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Revisiting Hindu–Muslim Fertility Differentials in India: Evidence from the Past Three Decades

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Abstract

This study reassesses the protracted debate on fertility differentials between two religious communities—Hindus and Muslims in India. It draws on data from the 2001 and 2011 Census and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) rounds covering the last three decades. The analysis, based on descriptive statistics, bivariate analysis, and negative binomial regression models, reveals a steady convergence in fertility levels between these two communities from 1992-93 to 2019-21. The findings also show that states and districts with higher fertility exhibit elevated fertility among both communities, underscoring the importance of contextual and developmental conditions of fertility decline at the local level rather than religious affiliation alone. Moreover, the proportional decline in fertility has been faster among Muslims than Hindus in recent decades further narrowing the gap. Despite this convergence, notable inter-state and intra-district disparities remain. Particularly in less developed states, such as Bihar, recent trends even suggest fertility divergence rather than convergence. The study therefore argues for shifting policy discourse from religion-based explanations to a greater focus on regional development. It highlights the need for context-specific, tailored, nuanced strategies to population policy for implementing family planning programmes which would better address spatial inequalities rather than relying on religious generalizations.

Key words: India, Religion, Hindu-Muslim, Fertility, Census, NFHS, Convergence, Negative binomial regression models, Regional Development

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