

# PUT AWAY THE STICK

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Indian Demography including Tribes

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On Tuesday, the Assam government announced that people with more than two children will **not be eligible for government jobs** from January 2021. Assam will become the fourth state after Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan to have a two-child norm in place for government jobs.

At least five other states follow this norm for candidates seeking elections to local bodies such as panchayats, municipal corporations and zila parishads. The Assam government's decision comes two months after Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) flagged the issue of population control in his Independence Day speech.

The conversation in the wake of the PM's speech has drawn attention to the limitations of the two-child norm. There is now compelling evidence that measures such as debarring people from holding government office amount to penalising weaker sections of the population, including women, whose reproductive choices are often subject to a variety of constraints. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the Assam government has chosen to ignore the discriminatory nature of the two-child policy.

Almost all surveys indicate that India's population growth rate has slowed substantially in the last decade. According to the latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), at 2.2, India's total fertility rate (TFR) is very close to the desired replacement level of 2.1.

In fact, the NFHS-4 data confirms what population experts, gender rights activists and social scientists have maintained over the years: Women's education has a direct bearing on fertility rates. The decadal survey shows that women who have never been to school are likely to bear more than three children while the fertility rate of those who have completed 12 years of schooling is 1.7.

In spite of the fall in TFR, India's population has continued to grow because nearly 50 per cent of the people are in the age group of 15-49. This means that the absolute population will continue to rise even though couples have less children.

There is substantial literature to show that a further slowing down of the momentum will require raising the age of marriage, delaying the first pregnancy and ensuring spacing between births. In this context, the NFHS-4 figures on contraception point to a major shortfall: The unmet need for contraception is 13 per cent — over 30 million women of reproductive age are not able to access contraception. Dealing with the country's demographic peculiarity will require investments in health, education, nutrition and employment avenues.

The right to seek a government job or contest elections are citizens' rights. State governments will do well to rethink throttling such rights to enforce population control.

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