Kerala’s Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR)

Victor Growth

1. Current Status

- Kerala’s **Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR)** has risen sharply from **18 to 30 per one lakh live births** (2021–2023), as per the **Sample Registration System (SRS) special bulletin**.
- Despite the rise, Kerala (along with Andhra Pradesh) continues to rank among the **States with the lowest MMR** in India.

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2. Reasons for the Increase

- **COVID-19 Impact (2021):**
  - Kerala reported **97 maternal deaths** linked to COVID-19.
  - In 2021–22, MMR spiked from **32 to 51** due to increased maternal deaths (up to 220 cases).
- **Declining Live Births:**
  - MMR is calculated as maternal deaths ÷ live births × 100,000.
  - Kerala’s annual live births have steadily fallen from **5–5.5 lakh** earlier to **below 4 lakh** in recent years.
  - In 2023, live births totaled **3.93 lakh**, expected to further dip to **3.54 lakh** (2024–25).
- With deaths steady (~120–140 per year), the **shrinking denominator** has inflated the ratio.

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3. Long-Term Trends

- Historically, Kerala’s MMR has been stable at **30–32** since 2014–15, based on Health Department’s **line list data** (actual maternal deaths recorded).
- The sharp drop to 18 in SRS data (2020–22) was misleading, as it did not reflect the actual steady number of maternal deaths.
- Experts had earlier warned that the figure of 18 was **unrealistic**.

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4. Data Sources & Variations

- **SRS Data (official):** Used in national reports and policy documents; derived from sample studies.
- **State Health Department (line list data):** Captures every maternal death, considered more accurate by officials.
- Variance between SRS and State data has been a persistent issue.

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5. Maternal Death Profile

- Kerala reports **120–140 maternal deaths annually** over the last 5 years.
- Safe motherhood has been a long-term focus of Kerala's public health efforts.
- However, reducing MMR further has become challenging due to:
    - Declining births.
    - The **last-mile difficulty** in tackling preventable maternal deaths.

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6. Key Insights

- The apparent "rise" in MMR does not necessarily mean maternal health has worsened.
- It reflects the **statistical effect** of fewer live births combined with a relatively steady number of deaths.
- Kerala still remains one of the **safest States for motherhood**, but policymakers must address the demographic shift and ensure continued maternal care.

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