

Misuse of Census Data on Religion for Narrow Political Gains

<https://www.newsclick.in/india/misuse-census-data-religion-narrow-political-gains>

Amit Sengupta

16 Sep 2015

The belated release of census data on religion has been followed by predictable reactions from sections with a motivated interest in promoting sectarian divisions on religious lines. Judicious interpretation of census data can be a powerful tool for planning as demographic trends are good indicators of underlying socio-cultural and economic factors that determine changes in the trajectory of populations. India is perhaps the most culturally diverse country in the world and disaggregated census data provides information about social, cultural and economic trends in different communities. It is foolhardy to pass judgments based on a snapshot view of crude data, and a sober assessment requires deeper understanding of the factors that determine population growth and stabilization. The knee jerk reaction to the census data on religion has largely focused on the higher rate of population growth among Muslims as compared to other communities. Bold headlines, prominently displayed in a major section of the corporate controlled media, have added fuel to the propaganda machinery of the sectarian Hindutva lobby.

A more sober interpretation of the data would, however, indicate some interesting trends. Unfortunately the declaration of the census data on religion has been done hastily, without explanatory notes that the census office usually provides. It is hence not possible to corroborate the trends in the data on religion with demographic trends linked to poverty rates and other indicators of socio economic backwardness. However data from other sources can help us in arriving at a composite picture of the data on religion.

Main findings of census data on religion

The main findings of the data on religion and a comparison with data from earlier periods is presented below.

Table 1: Census Data on Religion

	1991-2001			2001-2011		
	Total Population	Percent	Decadal Rate of Growth	Total population (crore)	Percent of total population	Decadal Rate of Growth
Religion						
Hindu	82.76	80.5	19.9	96.63	79.8	16.8
Muslim	13.82	13.4	29.5	17.22	14.2	24.6
Christian	2.41	2.3		2.78	2.3	15.5
Sikh	1.92	1.9		2.08	1.7	8.4
Buddhist	0.80	0.8		0.84	0.7	6.1
Jain	0.42	0.4		0.45	0.4	5.4
All	102.90	100.0	21.2	121.10	100	17.6

Source: Census data from relevant periods

Overall this should be seen as good news! The decadal growth rate of population for the entire country (i.e. the percent increase in population over a decade) has declined from 21.2% in 1991-2001 to 17.6% in 2001-2011. The Sangh Parivar's propaganda machinery, though, is adept at turning every piece of data into grist for the mill of communal propaganda. They now claim that the census data on religion is bad news for Hindus because the decadal growth rate among Muslims is 24.6% as against 16.8% for Hindus. However a closer look at comparative data drawn from the 2001 and 2011 census shows us that the rate of growth is falling faster among Muslims. While the decadal growth rate declined by 3.1 percentage points for Hindus, it fell by 5.1 percentage points for Muslims. The decade of 2001-2011 has seen the largest drop in growth rate of the Muslim population in India. What we are now seeing is a convergence of the growth rate of Muslim population towards the national average. A continuation of the trend of the slowdown of the rate of growth of population among Muslims is likely to lead, within the next few decades, to its alignment with the national average rate.

However it is true that population growth rates among Muslims in India is still higher than for other religious communities. If one were to shed the ideological blinkers of the Hindutva brigade, then the reasons are not difficult to find. It has nothing to do with being Muslims per se – if that were so then our immediate neighbor, Bangladesh, and Iran, -- both predominantly Islamic countries – would not have significantly lower population growth rates than that of India. To make sense of the rapid rise in India's population and the recent slowdown in growth of population, we need to look beyond religion.

Natural History of Population Change

India's experience regarding population growth is, by no means, unique. All over the globe populations increased rapidly as a response to developments in the economic and social spheres. This is most clearly demonstrable in Europe after the industrial revolution, where rapid increase in population was seen the late eighteenth century. Over a period, as capitalist development spread to different regions of the world, there was a similar tendency for populations to rise rapidly. There are many reasons why this happened. To start with, economic development leads to greater availability of food, which in turn leads to higher survival rates. Gradually economic development spurs social development, leading to improved conditions of housing, other civic amenities, improvements in public health infrastructure, education, etc. All these result in sharp decline in death rates. These conditions also facilitate increase in birth rates -- better nutrition enhances the ability of women to bear children, and higher survival rates mean that there are more women who survive through the child bearing age. A combination of high birth rates and high survival rates, thus, provide a dual push to population growth rates. This effect is seen in the peaking of population growth rates in Europe in the first part of the Twentieth Century.

