Plummeting Fertility Rate in South India- A Study

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ABSTRACT

Half of India’s 1.21 billion population comprise women, and the national average fertility rate stands at 2.5, slightly higher than the targeted 2. The theory is simple that two children replace two parents, and the population remains stagnant. The results confirm the persistence of low fertility in southern states. As far as India is concerned, in all regions fertility is declining and it is possible that fertility rates will converge in the near future. The main reason for fertility decline in southern region is the reduction in third and higher-order births. Another reason for low fertility in southern states is Women are, perhaps, postponing marriage and subsequently childbirth. Many are increasingly settling for one child as they are socially and biologically affected earlier.

Keywords: fertility, demographic transition, Women literacy, India

Introduction

Fertility rates in India are more closely related to education levels and the socio-economic development within a state, than to religious beliefs. Globally, there is little evidence to link religion and fertility rates, with poorer, conflict-ridden states and countries with lower female empowerment reporting higher population growth rates. When the office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India released fertility rates for the Indian population in the year 2015, the conversation was hijacked by the difference in population growth rates across religions. Several newspapers emphasised that the data showed that Muslim women had higher fertility rates than non-Muslims, and that the percentage of Muslims in the population was steadily growing.

The fertility rate measures the number of births occurring per 1,000 women between the ages of 15 and 44 in a particular year. (Birth rates refer to this measure within particular age groups). Tracking trends in fertility and birth rates is essential in planning for the current and future needs of multiple generations. Sustained high fertility rates lead to disproportionately large populations of young dependents, driving demand for supports for young families, for an adequate number of schools, and for affordable child care (Weeks, 2002). For example, during the baby boom period (births from 1946 to 1964), unanticipated high fertility rates caught communities unprepared, and without the school facilities needed to accommodate rapidly increasing numbers of school-age children. On the other hand, sustained low fertility rates can lead to an aging population and, in the long run, may place burdens on the economy and social services, because the pool of younger workers responsible for supporting the elderly accounts for a relatively smaller share of the population (Coale, 1987). In India, for most people, the general perception about India is of a country sitting on
an indicating population explosion. This notion however seems to be somewhat misplaced, at least in the context of the country's urban population, where the fertility rate—the number of children born per woman—has fallen to levels lower even than in countries like the United States, France, Australia and New Zealand. In this context, the present study analyses reasons for low level of fertility in south Indian states.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the fertility differentials across the states in India
- To discuss low fertility rates among southern states

North and South Indian States Fertility Differentials

The future then appears to show fewer children and more elderly, but the data and the details get complicated. After years of reasonably good healthcare, rising literacy and infant survival rates, 10 states, including South India's big four, virtually form a country distinct from the giants of the Hindi heartland. India's fertility rate is now 2.6, the number of children born to each woman, but the rate in the southern states has fallen below two. That is below the replacement level of 2.1, the level at which population neither increases nor decreases. Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh (including Telangana) have fertility rates that match the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and Norway 1.7 to 1.9 children per woman. Fertility rates in six other states Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir and Delhi have also fallen below replacement levels. In contrast, women in the cowbelt states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh are popping out three children or more; Chattisgarh and Jharkhand are just below three. These fertility rates are in line with countries like Haiti, Lesotho and Guatemala. In 2011, 505 million people lived in these six states, whose population surges will take India past China in six years and keep it still young at an average age of 29 by 2020, when China's will be 39, the US', 40.

Discussion on transformation of fertility rates

A profound demographic transformation seems to be taking place in the country and going by the data emerging from the 2011 census, fertility rates are dropping across the States, with at least eight of them showing a fertility rate below the replacement level of 2.1. Replacement level fertility can be the level of fertility at which a population replaces itself from one generation to the next. In developed countries, replacement level fertility can be taken as 2.1 children per woman. The good news is that the decline in fertility rate seems to be across the board with even the EAG States (Empowered Action Group States) such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan all showing a drop in total fertility rate (TFR) by 0.3 to 0.8. Also, several States such as Odisha, Assam, Sikkim, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Manipur are all beginning to figure for the first time among those States which have fertility rates below the replacement level. The data has emerged from an analysis of the district-level fertility in India, based on the 2011 census.

Centre for Development Studies in Kerala has analysed the district-level fertility, says that estimates from 621 districts across the country show that 190 districts constituting 31 per cent of India’s population have achieved fertility rates below that of replacement levels. The Institute points out that one-third of the country has attained fertility rates below replacement level, while 192 districts, which currently had a TFR of 2.2 to 3.0, will go below replacement level by 2021. About 239 districts in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Meghalaya states had a TFR over 3.0. There are 29 districts across eight States—Kerala, Karnataka, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Goa—where the fertility rate is less than or equal to 1.5 in the 2011 census, much below the replacement level of 2.1.

