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POPULATION GROWTH AND EMERGING SOCIAL CHALLENGES IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Population growth in India has historically been viewed through the lens of rapid demographic expansion and its implications for economic development. However, India's demographic situation has changed significantly in recent decades. Fertility has declined substantially, mortality has fallen, life expectancy has increased, and the country has entered a period in which population growth increasingly reflects demographic momentum and changes in age structure rather than persistently high fertility alone. This article examines population growth and its emerging social challenges in India from a sociological perspective. The study is based exclusively on secondary data obtained from the Census of India, National Family Health Survey-5, Government of India's population projections, United Nations Population Fund reports, International Institute for Population Sciences publications, and selected peer-reviewed studies. The analysis is restricted to information available up to 11 July 2025. The study argues that India's population transition is characterised by substantial regional, socioeconomic and gender-based differences. While some states continue to experience relatively high fertility, several others have already reached sustained below-replacement fertility. Consequently, population growth coexists with emerging concerns relating to population ageing, changing family structures and future labour-force dynamics. The study further finds that the potential demographic dividend cannot be realised through population structure alone; education, healthcare, skill development, employment generation and women's participation in the economy are critical mediating factors. Population growth also interacts with migration, urbanisation, housing, environmental sustainability and social inequality. The article concludes that India's demographic future requires a shift from a narrow population-control orientation towards a rights-based, people-centred and regionally differentiated approach that combines reproductive autonomy with investment in human capital, employment, gender equality, urban infrastructure and social protection.

Keywords: Population Growth; Demographic Transition; Demographic Dividend; Social Inequality; India

1. Introduction

Population change is one of the most consequential processes in the development of any society. The size and composition of a population influence the organisation of families, labour markets, educational institutions, healthcare systems, housing, political representation and social-security arrangements. For this reason, population growth cannot be understood simply as an increase in the number of people. It is also a process through which the structure of society changes.

India provides a particularly important case for examining this relationship between population and society. For much of the twentieth century, India's demographic experience was characterised by high fertility combined with a substantial decline in mortality. Improvements in public health, disease control, nutrition, sanitation and medical care reduced mortality, while fertility remained relatively high for several decades. The resulting difference between births and deaths produced rapid population growth.

The demographic situation has changed considerably since then. India's fertility transition has progressed to the point where the national Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was estimated at 2.0 children per woman in the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), conducted during 2019–2021. This is below the conventional replacement-level fertility of



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approximately 2.1. The decline is significant because it demonstrates that India has moved substantially away from the high-fertility regime associated with the earlier decades of the population transition.

Yet declining fertility does not mean that population growth ends immediately. A country may continue to experience population increase for several decades after fertility reaches replacement level because of its age structure. A large proportion of the population may already be entering or remaining within reproductive ages. This phenomenon, generally described as population momentum, is particularly important in understanding India's demographic future.

The distinction is sociologically important. If population growth is interpreted exclusively as a consequence of high fertility, policy attention may focus narrowly on family planning. If, however, population growth is understood as the outcome of demographic structure, fertility history, mortality decline, migration and social development, a much broader policy framework becomes necessary.

India's demographic transition is also far from uniform. Different states and social groups are moving through the transition at different speeds. Kumar (2014), using state-level evidence, demonstrated that India's states were experiencing markedly different demographic trajectories and argued that the aggregate national picture conceals important differences in age structure, infrastructure, education, health and employment conditions.

This regional differentiation has become even more significant in recent years. Several states have reached or moved below replacement-level fertility, while some states continue to experience comparatively higher fertility. Such differences are associated with variations in female education, age at marriage, contraceptive access, healthcare, economic development, social norms and household aspirations. Therefore, India's demographic transition cannot be adequately explained through a single national model.

The changing demographic structure also creates an apparent paradox. The decline in fertility has created the possibility of a favourable working-age population structure, commonly referred to as the demographic dividend. A larger proportion of working-age people relative to dependants can potentially increase savings, investment and economic productivity. However, the demographic dividend is not automatic. A large working-age population becomes an advantage only when people are healthy, educated, skilled and able to find productive employment.

