

Population Growth in Post-Independence India: An Analytical Study

Dr. Brajesh Srivastava

Assistant Professor – Economics

Kashi Naresh Government P.G. College, Gyanpur, Bhadohi

Abstract: Rapid population growth in India following independence has been a defining feature of the country's social, economic, and environmental transformation. India's population stood at approximately 361 million (36.1 crore) in 1951 and rose to about 1,211 million (121.1 crore) by 2011. This growth was not merely a numerical change; it was the outcome of a complex demographic process linked to declining mortality rates, increased life expectancy, expanded healthcare facilities, shifts in reproductive behavior, urbanization, and economic development. Official census data reveals that the growth rate was exceptionally high between the 1951–61 and 1971–81 periods, whereas a gradual decline was observed during 1991–2011.

The nature of population growth in contemporary India is also evolving. There has been a significant drop in the Total Fertility Rate (TFR); according to NFHS-5 (2019–21), India's TFR has reached 2.0, placing it around the replacement level. Nevertheless, substantial disparities persist among states regarding fertility rates, age structure, education, health, and economic opportunities. Therefore, rather than viewing India's population issue merely as a problem of "overpopulation," it is essential to understand it within the contexts of demographic transition, human capital, employment, regional inequality, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Population growth, demographic transition, fertility rate, mortality rate, demographic dividend, urbanization, India.

I. INTRODUCTION

Population forms the foundation of any country's economic and social structure. It serves as both a factor of production and a consumer of goods and services. Consequently, changes in population have a direct impact on economic development, employment, poverty, education, health, food security, housing, and natural resources. At the time of independence, India had an economy characterized by high birth and death rates. Following independence, the death rate declined rapidly due to improvements in public health, immunization, sanitation, medical facilities, food availability, and standards of living, whereas the decline in the birth rate was relatively slow. Consequently, the pace of population growth accelerated. India's census system recognizes the three key components of population change—births, deaths, and migration—as the fundamental basis of demographic change.

II. TRENDS IN POPULATION GROWTH SINCE INDEPENDENCE

India experienced rapid population growth following independence. In 1951, the country's population was approximately 361.1 million (36.11 crore). It rose to approximately 439.2 million in 1961, 548.2 million in 1971, 683.3 million in 1981, 846.4 million in 1991, 1,028.7 million in 2001, and 1,210.9 million in 2011. The official census series records these decadal changes.

Table 1: India's Population Since Independence

Census Year	Estimated Population (in millions/crore)	Decadal Growth Trend
1951	361.1 (36.11 crore)	—
1961	439.2 (43.92 crore)	Rapid
1971	548.2 (54.82 crore)	Very rapid

1981	683.3 (68.33 crore)	Extremely high
1991	846.4 (84.64 crore)	High
2001	1,028.7 (102.87 crore)	Declining
2011	1,210.9 (121.09 crore)	Further declining

Source: Census of India, A-02 Decadal Population Variation Series.

During the 1951–61 period, decadal growth stood at approximately 21.5 percent. It rose to approximately 24.8 percent during the 1961–71 period. The growth rate remained extremely high during the 1971–81 period as well. Subsequently, a gradual decline in the growth rate is observed. Thus, India's post-independence population growth can be viewed in two broad phases: first, a phase of rapid growth; and second, a phase of gradual decline in the growth rate.

III. KEY PHASES OF POPULATION GROWTH

(A) 1951–1971: Phase of Rapid Population Growth

Following independence, there was an expansion of health services, control over infectious diseases, a reduction in mortality rates, and improvements in food production. However, due to social and cultural factors, the birth rate remained relatively high. Consequently, the rate of natural increase accelerated.

India's annual population growth hovered around 2 percent during 1951–61 and was approximately 2.2 percent during 1961–71. Official historical demographic records also characterize this period as an era of rapid growth.

(B) 1971–1991: High Growth with Gradual Change

Family planning programs expanded during the 1970s and 1980s. Improvements in female education, urbanization, and healthcare services gradually began to alter reproductive behavior. Nevertheless, due to the massive size of the population base, the total population continued to increase significantly.

(C) 1991–2011: Marked Decline in Growth Rate

A significant decline in fertility rates was observed in India after 1991. Factors contributing to this included female education, a rising age at marriage, the availability of contraceptives, urbanization, changes in income levels, and the spread of the small-family norm.

Although the total population continued to rise during 1991–2011, a clear decline in the decadal growth rate was evident. This indicates the progression of India's demographic transition.