Fertility rate in South India

Studies say that women in most southern states appear to be settling for one child, pulling down the average fertility rate. It is evident that two districts, Udupi in Karnataka and Kolkata in West Bengal, have a TFR of 1.2, the lowest in the country. Pathanamthitta in Kerala and the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu come next with a TFR of 1.3. New Delhi (Delhi), Chikmagalur (Karnataka), Alappuzha, Idukki, Kollam, Kottayam and Thriruvananthapuram (Kerala), Mumbai and Sindhudurg (Maharashtra), Chennai, Coimbatore, Erode and Kanyakumari (Tamil Nadu) have a TFR of 1.3. Karim Nagar, Krishna (Andhra Pradesh), North Goa (Goa), Dakshina Kannada, Hassan, Kodagu, Mandya (Karnataka), Ernakulam and Thrissur (Kerala) and Namakkal, Thanjavur and Thiruvarur (Tamil Nadu) are the other districts where the TFR stands at 1.5. The States and Union Territories with a TFR below the replacement level of 2.1 are Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Andaman and Nicobar, Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim, Chandigarh and Himachal Pradesh. According to James, professor, Population Research Centre, who made the data analysis pointed out that Women are, perhaps, postponing marriage and, subsequently childbirth. Many are increasingly settling for one child as they are socially and biologically past their prime by the time they give birth for the first time.
CD Institute Trivandrum has pointed out that fertility rates have declined in all States; the process has been kick started and will continue now. We still need to pay attention to family planning but what are the policies we should adopt as ‘population policies’ for districts where fertility levels are already below replacement level, is something that needs to be given much thought. These differential fertility rates across the country and the fact that the demographic transition is taking place at various paces in different parts of the country could give some breathing space for the demographers to analyse the implications of these changes.

Tamil Nadu : 1.7 (comparable country: Denmark)  
Kerala: 1.8 (comparable country: Netherlands)  
Karnataka: 1.9 (comparable country: United Kingdom)  
Andhra Pradesh: 1.8 (comparable country: Netherlands)  
India: 2.4

Low fertility rates in south India doesn't equate to "extinction". Educated women decide the size of their family. They don't simply agree to turn themselves into a breeding machine. This is exactly how economic development happens. Take a look at the Scandinavian countries, Japan, Austria, and Germany, their fertility rates have fallen and infant mortality rates collapse, their prosperity rose simultaneously.

It isn't clear when India's population will stop growing. It could be as late as 2050 (by which time the average Indian will be 37), earlier if rising literacy and female emancipation holds down family size, a bleak prospect in the patriarchal north. Falling fertility and fewer children implies that three southern states (Kerala, Goa and Tamil Nadu) contain the highest proportion of elderly in India. As family size shrinks and community support fragments, familial ties that offer support to the infirm and elderly are fraying.

A labour shortage is also evident in large swathes of the southern economy. Internal migration tends to compensate and explains why despite below-replacement-level birth rates, populations continue to rise in the south, Maharashtra and West Bengal. Vacant slots are filled by migrants from the North and the North East, which has the least proportion of elderly people in India. This filling of vacant slots is visibly evident in the form of migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh into Mumbai and Kolkata. A quieter migration was revealed three years ago in Bengaluru when thousands of northeasterners streamed out of the city in panic after widespread rumours of attacks against them. The youth bulge of the North and North East and the ageing of the South (and some other states) have two implications in the years to come. First, working Indians will have more dependents to look after, young children and old people. Second, India's overall youth bulge can only delay its graying.

Several scholars have linked birthrate decline to female education. Educated women, they reason, generally prefer smaller families, allowing them to pursue their own interests while investing more resources and time in each child. As it turns out, the map of female literacy in India does exhibit striking similarities with the map of fertility. States with educated women, such as Kerala and Goa, have smaller families than those with widespread female illiteracy, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But this correlation, although strong, is of limited explanatory power, since Kerala and Goa rank high on every social indicator, just as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh rank low. A number of exceptions, moreover, are evident. Andhra Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, for example, combine low female literacy with low fertility, whereas in Meghalaya and Nagaland the pattern is reversed. Thus the education of women is no doubt significant in reducing fertility levels, as it is not the only factor at play.

Conclusion

Lowering fertility rates are a scientifically proven index of social and economic development. As education percolates into society, information seeps in prejudices and blind practices leak out. It leads to better health care, better treatment of women, and higher regard for women in society in general and allows them to make choices that impact them such as use of birth control. This lets people and society at large to have a better standard of living.

References