This point is especially important in the Indian context. The demographic opportunity is accompanied by substantial challenges relating to employment generation, skill development, regional inequality and women's participation in the labour market. Kumar (2014) argued that states receiving large increases in their working-age population must have adequate infrastructure, health, education and employment opportunities if the demographic window is to become a genuine economic advantage.

At the same time, India's demographic transition is creating a second major transformation: population ageing. Declining fertility combined with increasing longevity gradually changes the age composition of the population. The India Ageing Report 2023, prepared by UNFPA and IIPS, identifies population ageing as an increasingly important social-policy issue and examines elderly people's living conditions, health, social security and institutional support.

The report projects that older persons could constitute more than one-fifth of India's population by 2050. It also highlights the particular vulnerability of very old persons and older women. This development has important implications for families. Traditional family-based care systems are being affected by smaller family sizes, migration, urbanisation and the increasing participation of women in education and employment.



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Population growth also interacts with urbanisation and migration. As people move towards areas offering better employment and educational opportunities, cities experience increasing demand for housing, transport, water, sanitation, healthcare and other public services. Migration can improve household livelihoods, but migrants may also experience insecure employment, inadequate housing and limited access to welfare services.

The environmental dimension is equally significant. A larger population does not automatically cause environmental degradation; rather, environmental pressure results from the interaction between population, consumption, technology, settlement patterns and economic activity. Nevertheless, population concentration in rapidly growing urban and industrial regions can intensify pressure on land, water, energy and waste-management systems.

The sociological significance of India's population transition therefore lies in its multidimensional character. Population growth affects different groups differently. Its consequences are mediated by class, caste, gender, region, education, occupation and access to institutional resources. Similarly, demographic behaviour itself is shaped by social institutions and inequalities.

The present article therefore moves beyond the conventional question of whether India's population is "too large." Instead, it asks how population change is reshaping Indian society and what social conditions are required to convert demographic transition into inclusive development.

2. Review of Literature

Dyson (2010): *Population and Development: The Demographic Transition*

Dyson's objective was to explain demographic transition as a broad historical process linking mortality decline, fertility decline, population growth, urbanisation and changes in social and economic structures. Rather than testing a narrowly defined hypothesis, the study developed the proposition that demographic transition fundamentally transforms the organisation of societies. Dyson employed a historical and comparative methodology based on demographic evidence from different societies. The study found that mortality decline generally precedes fertility decline, creating a temporary phase of rapid population growth, after which declining fertility and increasing longevity produce changes in age structure, urbanisation and ageing. The limitation of the framework is that a broad historical model cannot fully capture the cultural, regional and institutional diversity of contemporary India. Nevertheless, the demographic-transition perspective provides an important theoretical basis for understanding India's long-term demographic transformation.

Srinivasan (2007): *Population Policy and Programme in India: A Review*

Srinivasan examined the evolution of India's population policy and family-planning programme. The objective was to assess the development of population policy and identify major changes and limitations in programme implementation. The study was based primarily on a review of policy documents, demographic evidence and programme history. Its underlying proposition was that India's population policy had progressively moved away from the earlier target-oriented approach, although implementation challenges remained. The study found that fertility decline was a significant achievement but argued that population policy needed to be understood within the wider context of health, development and social change. Its limitation was its principal emphasis on policy and programme evolution rather than detailed analysis of contemporary regional differences in demographic behaviour.

Arokiasamy (2007): *Returns of Fertility Decline among Uneducated Women in India*

Arokiasamy investigated fertility decline among women with little or no formal education. The study's objective was to determine whether fertility decline was confined mainly to educated women or whether it was also occurring among



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less-educated women. The underlying hypothesis was that fertility transition could occur among uneducated women through mechanisms other than formal educational advancement. Using secondary demographic data and fertility analysis, the study found evidence of fertility decline among uneducated women and demonstrated that India's fertility transition could not be attributed exclusively to female education. The limitation was that quantitative demographic evidence could not fully explain the household-level cultural and social processes through which reproductive decisions were made.

