

FERTILITY RATES OF HINDUS AND MUSLIMS CONVERGING: STUDY

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A new study on the religious composition of India's population since Partition said due to the "declining and converging fertility patterns" of Hindus and Muslims, there have been only marginal changes in the overall religious composition of the population since 1951, the year India conducted its first Census as an independent nation.

From 1992 to 2015, the total fertility rates of Muslims declined from 4.4 to 2.6, while that of Hindus declined from 3.3 to 2.1, indicating that "the gaps in childbearing between India's religious groups are much smaller than they used to be," said the study published by the Pew Research Center, a non-profit based in Washington D.C.

The average fertility rate in India today was 2.2, which was higher than the rates in economically advanced countries such as the U.S. (1.6), but much lower than what it was in 1992 (3.4) or 1951 (5.9).

Marked slowdown

Although growth rates had declined for all of India's major religious groups, the slowdown had been more pronounced among religious minorities, who outpaced Hindus in the earlier decades.

Between 1951 and 1961, the Muslim population expanded by 32.7%, 11 percentage points more than India's overall rate of 21.6%. But this gap had narrowed. From 2001 to 2011, the difference in growth between Muslims (24.7%) and Indians overall (17.7%) was 7 percentage points. India's Christian population grew at the slowest pace of the three largest groups in the most recent Census decade — gaining 15.7% between 2001 and 2011, a far lower growth rate than the one recorded in the decade following Partition (29.0%). In terms of absolute numbers, every major religion in India saw its numbers rise. In percentage terms, between 1951 and 2011, Muslims grew by 4.4 percentage points to 14.2% of the population, while Hindus declined by 4.3 points to 79.8%. But all the six major religious groups — Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains — have grown in absolute numbers. The sole exception to this trend are Parsis, whose number halved between 1951 and 2011, from 110,000 to 60,000.

Interestingly, out of India's total population of 1,200 million, about 8 million did not belong to any of the six major religious groups. Within this category, mostly comprising adivasi people, the largest grouping was of the Sarnas (nearly 5 million adherents), followed by the Gond (1 million) and the Sari Dharma (5,10,000).

Observing that a preference for sons over daughters could play a role in overall fertility, the study noted that sex-selective abortions had caused an estimated deficit of 20 million girls compared with what would naturally be expected between 1970 and 2017, and that "this practice is more common among Indian Hindus than among Muslims and Christians."

Cautioning that religion was by no means the only or even the primary factor affecting fertility rates, the study noted that women in central India tended to have more children, with Bihar and Uttar Pradesh showing a total fertility rate (TFR) of 3.4 and 2.7 respectively, in contrast to a TFR of 1.7 and 1.6 in Tamil Nadu and Kerala respectively.

With regard to migration as a driver of change in the religious makeup, the study said since the 1950s, migration has had only a modest impact on India's religious composition. More than 99% of people who live in India were also born in India, and migrants leaving India outnumber immigrants three-to-one, with "Muslims more likely than Hindus to leave India", while "immigrants into India from Muslim-majority countries are disproportionately Hindu."

The study also cast doubt over the speculated numbers of undocumented immigrants in India, noting, "If tens of millions of Muslims from nearby countries had indeed migrated to India, demographers would expect to see evidence of such mass migration in data from their countries of origin, and this magnitude of outmigration is not apparent." Religious conversion has also had a negligible impact on India's overall composition, with 98% of Indian adults still identifying with the religion in which they were raised.

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