

AS INDIA MOVES TO SLOW POPULATION GROWTH, BIHAR GETS LEFT BEHIND

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Demography of the World - Growth of Population

India's south and west are now at replacement fertility, but it will be several decades before the country's population starts shrinking

Gujarat has now joined 13 other states at or below replacement fertility, new data from the Sample Registration System (SRS) for 2018 shows. Bihar is now the only Indian state where a woman as of 2018 was likely to have over three children in her lifetime.

The SRS is a large-scale household survey, representative at the level of big states, used by India to measure indicators relating to births, deaths, and fertility. A country is said to have reached replacement fertility when its total fertility rate (TFR) drops to 2.1, a level that indicates that the population will stop growing, and only replace itself over time. India's TFR now stands at 2.2.

A TFR of 2.1 is considered to be an important milestone for developing countries seeking to slow down their population growth. In India, it's also intensely political, because of a wide gap in TFR between southern states --- that have better education and health outcomes, and have long reached replacement fertility --- and northern states, which are still some way off.

As the average number of children in a family has declined, the age at which women are giving birth has moved up. In urban areas of the country, the age-specific fertility rates have declined for women below 30, and gone up in women of all ages over 30. Age-specific fertility rates refer to the number of children born to women in a particular age group per 1000 women in that age group.

Across the country, age-specific fertility rates have declined across all age groups except for women in their early 30s, who have seen a rise in the age-specific fertility rates.

This is also the first time in five years that a fall in fertility has not been accompanied by a fall in the sex ratio at birth. After five years of declining sex ratios at birth, there has been a small uptick in the sex ratio.

Yet national-level improvements hide some state-level failings. Bihar is now the only Indian state that still has a total fertility rate of over 3. Among states that have not yet reached replacement fertility, Bihar had one of the slowest reductions of any state over the last ten years.

The state's Total Fertility Rate has moved very little over the last seven years, even as the gap between Bihar and Uttar Pradesh has widened, and UP too is now at a TFR of under 3.

"There has been a lack of energy in Bihar on not just family planning, but all of the allied areas that affect family size - women's health, girls' education, access to contraception," says Poonam Muttreja, executive director of the Population Foundation of India, a non-profit organisation that has worked on reproductive health in India for over 50 years. "For some time now, there has been no real movement. In UP, we have been seeing a lot more energetic and imaginative efforts on the ground and some good officers in charge."

The TFR reaching the replacement level of 2.1 does not mean that populations will decline

immediately, notes P Arokiasamy, professor and head of the department of development studies at the Mumbai-based International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS). Given the still large cohort of young children, the number of girls who will go on to have children remains large, even if they go on to have fewer children, he said.

"The southern states, especially Tamil Nadu and Kerala, have been at replacement levels for 15-20 years," said Arokiasamy. "But it will still take another ten years before their populations start to decline, and the country on the whole will only see a population decline after 2060."

Arokiasamy, whose research focuses on fertility and ageing, sees two distinct demographic patterns within India. While population policies focus heavily on one, family planning, the other phenomenon, of rising ageing in the south is being neglected. Southern states should "now wind up their family planning efforts" and focus on ageing instead, he said.

This dynamic has been particularly important in the last few months. With the elderly most vulnerable to covid-19, Kerala for instance, has implemented a "reverse quarantine" for them, to force them to stay home and protected.

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