the states under comparison. Kerala's female involvement in higher education appears to be exceptionally high even when compared to other educationally advanced states, as Tamil Nadu, which has a higher total GER, has a lower GPI of 1.03 and Maharashtra has 0.98.

Institutional Density: Kerala (1,463) has fewer colleges than Maharashtra (4,702) and Karnataka (3,385), which is indicative of their greater populations and geographical areas. Kerala's higher GER, however, indicates that the state is making better use of its current capacity and that there is a greater social demand for higher education per institution.

Government College Share: Kerala's government college share (16.1%) is lower than Tamil Nadu's (18.2%) but marginally higher than the national average (12.8%), suggesting room for additional public investment in government institutions to offset the predominance of self-financing colleges. Female

Enrolment: Of the states analysed, Kerala has the highest female enrolment share (57.8%), followed by Telangana (51.1%) and Tamil Nadu (49.2%). Even among big states, gender equity in higher education enrolment is still lacking in Maharashtra and Karnataka, where the percentage is still below 50%.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy suggestions are put out to improve Kerala's higher education system in light of the data analysis and identification of emergent issues:

- i. **Boost NAAC Accreditation Coverage:** All self-financing institutions should be required by law to obtain NAAC accreditation within a specified period of time, with financial penalties for noncompliance and assistance in improving colleges' capability during the accreditation process.
- ii. **Targeted Investment in Underserved Districts:** Public funding for new government colleges, especially for professional and technical education, is needed in districts like Wayanad, Kasaragod, and Idukki. Each severely underprivileged district shall have at least one engineering, medical, or management institution established by the state government.
- iii. **Revive and Strengthen Male Participation:** To increase male participation in higher education, specific scholarship programs, skill-linked degree programs, and awareness campaigns aimed at young men, especially those from economically disadvantaged groups and communities with high migration tendencies, should be created.
- iv. **Self-Financing Institutions:** Self-financing colleges with consistently low enrolment should be thoroughly reviewed. Instead of letting unviable universities continue to function as under-enrolled, subpar degree mills, incentives should be provided for their consolidation, merger, or transformation into community colleges or skill development centres.
- v. **Improve Research Ecosystem:** Public-private funds should be used to develop research centres at state universities and autonomous institutions. In order to achieve a dedicated research fund under KSHEC, the Kerala government needs to raise the amount allotted for research in the state higher education budget.
- vi. **Leverage the Digital University:** In order to provide students from remote areas and non-traditional backgrounds with access to high-quality higher education without having to physically relocate, the Digital University Kerala should be positioned as the state's main online and blended learning platform.
- vii. **Describe Graduate Outcome Monitoring:** Under KSHEC, a mechanism for tracking graduate employment should be mandated; forcing universities to provide yearly reports on placement, higher education continuation, and entrepreneurship outcomes. This information should be made available to the public so that students can make informed decisions and be held accountable.
- viii. **Extend Inclusive Policies:** The government should provide specialised scholarships, mentorship programs, and secure learning spaces for gender minorities, kids with disabilities, and students from ST communities, building on the current inclusion of transgender students in enrolment records.
- ix. **Align Curriculum with NEP 2020:** All Kerala institutions should adopt the four-year undergraduate curriculum with several entry and exit options as outlined in NEP 2020. This will provide students more freedom, lessen the impact of dropouts, and bring Kerala's degree system into compliance with international norms.
- x. **Encourage Internationalization:** To make up for the dwindling local youth cohort and raise money for quality enhancement, Kerala's universities should actively seek out overseas students, especially from South and South-East Asia and the Middle East.

8. FINDINGS

Kerala's female GER of 55.1% is 23.9 percentage points higher than the national female GER of 31.2%, and its GER of 45.6% in 2023–2024 is about 1.5 times the national average of 30.0%. At all academic levels, from undergraduate to doctoral, female enrolment significantly outnumbers male enrolment, indicating significant social investments in women's education and accounting for 58.7% of total

enrollment. The Gender Parity Index of 1.44 in 2021-22 is the highest among major Indian states, far exceeding the national GPI of 1.01, with the advantage extending to SC communities (GPI 1.80) and ST communities (GPI 1.41). 71.3% of all colleges are self-financing, and in Ernakulam, the ratio of self-financing to government colleges is more than 9:1. This raises grave issues about fair access and quality control. There are notable geographical differences, with Wayanad (33) and Kasaragod (50) having significantly fewer colleges than Ernakulam (185), Malappuram (160), and Thiruvananthapuram (155). Affiliated institutions account for 69.9% of total enrolment (7, 67,869 out of 10, 99,113), emphasising their vital significance and the necessity for effective quality assurance mechanisms. Kerala is a national leader in female involvement in higher education, routinely outperforming the other main educationally advanced states, Tamil Nadu (1.03), Maharashtra (0.98), and Karnataka (1.04). For a state with more than 10 lakh students enrolled in higher education, the PhD research enrolment of 4,652 students is comparatively low, indicating a lacklustre research culture. Declining male enrolment share and demographic pressures from a shrinking youth population indicate twin structural challenges for the long-term sustainability of the higher education industry. Kerala's path toward genuinely inclusive higher education has reached a significant milestone with the formal inclusion of transgender students in enrolment records (121 students).

9. CONCLUSION

This study highlights Kerala's strong performance in higher education, particularly in terms of enrolment and gender equity, while identifying critical challenges related to institutional quality, regional disparities, research capacity, and demographic change. Although the state has made significant progress in expanding access, sustaining this achievement requires a greater focus on quality enhancement, equitable institutional development, and innovation. Strengthening public investment, research ecosystems, and evidence-based policy implementation in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 will be essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability and global competitiveness of Kerala's higher education system.

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