



An irrational draft population control Bill that must go

The recently announced draft Uttar Pradesh Population (Control, Stabilization and Welfare) Bill, 2021 focuses exclusively on making a two-child norm a law, specifying various incentives and penalties for contravention. However, most experts would agree on 'development being the best contraception' and the irrationality of incentives-disincentives had been, ostensibly, long settled.

Highlights:

1. As early as 1994, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (UN 1994); to which India is a signatory, strongly avers that coercion, incentives and disincentives have little role to play in population stabilisation and need to be replaced by the principle of informed free choice.
2. This principle is also echoed in the National Population Policy 2000, which unequivocally supports a target-free approach and explicitly focuses on education, maternal and child health and survival, and the availability of health-care services, including contraceptive services, as key strategies for population stabilisation.

Signs of stabilisation

1. The population of India, and Uttar Pradesh is on the road to stabilisation regardless of coercive policies such as the two-child norm. The fertility rate for Uttar Pradesh (National Family Health Survey, or NFHS-4) is 2.7, compared to 3.8 10 years ago (NFHS-3).
2. This trend is correlated with improvements in health indicators for the State, such as infant mortality rate (IMR), maternal mortality ratio (MMR) and malnutrition, in the same period.
3. There are many States that have attained the replacement-level fertility rate of 2.1 by NFHS-4 such as Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, West Bengal (excluding Union Territories and some northeastern States); all of which have much better development indicators.
4. For instance, by NFHS-4, the child mortality rate in Uttar Pradesh is 78 compared to seven in Kerala and 27 in Tamil Nadu. Women with 10 or more



years of schooling stand at 33% in Uttar Pradesh compared to 72% in Kerala and 50% in Tamil Nadu.

5. Thus, there is much scope for the acceleration of population stabilisation through better delivery of health and education services.

Issue of child sex ratios

1. Second, one of the greatest concerns with coercive policies such as the two-child norm is their potential impact upon child sex ratios in a society that has such a high preference for male children.
2. That this concern is only too real is well demonstrated by the example of China that had to detract from its stringent one-child norm, first in favour of a two-child norm and then to remove targets altogether, after experiencing a disastrous reduction in its child sex ratio.
3. Considering that Uttar Pradesh is amongst the worst across the Indian States, with the lowest child sex ratio of 903 compared with 1,047 in Kerala and 954 in Tamil Nadu, and that; unlike other development indicators, this has deteriorated in NFHS-4 compared to NFHS-3, why it would want to take such a foolhardy misstep is hard to understand.
4. The correlation between poor socioeconomic status and family size also impacts the potentially discriminatory effect of the proposed measures upon communities that house the poorest of the poor, such as the religious minorities and Dalits, as already pointed out by many.
5. Leaving these communities out of political and administrative spaces as well as curtailing their access to welfare is hardly likely to advance any kind of social justice or equity.