Arokiasamy (2009): *Fertility Decline in India: Contributions by Uneducated Women Using Contraception*

Arokiasamy's study aimed to examine the contribution of uneducated women to fertility decline and to explore the relationship between fertility reduction and maternal and child outcomes. The study proceeded from the proposition that fertility decline among disadvantaged women could generate significant demographic and health benefits. Secondary survey data were analysed to examine fertility and contraceptive behaviour. The study found that less-educated women contributed substantially to India's fertility transition and that fertility reduction had important implications for maternal and child wellbeing. Its limitation was that the analysis focused predominantly on fertility and health outcomes and gave less attention to broader structural issues such as employment, migration, urbanisation and social inequality.

Lutz and Scherbov (2004): *Probabilistic Population Projections for India with Explicit Consideration of the Education-Fertility Link*

Lutz and Scherbov sought to improve population projections for India by incorporating educational composition into fertility assumptions. Their underlying hypothesis was that educational expansion would influence future fertility and therefore significantly affect India's population trajectory. The authors used probabilistic population-projection techniques that explicitly incorporated the relationship between education and fertility. Their findings indicated that population projections become more informative when educational heterogeneity is incorporated rather than assuming a socially homogeneous population. The major limitation was the uncertainty inherent in long-term projections, because future fertility, education and mortality cannot be known with certainty.

Kumar (2014): *India's Demographic Transition: Boon or Bane?*

Kumar examined whether India's demographic transition would become an economic opportunity or a socioeconomic burden. The study's objective was to understand differences in demographic transition across Indian states and their implications for the demographic dividend. Using state-level secondary data and official population projections, the study found that states were progressing through demographic transition at substantially different rates. It particularly highlighted the contrast between states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which were relatively advanced in the transition, and Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, where the working-age population was expected to increase substantially. The study concluded that the demographic dividend would depend critically on employment, infrastructure, education and health. Its limitation was that economic and demographic indicators could not capture the full sociological complexity of demographic behaviour.

Lutz (2014): *A Population Policy Rationale for the Twenty-First Century*

Lutz reconsidered the rationale for population policy in the twenty-first century. The objective was to move population policy beyond a narrow concern with fertility rates and population size and towards human-capital development. The study proposed that education, particularly female education, should occupy a central place in population policy. Using conceptual and comparative demographic analysis, Lutz argued that population policies are most effective when they improve human capabilities rather than simply attempting to change fertility rates. The limitation was that the analysis was



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predominantly global and theoretical, requiring contextual adaptation for India's diverse social and institutional environment.

Cuaresma, Lutz, and Sanderson (2014): *Is the Demographic Dividend an Education Dividend?*

The authors examined whether demographic dividends are generated primarily through changes in age structure or through improvements in educational attainment. Their hypothesis was that education significantly strengthens the economic effects associated with favourable demographic structures. Using cross-national quantitative analysis, the study found that educational attainment plays an important role in determining the economic benefits associated with demographic transition. The limitation is that cross-country evidence cannot fully explain the state-level and social-group differences found within India. Nevertheless, the study provides strong theoretical support for treating education as a central component of demographic-dividend policy.

Lutz et al. (2019): *Education Rather Than Age Structure Brings Demographic Dividend*

Lutz and colleagues revisited the demographic-dividend argument by examining whether age structure alone is sufficient to generate economic growth. The objective was to assess the contribution of education to demographic and economic outcomes. The authors hypothesised that human capital, particularly education, could have a stronger relationship with economic development than age structure alone. Using quantitative cross-national analysis, they found that educational attainment substantially influences the capacity of societies to benefit from demographic change. The study's limitation is its global comparative design, which cannot directly account for India's regional disparities, labour-market structure and institutional differences.

