Bad news: Sex ratio down. Good news: So is fertility rate

Delhi Now Has The Lowest Fertility Rate In Country, But Large States Like UP, Bihar Still Continue To Have A High Number Of Babies Per Family

Rema.Nagarajan@timesgroup.com

India’s sex ratio at birth (SRB) — the number of female babies born for every 1,000 male babies — fell to an all-time low of 896 in 2015-2017. This would translate into approximately 117 lakh girls missing in the country in a span of three years. Five large states — Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Maharashtra and Gujarat — with poor sex ratios at birth account for about two thirds of these missing girls.

Uttar Pradesh alone accounts for about 34.5 lakh missing girls or about 30% of the total, followed by Rajasthan with 14 lakh, Bihar with about 11.6 lakh and Maharashtra and Gujarat, each with about 10 lakh girls missing in the three years.

While the sex ratio continues to decline despite government efforts, India’s total fertility rate — the number of kids likely to be born to a woman — which was stuck at 2.3 from 2013 onwards, fell to 2.2 in 2017, close to the replacement level fertility of 2.1.

Replacement fertility is the level at which a population can replace itself from one generation to the next without growing or declining and it is estimated at 2.1 children per woman. Below this level, the population starts shrinking. Nine states, including some of the least developed, have fertility levels higher than 2.1, though two of these, Gujarat and Haryana, are at 2.2. Only in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are women on average likely to have three or more children.

Of 13 states with below replacement level fertility, Delhi has the lowest at 1.5. Barring Rajasthan, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, urban populations of all states have less than replacement level fertility. In rural areas, MP, UP and Bihar have a fertility rate of three or more. India’s total fertility rate has fallen steadily from 3.2 in 1998 with the most dramatic improvement in the southern states where it fell from about 4 in the 1970s to the current level of 1.6 or 1.7.

The pressure to have smaller families in a society that prefers boys, along with access to sex determination methods and methods of getting rid of female babies could be leading to an alarmingly skewed sex ratio. Though some of the states with the worst SRB, such as Haryana, Gujarat and Punjab, have shown gradual improvement over the years, they are yet to regain the levels of the 1990s. Also, these are mostly states with smaller populations and fewer births. So, the improvement here is more than offset by declining SRB in populous states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh with a huge number of births, leading to India’s overall SRB continuing to fall.

Moreover, many states that had earlier recorded high SRBs such as Kerala and Odisha have witnessed a steep decline. Kerala had an SRB of 948, second only to Chhattisgarh, but this has plummeted 26 points from 974 in 2012-14. In Odisha, the fall from 956 in 2011-13 to 929 by 2015-2017 is an even sharper 27 points.
SEX RATIO FELL, MEANS 11.7M GIRLS HAVE GONE "MISSING"

Between 2014-16 and 2015-17, Assam clocked the biggest improvement followed by J&K while Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra and Bengal, in that order, also saw an uptick. Haryana and Himachal, too, showed marginal improvement.

Kerala saw the biggest dip, from 959 to 948, but since its sex ratio was so high to begin with, it is second only to Chhattisgarh.

Fertility rate falling across states, but still above replacement level in 9 of them

2.1 is the replacement fertility rate, or the total fertility rate — the average number of children born per woman, at which a population exactly replicates itself from one generation to the next, without migration.