

India's Demographic Turning Point

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India's Demographic Turning Point: From Growth to Governance

Context:

India's demographic landscape is undergoing a major transformation. The recently released UNFPA "State of World Population 2025" report highlights a critical shift — **India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined to 1.9**, falling **below the replacement level of 2.1**. Despite this decline, India remains the **most populous country** in the world.

This shift marks a new phase in India's demographic journey, transitioning from high population growth to potential population stabilisation and even decline in the long term.

Current Population Status and Projections

- As of **April 2025**, India's population is estimated at **146.39 crore**.
 - It is projected to **peak at around 170 crore** in the next four decades before beginning to decline.
 - India has now entered the phase of a **demographic transition**, common in many emerging economies.
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Declining Fertility Rate: Key Trends

- India's **TFR has dropped to 1.9**, below the **replacement level of 2.1**.
- This shift has occurred **without coercive policies**, driven instead by:

- Improved **access to reproductive healthcare**.
 - **Increased educational awareness**.
 - **Women's empowerment** and participation in decision-making.
- In **1960**, the average Indian woman had **six children**; this number has sharply fallen over the decades.
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Regional Variations in Fertility

According to NFHS-5 (2022):

- **Urban fertility: 1.6**
- **Rural fertility: 2.1**
- States with **above-average fertility**:
 - **Bihar – 2.98**
 - **Meghalaya – 2.9**
 - **Uttar Pradesh – 2.35**
 - **Jharkhand – 2.26**
 - **Manipur – 2.2**

These regional variations highlight the need for **state-specific interventions** rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Economic Pressures Influencing Fertility Choices

- **38%** of Indian respondents cited **financial constraints** as a reason for having fewer children.

- **21%** mentioned **job insecurity or unemployment**.
- Globally, **39% of people across 14 countries** reported similar concerns.

This reflects a growing mismatch between **desired family size** and **economic realities**.

Gap Between Ideal and Actual Fertility

- **41% of Indian women** consider **two children** as the ideal family size.
- However, **7% of respondents below 50** expect to have **fewer than the ideal** due to economic and social stress.
- There is also influence from:
 - **Partners' preferences** (19% wanted fewer children).
 - **Lack of domestic support** (15% cited household burden).
 - **Pressure from healthcare workers** (14% said they were advised to limit childbirth).

This reveals gaps in **reproductive autonomy** and potential **institutional biases**.

Demographic Dividend and Ageing Concerns

India currently benefits from a **demographic dividend**:

- **68%** of the population is in the **working-age group (15-64 years)**.

However, with **life expectancy increasing** to:

- **71 years for men**
- **74 years for women**

...the **elderly population (now 7%)** is projected to grow significantly. This will create added

pressure on:

- **Healthcare systems**
 - **Social security**
 - **Pension and elderly care infrastructure**
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Reframing the Population Debate: From Numbers to Rights

The UNFPA report emphasizes that the real issue is **not population size**, but the **inability of individuals to fulfil their reproductive goals**.

Key shifts proposed:

- Move from **population control** to **reproductive rights**.
 - Promote **informed decision-making** on contraception, sex, and family planning.
 - Focus on **choice, access, and empowerment**, not demographic targets alone.
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Policy Imperatives for India

To adapt to this new demographic reality, India must:

- **Enhance women's workforce participation** through flexible work policies and equal pay.
- **Expand support for childcare and elderly care**, particularly in urban areas.
- **Reform workplace structures** to reduce the economic cost of parenting.
- **Invest in universal access** to contraception, fertility counselling, and reproductive education.
- Strengthen state-level programmes in high-fertility regions.

The **upcoming 2027 Census**, delayed since 2021, will be crucial for policy calibration.

Conclusion:

India stands at a critical demographic juncture. The challenge is not merely about managing numbers, but ensuring that every individual has the **freedom, support, and resources** to make **informed reproductive choices**.

Future population strategies must prioritise:

- **Rights-based approaches** over control mechanisms.
- **Social investments** over short-term targets.
- **Inclusive governance** over demographic panic.

This transition, if managed wisely, can position India for **sustainable development and social equity** in the decades to come.



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