International Institute for Population Sciences and ICF (2021): *National Family Health Survey-5, 2019–21*

NFHS-5 aimed to provide nationally and sub-nationally comparable information on fertility, family planning, reproductive health, maternal and child health and other social indicators. The survey used a large-scale household survey methodology covering India's states and Union Territories. Its findings indicated that India's TFR had declined to 2.0 and that fertility had fallen substantially compared with earlier rounds of the survey. At the same time, the survey revealed considerable differences between states and social groups. The major limitation is that a cross-sectional survey can describe associations and patterns but cannot independently establish long-term causal relationships between particular social factors and fertility behaviour.

Technical Group on Population Projections (2020): *Population Projections for India and States, 2011–2036*

The Technical Group on Population Projections prepared demographic projections for India and its states to support development planning. The objective was to estimate future population size and age structure using demographic assumptions relating to fertility, mortality and migration. The report employed cohort-component projection techniques for most states. It projected continued population growth through 2036 despite declining fertility, illustrating the significance of population momentum. Its principal limitation is inherent in all population projections: future demographic outcomes depend on assumptions that may change over time.

UNFPA and IIPS (2023): *India Ageing Report 2023*

The India Ageing Report examined the demographic, social and economic conditions of India's older population. Its objective was to assess the implications of population ageing and the institutional arrangements available for elderly care and social protection. The report used secondary analysis of the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India, Census data,



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Government of India population projections and international demographic estimates. It found that India's elderly population is increasing rapidly and that older people face challenges involving healthcare, income security, disability, social isolation and care arrangements. The report also drew attention to the vulnerability of older women. Its limitation is that some future estimates depend on assumptions regarding mortality, fertility and population structure.

UNFPA (2025): *State of the World Population 2025: The Real Fertility Crisis*

The 2025 UNFPA report reconsidered conventional narratives about population growth and fertility. Its objective was to examine whether people are able to realise their desired family size and to shift attention from population numbers towards reproductive agency and socioeconomic constraints. Drawing on international and country-level evidence, including India, the report emphasised that fertility behaviour is influenced by economic insecurity, gender inequality, access to reproductive healthcare and social conditions. Its limitation is that its global comparative scope does not provide the same level of state-specific detail as Indian demographic surveys. Nevertheless, the report is particularly useful for a sociological interpretation because it places individual reproductive choices within wider structural conditions.

Marois, Gietel-Basten, and Lutz (2025): *The Demographic Race between India and China*

Marois and colleagues examined the future demographic trajectories of India and China with particular attention to education, labour-force participation and age structure. The objective was to move beyond population size and examine the demographic characteristics likely to influence future economic performance. Using multidimensional demographic projections incorporating age, sex, education and labour-force participation, the study argued that India's future demographic advantage would depend substantially on human-capital development and women's economic participation. The principal limitation is the uncertainty associated with long-term projections and assumptions about future education, fertility and labour-force behaviour.

3. Research Gap

The existing literature provides extensive evidence on India's fertility transition, demographic dividend, population policy and population ageing. However, much of the literature examines these issues separately. There remains a need for an integrated sociological analysis that connects population growth with changing family structures, social inequality, gender relations, migration, urbanisation, employment and ageing.

A second gap concerns the tendency to interpret India's demographic situation through national averages. Such an approach can obscure major differences among states and social groups. Kumar's analysis demonstrates that the pace of demographic transition varies considerably across Indian states and that the economic implications of population change depend heavily on state-level institutional capacity.

A third gap concerns the demographic dividend. Discussions of India's demographic dividend frequently emphasise the large working-age population without giving equal attention to whether the economy can generate productive employment for that population. Education, health and skills are essential for converting demographic structure into human capital.

A fourth gap concerns the changing nature of population policy. As fertility declines, a narrow population-control framework becomes increasingly inadequate. India's demographic future requires simultaneous attention to relatively high fertility in some regions and low fertility and ageing in others.



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The present study addresses these gaps by examining population growth as a multidimensional sociological process rather than as a purely demographic statistic.

