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2001 Census Results Mixed for India's Women and Girls

by O.P. Sharma

(Population Today, May/June 2001) At first glance, results from India's 2001 census seem encouraging. They show a decline in the population growth rate, an improvement in the ratio of men to women, and a remarkable increase in literacy, particularly for girls and women. Yet one important indicator — the sex ratio among children under the age of 7 — shows signs of regression.

Census of India, 2001

(Provisional Results)

Population

Males	531,277,078
Females	495,738,169
Both Sexes	1,027,015,247

Growth 1991-2001

21%

Sex Ratio (Males per 1,000 females)

1,072

Density (Population per sq. km)

324

Literate Population

	Number	%
Males	339,969,048	75.85
Females	226,745,947	54.16
Both sexes	566,714,995	65.38

Source: Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, *Census of India 2001 — Provisional Totals*, March 2001.

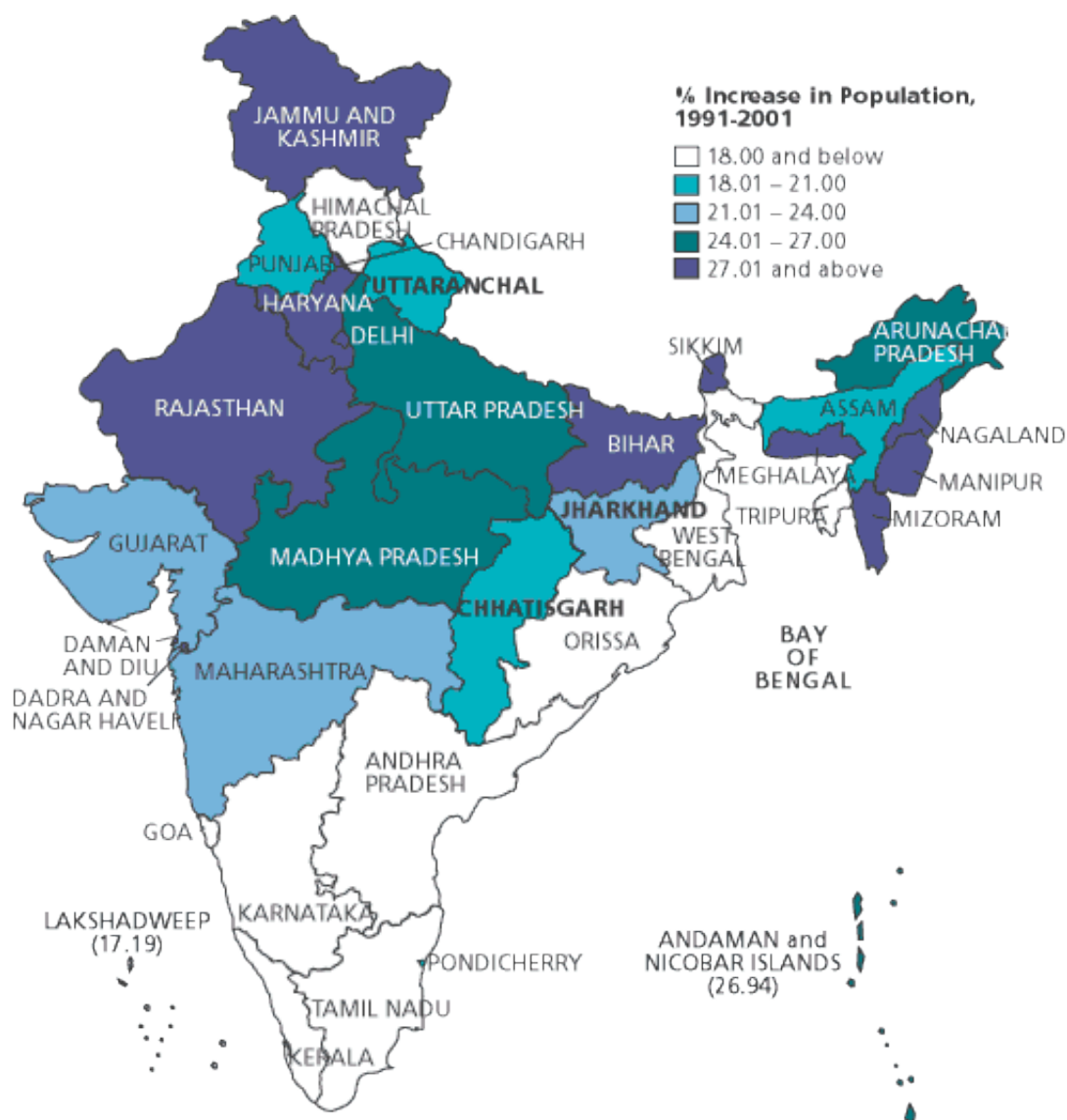
According to the provisional population total released by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner on March 26, India's population as of March 1, 2001, stood at 1.03 billion (1,027,015,247). That total is a bit higher than the projected 1,012,386,000. From 1991 to 2001, India's population increased by 181 million, more than the population of Brazil (170 million).

