What The Data Tells Us

Are Muslims responsible for India’s ‘population explosion’? Not quite

The Prime Minister expressed concern about ‘population explosion’ in his Independence Day speech, and referred to those with small families as patriotic, ‘responsible citizens’. Last month, BJP MP Rakesh Sinha introduced the Population Regulation Bill, 2019, in the Rajya Sabha. He later claimed that his Bill was not aimed at any religion, caste or community. Regardless, the Shiv Sena targeted a section of the Muslims for their supposedly high birth rates (‘hum do, humare pachhis’ – we 2, our 25). Last year, BJP MP Giriraj Singh went to the extent of claiming that “one particular community is responsible for increasing the population of the country and that is curbing the nation’s development”, even as Shiv Sena called for “compulsory sterilisation” of Muslims.

None of this is new. Religious differences in birth rates have often been a matter of hot political debate in India since the early 1900s. Thankfully, India has had a long history of very rich and reliable demographic data which can be used to assess whether such concerns are well-founded.

India’s population has increased by more than 5 times in the last 110 years, from 238 million in 1901 to 1,211 million in 2011. Most of the increase (87%) happened in the post-Independence era (1951-2011). The highest population growth was 24.8% during 1961-71, after which the growth rate started declining, going down to 17.7% during 2001-11. A report by the National Institute for Heath and Family Welfare, ‘The Story of India’s Population’ (2014), confirms that “India has witnessed a steady decline in its population growth rate over the last four decades (1971–2011).”

However, with a huge population as ours, even decreasing growth rate means massive additions to the total population size. So, despite declining growth rates during 1971-2011, we added 663 million to our population in this period. And not 2050, India will become the world’s most populous country in 2027 itself, according to estimates by UN World Population Prospects 2019. So, yes, the population explosion has happened and continues to happen.

Are Muslims responsible for India’s population explosion? Muslims contributed 14.6% (1901-2011), 16.1% (1951-2011) and 16.7% (1971-2011) to India’s population growth. The contribution of Hindus, on the other hand, was 79.4%, 78% and 77.4% and that of the rest was 6%, 5.9% and 5.9% during these periods. In 1901, Hindus outnumbered Muslims in India by 164 million; by 268 million in 1951; 392 million in 1971; and by 794 million in 2011. So, despite a lower growth rate, but a much higher
population, the numerical advantage of Hindus has grown over the years, rather than the other way round.

At the same time, the population growth rate of Muslims has been declining since 1971 – from 30.9% during 1961-71 to 24.6% during 2001-11. If population explosion is what you are concerned about, do not bother about the Muslims so much.

A higher total fertility rate (TFR) – births per woman – among Muslims is often referred to as a cause for alarm (religious, demographic and developmental). Allow me to clarify. Population change is determined by three demographic variables – fertility, mortality and migration – and not by fertility alone. You can have a high fertility rate, but if your mortality or migration rates are high, your population won’t increase.

These demographic variables are, in turn, determined by socioeconomic factors (type of residence, education, economic status, etc) as well as by culture, religion, sense of security, etc – and not by religion alone. The TFR of Muslims in Uttar Pradesh is 3.10, while it is 1.86 in Kerala – much less than that of Hindus in UP (2.67), according to the fourth round (2015-16) of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4).

TFR in rural India was 2.41 and 1.75 in urban India, while their under-five mortality rate (U5MR) was 55.8 and 34.4 respectively. Similarly, at the national level, among women aged 15-49 years with no schooling and those with 12 or more years schooling, TFR was 3.06 and 1.71 respectively, while U5MR was 67.5 and 26.5. Among those in the lowest and the highest wealth index, TFR was 3.17 and 1.54 respectively, while U5MR was 71.7 and 22.6. TFR of Muslims and Hindus was 2.61 and 2.13 respectively, while their U5MR was 49.9 and 50.5, at the all-India level. Muslims have had an advantage over Hindus in child survival for a very long time, and it has only declined over time. One aspect of mortality is life expectancy at birth (LEB). There was a difference of 4 years between LEB of poor Muslims (65.5 years) and Hindus (61.5 years) during NFHS-3 (2005-06), the difference being miniscule between non-poor Muslims (68.4 years) and Hindus (67.8 years).

So, it is not just due to higher TFR, but also higher child and adult survival rates that the population growth rate among Muslims has been relatively higher.

Furthermore, TFR declined by 40.8% among Muslims vis-a-vis 35.7% at the national level and 35.5% among Hindus between NFHS-1 (1992-93) and NFHS-4. It will decline further if their socioeconomic characteristics, sense of security, etc improve. Only 9.2% of Muslim females aged 6+ years vis-a-vis 14% Hindu females had 12 or more years of schooling; for males, it was 12.7% and 21% respectively (NFHS-4). In 2011-12, 25.4% Muslims and 21.9% Hindus were below the poverty line (Tendulkar methodology). Despite differentials in socioeconomic deprivation, the situation of both Hindus and Muslims is worrisome, and this is what needs to be addressed to stop the population exploding further.

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