

No need for a drastic population policy

Data from Assam and Uttar Pradesh show that fertility rates have been reducing over time



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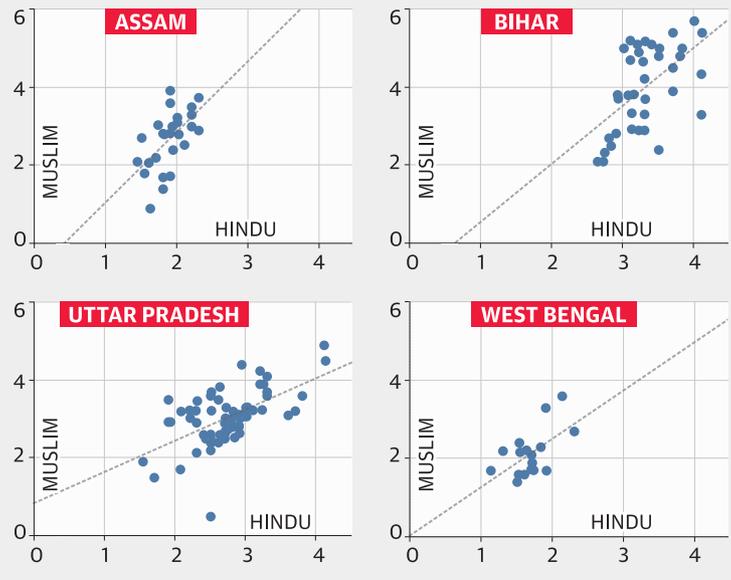
Population policy is suddenly in the news in India with Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled States such as Assam and Uttar Pradesh proposing to bring in or bringing in draft legislation aimed at controlling their populations. The Uttar Pradesh Population (Control, Stabilisation and Welfare) Bill of 2021 promotes a two-child policy, according to which those people having more than two children will be barred from contesting local body elections and become ineligible to apply for State government jobs. A similar law has also been proposed in Assam, where the Chief Minister has even announced a 'population army' to curb the birth rate in Muslim-dominated areas in lower Assam. The U.P. Chief Minister has said that the aim of the policy is to reduce the total fertility rate in his State.

The Chief Ministers of these States don't seem to have read the document on population projection, published by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in 2019. According to this document, U.P. will reach a replacement rate (the rate at which women give birth to enough babies to sustain population levels) of 2.1 by 2025, and Assam by 2020. If the replacement fertility rate has already been achieved in Assam and will be achieved by 2025 in U.P., what is the need for any drastic population policy?

Decreasing fertility rates

The need arises because population policy is an important weapon in the arsenal of the Hindutva brigade to attack the Muslim population in the country. The Assam Chief Minister's 'population army' in Muslim areas and the U.P. Chief Minister's many utterances prove this. However, even on this score, their policy framework is wrong. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-2 data, the total fertility rate (TFR), which is the average number of children that women of reproductive age group have had in their lifetime, in 1998-99 in U.P. was 3.87 for Hindus and 4.76

Fertility rates of Hindus and Muslims in select States across districts (2015-16)



Source: Fourth round of NFHS, 2015-16; calculated by the authors

for Muslims. In 2015-16, it decreased to 2.67 for Hindus and 3.1 for Muslims. This means that the TFR declined by 1.2 for Hindus and by 1.66 for Muslims, which is higher. The NFHS-5 data for 2019-20 for U.P. have not been published. When it is published, data will show that the fertility rate for both Hindus and Muslims has declined even further.

The fertility trend for Assam is even starker. According to NFHS data, Assam had a TFR of 3.5 in 1992-93, which decreased to 1.9 in 2019-20. Even after such a drastic decline in TFR, the Chief Minister's enthusiasm to decrease it even further has no merit other than scoring political points based on a distorted notion of religious demography. In 1998-99, the TFR for Hindus in Assam was 2.0, which declined to 1.59 in 2019-20. For Muslims, it declined from 3.05 to 2.38 in the same period. While the fertility rate of Hindus is less than the replacement level, the fertility rate of Muslims is near that level and will reach there in the near future without any policy intervention.

The point is that fertility rate does not depend on religion. It depends on socio-economic characteristics like education, income, maternal and child health conditions, and other associated factors. The graphs above show this in a concise manner. We have taken the district-wise ferti-

lity rates for Hindus and Muslims in four States: U.P., Assam, West Bengal and Bihar (calculated from NFHS-4 2015-16 data). The horizontal axis shows the fertility rate for Hindus and the vertical axis shows the fertility rate for Muslims. It is clear from the graphs that there is a positive relationship between the fertility rates of Hindus and Muslims. In other words, in districts where Hindus have a high fertility rate, the fertility rate of Muslims is also high. This cannot be explained by religion but by socio-economic factors in these districts. It is also clear that there are districts in these four States where the fertility rate for Hindus is actually higher than that of Muslims. The fertility rate of Hindus is greater than Muslims in four districts of Assam, 11 districts of Bihar, 22 of U.P. and three of West Bengal. Therefore, to stigmatise Muslims in terms of population growth and breeding more children is a figment of the right-wing imagination and not supported by facts.

Preference for a male child

The preceding discussion pointed out that the population control policy of imposing a two-child norm is not supported by data. However, it can have other unintended consequences. Generally, any discussion on fertility focuses on policy recommendations regarding increasing fe-

male education, which is no doubt important. However, a single-minded focus on this policy instrument ignores the issue of a preference for male children, which is dominant in the country. An earlier study of women's fertility in Hindi heartland States showed that the proportion of graduate women who had two living daughters but still wanted another child was 23.7% in Bihar, 27.3% in U.P. and 28.3% in Rajasthan. This is nothing but an indicator of a preference for sons in a patriarchal and caste-dominated society. Given such a preference for male children, the two-child norm will only increase sex-selective abortions of girl children, and female infanticide, since couples will want to maintain both the two-child norm as proposed to be enacted by the government as well as their preference for sons.

Problem of ageing

The experience of China also shows that if the state imposes its decision on families' fertility choices, such a decision is bound to fail. With the one-child policy, the proportion of the aged population is increasing in China. Fewer younger workers are available, which might result in a slowdown of economic growth. As a result, the government has been forced to relax the one-child policy and adopt a three-child policy. In India too, as per the population projection report, the proportion of people aged 60 years and above will increase from 13.8% in 2011 to 23.1% in 2036. The two-child norm will only further aggravate the problem of ageing.

The lesson to be drawn is that the decision on children is best made by the family, which can be nudged towards making choices that ensure a stable population growth. As a famous demographer argued, the fertility behaviour of a couple is a "calculus of conscious choice". India's decades-old population policy has achieved replacement level fertility in the country without taking any coercive measures. Governments should have faith in these time-tested policies and respect the choices of people rather than impose warped and motivated ideas regarding demography on the people.

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