4. Objectives of the Study

The study has four objectives:

1. To examine the trends and changing patterns of population growth and demographic transition in India.
2. To analyse the major sociological and socioeconomic challenges associated with population growth in India.
3. To examine the relationship between demographic change, human capital and the demographic dividend in India.
4. To suggest socially responsive and sustainable policy measures for managing India's changing demographic structure.

5. Research Methodology

The study is based exclusively on secondary data. No primary survey, interview, questionnaire or field observation was undertaken.

The principal sources include the Census of India, National Family Health Survey-5, Government of India's *Population Projections for India and States 2011–2036*, UNFPA publications, IIPS reports, peer-reviewed journal articles and relevant demographic and development literature.

The study uses a descriptive and analytical research design. Descriptive analysis is used to identify demographic trends and patterns, while sociological interpretation is employed to examine the relationship between population change and social institutions.

The study adopts a documentary research approach. Government reports and demographic datasets are treated as primary secondary sources, while peer-reviewed research is used to interpret demographic processes theoretically.

The temporal boundary is 11 July 2025. Statistics and reports published after this date have not been used in the analysis. Where future population figures are presented, they are explicitly identified as projections rather than census-enumerated population counts.

One important methodological limitation is that India's latest completed population census remains the 2011 Census. Consequently, more recent population estimates and projections should not be treated as substitutes for an actual census enumeration. The findings should therefore be interpreted within the limitations of available secondary demographic data.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 Objective 1: Demographic Transition Theory

- Mortality decline
- Fertility decline
- Population momentum
- Changing age structure
- Regional demographic transition



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Demographic Transition Theory provides the central framework for understanding India's changing population structure. The theory proposes that societies generally move from high fertility and high mortality towards lower fertility and lower mortality as social and economic conditions change.

India's experience broadly reflects this transition. Mortality declined considerably as public health, medical services, sanitation and living standards improved. Fertility subsequently declined as education expanded, reproductive healthcare became more accessible, age at marriage increased and families increasingly adopted smaller-family norms.

However, the Indian experience demonstrates that demographic transition is not a uniform national process. States have entered different phases of the transition at different times. Kumar's state-level analysis found significant differences in the pace of demographic transition and showed that these differences influence the distribution of India's future working-age population.

The concept of population momentum is particularly important. Even when fertility reaches replacement level, population growth may continue because of the existing age structure. India's large population of young people means that a substantial number of people continue to enter reproductive ages.

From a sociological perspective, demographic transition also changes family organisation. Smaller families can facilitate greater investment in children's education and health. However, over time, smaller family sizes can also reduce the number of family members available to provide care for older people.

Thus, India's demographic transition should not be understood merely as fertility decline. It represents a transformation in family structure, intergenerational relations, labour supply and social institutions.

6.2 Objective 2: Social Stratification Theory

- Class inequality
- Regional inequality
- Gender inequality
- Unequal access to services
- Differential fertility behaviour

Social Stratification Theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding why population growth and fertility decline do not occur uniformly across Indian society.

Demographic behaviour is shaped by unequal access to resources. Education, healthcare, employment, housing and reproductive services are not distributed equally. Consequently, people belonging to different socioeconomic groups may experience very different demographic realities.

The national TFR of 2.0 therefore requires careful interpretation. A national average does not mean that all states, communities or households have identical fertility patterns. The continuing coexistence of relatively high and low fertility demonstrates the importance of regional and social inequalities.

Gender relations are equally important. Women's reproductive choices are influenced by their education, employment, bargaining power within the household, access to contraception and exposure to social expectations regarding marriage and motherhood.



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A sociological interpretation therefore treats fertility not simply as an individual biological behaviour but as a social outcome. Household income, social norms, gender relations and institutional access shape the circumstances in which reproductive decisions are made.

This framework also helps explain why population policy should focus on social development rather than numerical targets. Improving women's education and reproductive autonomy can contribute to fertility decline while simultaneously improving family wellbeing and human capital.

