



## Rethinking Representation: Balancing Population Growth and Development

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### Introduction: A Demographic Paradox

As India is approaching to the 2026 parliamentary delimitation, an unsettling paradox is emerging. Southern states which were once praised for their marked population control through universal education, family planning, and women's empowerment now face the prospect of political disadvantage. Their success in slowing population growth could reduce their share of seats in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies, compared to northern states where fertility rates have remained relatively high. This unexpected twist in India's demographic journey has sparked a growing concern: Could responsible governance lead to political marginalization? And, more worryingly, is the South being nudged toward a dangerous pro-natalist path to retain influence?

### The Delimitation Dilemma

Delimitation is the process of drawing parliamentary and assembly constituencies based on population size, guided by Article 82 of the Indian Constitution, ensuring proportional representation in legislative bodies following the latest Census figures. In the early decades of independent India, the number of Lok Sabha seats increased periodically from 494 in 1952, to 520 in 1963, and then to 543 in 1973 in response to population growth in respective censuses. In 1951, each seat in Parliament represented about 7.3 lakh people which risen to 10.1 lakh by 1971. In response to rapid population growth, and as part of a broader policy to encourage family planning, the redistribution of parliamentary seats was frozen in 1976. Initially intended to last until 2001, this freeze was later extended to 2026. As a result, despite significant demographic changes over the decades, the allocation of seats in Parliament has remained largely unchanged.

Today, with India's population surpassing 1.45 billion, each of the 543 Lok Sabha members represents an average of 26.7 lakh citizens—a sharp increase that underscores the urgency of revisiting the current distribution. Although advances in communication and administrative infrastructure have helped MPs stay more connected with their constituents, these improvements only partially offset the widening gap in representation caused by decades of demographic transformation.

### Uneven Demographic Transitions and Development among Indian states

After independence, India's population began to surge, driven by declining mortality rates, improved food security and high fertility. Recognizing the dangers of unchecked population growth, India became the first country to launch a national family planning program in 1952. Initially focused on awareness and voluntary contraceptive use, the program emphasized birth spacing and sterilization. Despite this, the population continued to grow, prompting the

government to introduce formal population policies in 1976 and 2000, aimed at reducing fertility rates below replacement levels and improving women's reproductive health.

Since 1971, India's demographic transitions have sharply diverged. Southern states like Kerala (TFR 1.9), Tamil Nadu (1.8), and Karnataka (2.0) reached replacement-level fertility by the mid-2000s, driven by higher literacy, women's empowerment, and robust healthcare. In contrast, northern states like Uttar Pradesh (3.82) and Bihar (4.0) remained mired in high fertility well into the same period. While recent NFHS-5 round show a decline in Uttar Pradesh (2.35) and Bihar (3.0) in 2021 yet their fertility rates still exceed the replacement threshold. Sterilization rates also mirror this regional disparity. As per latest NFHS data, female sterilization stands at 68.3% in Andhra Pradesh, 55.6% in Tamil Nadu, and 55.2% in Karnataka, compared to just 31.8% in Bihar and a mere 13.5% in Uttar Pradesh (IIPS and ICF, 2021). These figures reflect both differing family planning practices and deeper socio-economic and policy divides among northern and southern states.

Southern states, benefiting from investments in human development, now lead in per capita income, child nutrition, and lower infant and maternal mortality. In contrast, northern states, with larger populations, lower literacy rates, and weaker women's empowerment, continue to face poor health outcomes and limited economic progress. Research shows that large family sizes often perpetuate poverty and hinder upward mobility across generations.

### **Political Anxiety and the Rise of Pro-Natalist voice**

With the delimitation freeze set to lift in 2026, southern states are understandably anxious. A population-based allocation could see high-growth states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar may gain more seats, while the South may see marginal gains. This shift has sparked political rhetoric, with Tamil Nadu leaders advocating for larger families to preserve state power. Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are also considering incentives for bigger families. For the first time, southern states are contemplating pro-natalist policies not for economic reasons, but out of fear of under-representation.

### **The Perils of Pro-Natalism: Rethinking Growth and Sustainability**

India's population has increased by 1.1 billion since 1951, making it the world's largest, equivalent to Europe and North America's combined populations. This growth has strained the country's social, economic, and ecological systems, and further growth driven by pro-natalist policies could exacerbate the crisis.

As rural livelihoods decline, India's urbanization—projected to reach 600 million by 2036—puts immense pressure on city infrastructure (Milleniumpost, 2025). Over 35% of urban residents live in slums, facing overcrowding, poor sanitation, and unsafe housing. Cities like Delhi and Mumbai rank among the world's most polluted, while deforestation and land degradation worsen ecological stress. Without urgent, sustainable urban planning, Indian cities may become crisis epicenters instead of growth hubs.

Per capita water availability in India has sharply declined from 5,177 cubic meters in 1951 to 1,486 cubic meters in 2014, and is projected to drop to 1,235 cubic meters by 2050 (TOI, 2019). NITI Aayog warns that 21 major cities, including Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai, may run out of groundwater by 2030 due to urbanization, population growth, and climate change (Climate Centre for Cities, 2021). Rural areas are also at risk the increased size of population, with India expected to reach critical groundwater depletion by 2025. The Composite Water Management Index estimates 600 million people already face high water stress, and by 2050, water demand will exceed supply (PIB, 2019).

Despite having the world's largest youth population, India faces a deepening employment crisis. As of early 2024, urban unemployment is at 6.4%, while youth unemployment (ages 15–29) has reached 16.1% (Shukla, 2025). Pro-natalist policies may risk worsening this by adding to an already saturated job market without parallel investments in education, skill development, and job creation. The promise of a demographic dividend is untenable without systemic efforts to equip youth with skills and employment opportunities. Without this, India's demographic advantage could turn into a demographic burden.

### **Rethinking Representation: Growth with Purpose, Not Numbers**

India stands at a critical crossroads where political representation intersects with deep demographic divides, and pro-natalist policies risk sabotaging decades of progress toward achieving an optimal population balance. While such policies may offer short-term political gains, they pose long-term social, economic, and environmental risks for a country as large and diverse as India. As the 2026 delimitation approaches, tying political power directly to population growth across states must be avoided. Instead, India should pursue innovative models that balance demography, geography, economy, and ecology—rewarding demographic responsibility while ensuring fair representation.

In a nation of 1.45 billion, the question is not how many are represented, but how fairly and effectively that representation serves the people. India's true strength lies not in its numbers, but in its ability to govern them wisely. As we chart a path toward Viksit Bharat 2047, the focus must shift from quantity to quality, from sheer population size to sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development.

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