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1. India's 1.9 Fertility Rate – Economy

According to the recently released Sample Registration System (SRS) Statistical Report 2024, India's total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped to 1.9. This represents a historic demographic transition for India, falling below the replacement level of 2.1 for the first time nationally. The fertility decline reflects broader socioeconomic progress in education, healthcare, and women's empowerment while signalling future challenges related to aging populations and workforce sustainability.

1.Understanding Total Fertility Rate (TFR)

Definition and Significance

1. India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR), the average number of children a woman would have in her lifetime assuming she lives through her reproductive years (15–49 years), has fallen below the replacement level of 2.1.
2. Replacement rate is the number of child births a woman must go through to keep the population constant from one generation to the next without migration.
3. A TFR below 2.1 indicates that without net migration, each generation becomes smaller than the previous generation.

Geographic Variation

1. The only states in India with a TFR higher than 2.1 in 2024 were Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh.
2. Delhi records the lowest TFR at 1.2, followed by Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal at 1.3 each.
3. This regional variation reflects stark differences in development, education, and healthcare access.

Historical Trajectory

1. In 1985, India's TFR was 4.3 and has fallen at a rate of about 0.06 per year with no sign that this decline will reverse.
2. At the current pace, India's TFR is projected to drop below 1.6 by 2031.
3. This steady decline occurred despite population growth, indicating fundamental shifts in family formation patterns.

2.Reasons for Declining Fertility Rate in India

Delayed Marriage and Childbearing

1. The average age at marriage has increased, especially in urban areas where couples are postponing childbirth due to career considerations.
2. Higher educational attainment, particularly among women, extends the period spent in education and professional development.

Urbanisation Effects

1. Urban living is associated with higher costs of housing, education, healthcare, and childcare limiting family size preferences.
2. Limited living space and changing lifestyles in urban areas encourage smaller family sizes.
3. Urban areas typically show lower fertility compared to rural counterparts.

Improved Access to Contraception and Family Planning

1. Expansion of reproductive health services and contraceptive availability has enabled couples to plan the number and spacing of children.
2. Family planning programs provide information and access reducing unintended pregnancies.

Declining Infant and Child Mortality

1. Improvements in healthcare, immunization, nutrition, and sanitation have reduced child mortality.
2. When parents are confident their children will survive to adulthood, they feel less need to have additional children.

Economic Factors

1. The cost of raising and educating children has increased substantially making larger families economically burdensome.
2. Families increasingly prefer investing more resources in fewer children to improve their quality of life and educational outcomes.

Demographic Transition Model

1. India is moving through the later stages of the Demographic Transition Model, characterized by low birth rates, low death rates, and slower population growth.
2. The transition reflects development progression from high fertility to sustainable low fertility.

3.Implications of Below-Replacement Fertility

Slower Population Growth and Eventual Stabilization

1. A fertility rate below replacement level means that, over time, each generation will be smaller than the previous one.
2. Eventually, the population is expected to stabilize and later decline without net immigration.
3. Population stabilization eliminates the pressure of managing rapid population growth.

Rising Ageing Population

1. A sustained low fertility rate will increase the proportion of elderly citizens in the population.
2. India may face challenges similar to those experienced by countries such as Japan and South Korea including higher pension liabilities, greater healthcare expenditure, and increased demand for geriatric care and social security.
3. Aging societies require fundamental restructuring of social security and healthcare systems.

Future Labour Force Challenges

1. A declining birth rate eventually leads to fewer entrants into the labour market.
2. Economic growth could slow if productivity improvements do not compensate for a smaller workforce.
3. Dependency ratios shift from young dependents to elderly dependents, altering fiscal pressures.

Regional Demographic Imbalances

1. Fertility rates vary significantly across states, with most southern and western states having well below replacement fertility while states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan continue recording relatively higher fertility levels.
2. This may alter internal migration patterns, political representation, resource allocation, and labour market dynamics.
3. High-fertility states will have younger populations while low-fertility states face aging challenges.

4.Way Forward

Need for New Population Policies

1. India's policy focus may gradually shift from controlling population growth to managing aging population.

2. Policies must transition from family planning toward eldercare, healthcare, and social security provision.

Opportunity to Strengthen the Demographic Dividend

1. India still has a large working-age population where lower fertility can reduce the dependency burden on families and the state.
2. Greater investments can be directed toward education, health, skills, and productivity of the workforce.
3. This window of opportunity allows conversion of demographic advantage into economic growth before aging burdens become significant.

Integrating Regional Perspectives

1. Policies must address regional disparities in fertility ensuring that high-fertility states receive targeted development support.
2. Interstate coordination on migration and resource sharing becomes critical with fertility divergence.

Source - <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/health/indias-total-fertility-rate-is-now-below-replacement-level-centre>