6.3 Objective 3: Human Capital and Demographic Dividend Theory

- Working-age population
- Education
- Health
- Skills
- Employment
- Women's economic participation

The demographic-dividend framework explains how changes in age structure can create favourable conditions for economic development. When fertility declines, the proportion of working-age people can increase relative to children and other dependants.

India's large working-age population provides an important development opportunity. However, the opportunity is conditional rather than automatic.

Education is a particularly important determinant. Lutz and colleagues argue that education can be more significant than age structure alone in determining whether demographic change produces an economic dividend. This insight is highly relevant to India because differences in educational attainment are closely connected with employment, productivity and social mobility.

The demographic dividend also depends on health. A working-age population suffering from poor health cannot contribute fully to economic productivity. Similarly, skills must correspond with changing labour-market requirements.

Employment is perhaps the most critical condition. A large working-age population without adequate employment opportunities can generate unemployment and underemployment rather than prosperity.

Women's participation in the labour force is another important dimension. A society cannot fully utilise its human resources when a substantial proportion of educated working-age women remain outside productive employment because of social constraints, unpaid care responsibilities or inadequate employment opportunities.

The demographic dividend should therefore be understood as a relationship among population structure, human capital and institutions. Population provides the potential; education, health, skills and employment determine whether that potential becomes a genuine dividend.



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6.4 Objective 4: Sustainable Development and Life-Course Perspective

- Childhood and education
- Working-age population
- Migration
- Urbanisation
- Ageing
- Social security

The sustainable-development and life-course perspectives help explain how population change affects individuals and institutions at different stages of life.

Children require nutrition, education and healthcare. Working-age adults require employment, housing and social security. Older people increasingly require healthcare, pensions and long-term care. Demographic change therefore changes the distribution of social needs over time.

India's ageing transition illustrates this clearly. The India Ageing Report 2023 identifies population ageing as a major emerging social issue and examines healthcare, social security, disability and care arrangements among older persons.

The report indicates that India's elderly population is expected to constitute more than one-fifth of the population by 2050. This has implications for families, communities and the welfare state.

Traditional Indian families have historically provided a substantial proportion of elderly care. However, migration, urbanisation, smaller family sizes and changing occupational patterns may reduce the capacity of families to provide all forms of care.

The life-course perspective therefore suggests that population policy must move beyond fertility and population size. It must consider the entire demographic life cycle, from childhood to old age.

7. Population Growth and Emerging Social Challenges

7.1 Population Momentum

India's fertility decline has not immediately translated into population decline. The large size of the existing population and its age structure ensure continued population increase for some time.

This distinction is important because it challenges the assumption that declining fertility immediately reduces population size. Population momentum means that demographic consequences of fertility decline are spread over several decades.

7.2 Regional Demographic Imbalance

India's demographic transition is geographically uneven. Some states have experienced rapid fertility decline and are approaching an ageing demographic structure, while others continue to have relatively young populations and higher fertility.



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This creates an emerging demographic imbalance. States with younger populations will account for a substantial proportion of future labour-force growth, while states that have completed fertility transition earlier will experience faster ageing.

The policy implications are considerable. High-fertility states require continued investment in education, healthcare and reproductive services, while low-fertility states increasingly require policies addressing ageing and labour shortages.

7.3 Employment and Underemployment

The demographic dividend creates employment pressure. India's growing working-age population requires an expansion of decent and productive employment.

If employment opportunities do not expand sufficiently, the demographic dividend may become a source of economic and social stress. Young people without stable employment may experience delayed marriage, migration, household insecurity and social frustration.

Therefore, demographic policy cannot be separated from employment policy.

7.4 Education and Skill Development

Population growth increases the demand for education at all levels. The quality of education is as important as enrolment.

A demographic dividend based on a poorly educated population is unlikely to produce sustained productivity growth. India therefore needs continuous investment in school education, higher education, vocational training, technical skills and lifelong learning.

7.5 Gender Inequality

Population change is closely associated with gender relations. Women's education, employment and reproductive autonomy influence fertility behaviour and household wellbeing.