The decline in birth rates starts somewhere in the middle of this process of increasing growth rates of population. Initially, this is still much slower than the decline in death rates. So, even though less children are born, the population still continues to increase as even less people die. It takes much longer for birth rates to fall to a level where they compensate for the very low death rates. We can see this happening in the developed Capitalist world -- Europe, N.America, Japan, etc. -- only in the second half of the twentieth century.

Steady and sustained decline in birth rates are predicated on a complex set of factors. Crucial to this are child survival rates. In situations where child survival rates are very low, birth rates are high because families produce more children as an 'insurance' that at least a few of them will survive up to adulthood.

The second crucial factor is related to gender. The old feudal values, where women are seen as just 'home-makers' ensure that child rearing remains a full-time occupation for many women in the child bearing age. Improved nutrition ensures that the span during which women can produce children increases significantly. Thus women, for 20-25 years move from one pregnancy to the next through much of this period. This cycle is dented only when women start entering the job market to take up independent careers. The cycle is further dented when women are able to independently articulate the need to limit families, as repeated child-births (and early child-birth) take a toll on their health. Moreover, the pursuit of material comforts act as a brake on family size -- as a large family compromises access to an array of consumer goods. A combination of these factors has led to precipitate falls in birth rates in much

of the developed world, and we see a reverse of the earlier process -- birth rates dipping below the low death rates, leading to an actual fall in population.

Economic and Social Development drives decline in population growth

India is situated today, roughly, where Europe was in the middle of the twentieth century. Birth rates are declining and so are death rates. The persistence of feudal norms in society, however, continues to fetter women in traditional 'home making' roles, thus negating a part of the influence of economic development in lowering birth rates.

What is the central message in this understanding of the dynamics of population growth and subsequent decline? The central message is clear – population growth rate declines faster in periods of socio-economic development. The poor and the socially disadvantaged produce more children not because they belong to a particular community, but because their social and economic conditions promote an acceleration in birth rates. Thus the rate of population growth is higher than the national average in all disadvantaged communities, including Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis.

Muslims in India, on an average, are both economically and socially disadvantaged. A Muslim in India is more likely to be poor, less likely to be in regular employment and less likely to be fully literate or educated. Even for Muslims who are at the same level of education as other communities, they are less likely to be in gainful employment. Tables 2 and 3 depict the extent of backwardness among Muslims in education and employment. Table 4 provides information about monthly expenditures of different communities as an indicator of levels of poverty.

Table 2: Percent graduates in population aged 20+

Caste/ Community	Rural	Urban
Adivasi	1.1	10.9
Dalit	1.2	4.7
Muslim	1.3	6.1
OBC	2.1	8.6
Sikh	2.8	25.0
Christian	4.7	23.7
'Upper' Caste Hindu	5.3	25.3
All India	2.6	15.5

Source: NSS 55th Round

Table 3: Worker Population ratio (those reported working in 1,000 population)

Religion	Rural	Urban
Hindu	417	344
Muslim	337	306
Christian	441	358
Sikh	405	317
All India	408	337

Source: NSS 66th Round

Table 4: Monthly per-capita expenditure (MCPE) 2009-2010

Religion	MCPE (in Rs.)
Sikh	1659
Christian	1543
Hindu	1125
Muslim	980

Source: National Sample Survey Organisation

Comparative data for different religious communities also indicate that urbanization of Muslims has increased more rapidly – much higher than the average for all communities. Significantly, while poverty among Muslims in rural areas is similar to other communities, it is much higher among Muslims in urban areas. Such high rates of urban poverty among Muslims is also driving up population growth rates.

Finally there is another set of data that indicates that Muslims are actually doing better than other religious communities. The 2011 Census data shows that the sex ratio among Muslims now stands at 951 females for every 1,000 males, which is substantially better than the rate of 939 females for every 1,000 males, among Hindus. Further the National Family Health Survey of 2005 shows that the Infant Mortality Rate among Muslims is 59 compared to 77 for Hindus. Paradoxically the survival of more women and more children are also factors that drive a higher rate of population growth among Muslims.

Crude attempt to polarize the people on religious lines

None of this information provided is novel – it has been reiterated time and again by various commissions and studies, including by the Rajinder Sachar Committee and the follow up Amitabh Kundu Committee. What is significant is that the Census data on religion was presented without even an attempt to correlate it to levels of socio-economic development among religious groups. This omission was not accidental, it was deliberate. The real intent was to raise the bogey of Muslim population growth to polarize the electorate before the crucial Assembly elections in Bihar.

The Census data on religions, if examined with an open and rational mind, provides valuable pointers for public action. However, by communalizing the data, the Sangh Parivar is intent on misusing the findings for their narrow and sectarian ends.