IV. KEY CAUSES OF POPULATION GROWTH

(A) Decline in Mortality Rate

Post-independence, public health system expanded. Improvements in vaccination, drinking water, sanitation, medicines, and medical facilities contributed to reducing the mortality rate. When the mortality rate drops rapidly while the birth rate remains high for some time, the population grows quickly.

(B) High Birth Rate and Fertility Behavior

In India, factors such as child marriage, early motherhood, social acceptance of large families, and limited contraceptive use sustained high fertility rates for a long time. However, significant changes have occurred in these areas over time.

According to NFHS-5 (2019-21), India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined to 2.0. This indicates that India has entered a stage where average fertility is around the replacement level.

(C) Youthful Age Structure of the Population

India's large youth population influences population growth dynamics. When a large segment of the population is of reproductive age, the total number of births can remain high for some time, even if fertility rates decline. This phenomenon is known as 'population momentum.'

(D) Education and Social Change

Increased female education, expanded employment opportunities, urbanization, and changing perceptions regarding family size have altered fertility behavior. Education, in particular, influences decisions concerning the age of marriage, maternal health, and family planning.

(E) Economic and Social Structure

In rural areas, among agriculture-based families, having more children was long viewed as a source of labor and social security. Conversely, in urban economies, the high cost of educating and raising children has strengthened the trend towards smaller families.

V. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF POPULATION GROWTH

1 Economic Impacts

A large population expands the market and increases labor availability. If adequate employment, education, and skills are available, this population can become a driving force for economic growth.

On the other hand, if the pace of job creation is slow, problems such as unemployment, underemployment, and informal employment can escalate. There is also an increased need for public expenditure on education, health, housing, and infrastructure.

2 Poverty and Inequality

Rapidly growing populations can exert pressure on the per capita income and consumption capacity of poor families. A high number of dependent members can limit family savings and investments in human capital.

3 Food and Water Security

Population growth increases the demand for food, drinking water, and energy. Pressures on agricultural land, the over-extraction of groundwater, and the unequal distribution of water resources create long-term challenges.

4 Urbanization

Migration of the rural population towards cities in search of employment and education has increased. This led to the expansion of metropolitan areas but also exacerbated problems related to housing, transportation, sanitation, pollution, and slums.

5 Environmental Impact

A large population places strain on natural resources. Land-use changes, deforestation, water pollution, solid waste generation, and rising energy demands can affect environmental sustainability.

VI. INDIA'S POPULATION POLICY AND GOVERNMENT EFFORTS

India was the first country in the world to launch a National Family Planning Programme in 1952. Over time, the nature of the programme evolved; it shifted focus from mere population control to reproductive health, maternal and child health, and voluntary family planning.

The government has undertaken numerous initiatives to promote maternal health, institutional deliveries, immunization, family planning, women's education, and health services. The availability of modern contraceptive methods and the expansion of reproductive health services have also been significant. UNFPA reports on India highlight efforts to improve access to modern contraceptive services and strengthen maternal health care.

VII. CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

The pattern of population growth in India has changed. While the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined, regional disparities persist. Consequently, the current demographic challenge relates more to the structure and quality of the population than to "rapid population growth."

India needs to address several issues simultaneously:

- Adequate and quality employment for the youth;
- Women's education and economic participation;

- Universal healthcare facilities;
- Social security for the elderly population;
- Balanced regional development;
- Reduction in rural-urban disparities;
- Urban amenities for migrants;
- Sustainable use of natural resources.

Thus, India's population policy cannot be viewed in isolation from its development policy.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Since independence, India's population growth has been a complex and multifaceted process. The rise from a population of approximately 360 million in 1951 to about 1.21 billion in 2011 marks a highly significant demographic shift in the country's history. In the initial decades, a rapid decline in mortality rates coupled with relatively high birth rates accelerated population growth. In subsequent decades, the expansion of education, urbanization, healthcare services, women's empowerment, and family planning led to a decline in fertility rates.

Therefore, for India, it is insufficient to view population merely as a numerical issue. The real challenge lies in providing a vast and diverse population with access to health, education, skills, employment, social security, and opportunities for a dignified life. If the young population is transformed into productive human capital, this demographic shift can become a crucial foundation for economic growth. Simultaneously, long-term policy preparedness is essential to address issues related to an aging population, environmental pressures, and regional disparities. In this context, the future of population growth in India...

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