Women should not be viewed merely as recipients of family-planning services. They should be recognised as decision-makers whose reproductive choices are connected with education, employment, health and personal autonomy.

7.6 Urbanisation and Housing

Population growth and migration are contributing to continued urban expansion. Cities offer employment, education and healthcare opportunities, but rapid population concentration can place pressure on housing and infrastructure.

Affordable housing, public transportation, water supply, sanitation and waste management therefore need to be integrated into demographic and urban planning.

7.7 Migration

Migration redistributes population geographically. Workers often move from areas with limited employment opportunities to regions with greater demand for labour.



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Migration can improve household income and contribute to economic growth, but migrants may face insecure employment, inadequate housing and limited access to welfare services.

Social policy should therefore make essential welfare services portable across states and locations.

7.8 Environmental Sustainability

Population pressure becomes environmentally significant when combined with unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

Urban expansion can increase demand for water, energy and land. Population planning should therefore be integrated with environmental management, climate adaptation and sustainable urban development.

7.9 Population Ageing

Population ageing is emerging as one of India's most important long-term demographic challenges.

The India Ageing Report 2023 highlights the growing need for healthcare, income security and institutional support for older persons.

The projected increase in the elderly population also has implications for intergenerational relationships. Smaller families and migration may reduce the availability of traditional family-based care.

India therefore needs to develop a broader social-care system involving families, communities, local governments and the state.

8. Selected Secondary-Data Indicators

Table 1: Selected Indicators Illustrating India's Demographic Transition

Indicator	Reference/Earlier level	Later available evidence	Source
Population	1.21 billion, 2011	Continued increase projected	Census of India; Government of India
Decadal growth rate	17.64%, 2001–2011	Growth rate declining	Census of India
Total Fertility Rate	2.2, NFHS-4	2.0, NFHS-5	IIPS & ICF
Replacement fertility	—	Approximately 2.1	Demographic convention
Projected population	121.1 crore, 2011	About 152.2 crore by 2036	Technical Group on Population Projections
Elderly population	About 10% in 2022	More than 20% projected by 2050	UNFPA & IIPS
Demographic transition	Uneven across states	Increasing regional differentiation	Kumar; NFHS-5

Source: Compiled from Census of India, NFHS-5, Government of India population projections and UNFPA/IIPS publications. Future values are projections and should not be treated as census-enumerated population counts.



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Table 1 highlights the major features of India's ongoing demographic transition. The data indicate that although India's population growth rate has declined, the country's total population continues to increase because of demographic momentum. The decline in the Total Fertility Rate from 2.2 under NFHS-4 to 2.0 under NFHS-5 indicates substantial progress in fertility transition. At the same time, the projected increase in population to about 152.2 crore by 2036 demonstrates the continuing influence of population structure. The projected rise in the elderly population further indicates that India is gradually moving towards an ageing society. Importantly, demographic transition remains uneven across states, reflecting differences in socioeconomic development, education, healthcare and fertility behaviour.

9. Findings and Suggestions

Major Findings

Finding 1: India's fertility transition is well advanced

The evidence demonstrates that India has moved considerably away from the high-fertility conditions that characterised earlier phases of demographic transition. NFHS-5 recorded a national TFR of 2.0.

Finding 2: Population growth will continue despite declining fertility

Declining fertility does not immediately result in population decline because demographic momentum continues to operate through India's existing age structure.

Finding 3: India's demographic transition is regionally differentiated

States are progressing through demographic transition at different rates. Kumar's analysis demonstrates the importance of state-level differences in age structure, infrastructure, health and employment.

Finding 4: The demographic dividend is conditional

A large working-age population is an opportunity, but it becomes an economic dividend only when supported by education, health, skills and employment.

Finding 5: Gender equality is central to demographic development

Women's education, reproductive autonomy and economic participation influence both fertility and human-capital outcomes.

Finding 6: Population ageing is becoming a major policy issue

The projected increase in India's elderly population will require stronger healthcare, pension and care systems.

Finding 7: Population challenges are increasingly multidimensional

Population growth is connected with employment, urbanisation, migration, housing, environmental sustainability and social inequality. Consequently, population policy cannot operate independently of broader development policy.



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Suggestions

1. Adopt a rights-based population policy

Population policy should respect reproductive autonomy and ensure access to voluntary, informed and high-quality reproductive healthcare.

2. Strengthen women's education

Female education should remain a central component of demographic and development policy because it influences fertility, health, employment and household decision-making.

3. Expand decent employment opportunities

The government should strengthen employment-intensive sectors, skill development, entrepreneurship and labour-market institutions so that the expanding working-age population can be productively absorbed.

4. Invest in human capital

Education, health and skills should be treated as long-term investments rather than merely social expenditures.

5. Develop state-specific demographic strategies

A single national approach is insufficient. High-fertility states require continued investment in health, education and reproductive services, whereas low-fertility states increasingly require ageing and labour-force policies.

6. Strengthen urban planning

Affordable housing, public transportation, sanitation, water supply and healthcare should be incorporated into long-term demographic planning.

7. Protect migrant workers

Social-security and welfare benefits should become more portable so that internal migrants can access essential services irrespective of their state of residence.

8. Prepare for population ageing

India should expand geriatric healthcare, pensions, community-based care, long-term care and support for vulnerable older persons.

9. Integrate population and environmental policy

Population planning should be coordinated with sustainable resource management, climate adaptation and environmentally responsible urban development.



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10. Strengthen demographic data systems

Regular and reliable demographic data are essential for evidence-based policy. Better sub-national data are particularly important because national averages can conceal major regional differences.

10. Conclusion

India's population story is undergoing a fundamental transformation. The country has moved a considerable distance from the high-fertility conditions that shaped demographic debates during much of the twentieth century. Fertility has declined substantially, and the national fertility rate has reached approximately replacement level. Yet the population continues to grow because demographic change operates through age structure and population momentum.

This transition creates a complex combination of opportunities and challenges. India's large working-age population can provide an important demographic dividend, but the dividend cannot be assumed. Its realisation depends upon the quality of education, healthcare, skills and employment available to the population. As Kumar's analysis demonstrates, India's states are moving through demographic transition at different rates, meaning that the opportunities and pressures associated with demographic change are unevenly distributed.

The sociological interpretation developed in this article suggests that fertility and population growth should not be treated as isolated demographic variables. They are deeply embedded in social institutions and patterns of inequality. Women's education and employment, household aspirations, marriage patterns, access to healthcare, regional development and economic security all influence demographic behaviour.

The changing demographic structure also requires a reorientation of population policy. India's population challenge is no longer simply a question of reducing fertility. It is increasingly a question of how society can provide education, employment, healthcare, housing and social security to a changing population.

The rise of population ageing is particularly significant. The India Ageing Report 2023 shows that ageing will become a major component of India's demographic future and that the country will need stronger institutional mechanisms for elderly care, healthcare and social protection.

The coexistence of relatively high fertility in some regions and below-replacement fertility in others means that demographic policy must become more regionally sensitive. What is appropriate for a state experiencing relatively high fertility may not be appropriate for a state facing rapid ageing and a shrinking younger population.

India therefore needs to move from a narrow population-control paradigm towards a people-centred demographic policy. Such a policy should protect reproductive choice while simultaneously investing in education, health, women's empowerment, employment, migration management, urban infrastructure and social security.

Ultimately, India's demographic future will depend less on the absolute number of people than on the social and economic opportunities available to them. Population becomes an asset when people are healthy, educated, skilled and productively engaged. It becomes a source of social pressure when demographic change occurs alongside unemployment, inequality, inadequate infrastructure and weak social protection.

The central sociological lesson is therefore clear: India's population transition is not simply a story about numbers; it is a story about social transformation. Managing this transformation successfully will require policies that recognise



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demographic diversity, strengthen human capabilities and ensure that the benefits of demographic change are shared across regions, generations, classes and genders.

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