Growth Rate

While in the last century the world's population increased more than threefold, India's grew more than fourfold. Still, its growth rate over the last 10 years (21 percent) was lower than for the previous 10-year period (24 percent), marking the biggest percentage drop since India became independent in 1947. The decline in the growth rate can be attributed to effective implementation of government-sponsored programs aimed at improving reproductive health services and bringing the fertility rate down

to replacement level.

Population Growth in India's States and Union Territories Between 1991 and 2001



Note: Boundaries are representational, not exact. Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand are states that were created since 1991.

Source of data on population increase: Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, Census of India 2001 — Provisional Population Totals, March 2001.

At the state level, growth rates varied widely. Three southern states — Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh (see map above) — had the lowest rates, with Andhra Pradesh registering the most dramatic decline in its growth rate since the last census: down from 24 percent to 14 percent. Uttar Pradesh added the most people, 34 million.

Density

Crowding worsened. India's density on Census Day this year was 324 people per square kilometer, 57 points higher than in 1991. The highest population density, 9,294 people per square kilometer, was recorded by Delhi Union Territory, the seat of the federal government. Among states, West Bengal was the most crowded, with a density of 904.

Overall Sex Ratio

According to the 2001 census, the sex ratio for India's population is 1,072 males per 1,000 females. This ratio is significantly higher than those of neighboring countries: Pakistan (1,066), China (1,059), and Bangladesh (1,049). For India, though, the 2001 ratio indicates a slight improvement from that observed in the 1991 census (1,079). This gain can be attributed to better health facilities for women and, to some extent, to improvement in the status of women. But any complacency over this development must be tempered by the fact that there are sharp differences across states. While Kerala has a sex ratio of 945, Haryana's ratio of 1,161 reflects considerable gender imbalance. It is unclear whether the cause for this imbalance is out-migration of the male labor force in Kerala and in-migration of male workers in Haryana or systematic use of sex-selective abortion. More data are needed to fill in the blanks.

Literacy

Literacy is among the most promising aspects of the latest census. India's literacy rate increased by 13 percentage points, from 52 percent in 1991 to 65 percent in 2001. Seventy-six percent of males and 54 percent of females are now literate, compared with levels of 64 percent and 39 percent, respectively, in 1991.

Several states are doing well in promoting literacy. Kerala, with a literacy rate of 91 percent, tops the list, followed by Mizoram and Lakshadweep (88 percent each). Meanwhile, even Bihar, which recorded the lowest literacy rate (48 percent), realized an increase of 10 percentage points from 1991.

The Under-7 Population

In India, the proportion of the total population in the under-7 age group declined from 18 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 2001. This decline shows an increasing preference for small families. But more attractive incentives will have to be offered to the poverty-stricken and illiterate people, both rural and urban, who prefer to have as many children as they can because more hands mean more income for the family.

The sex ratio (males per 1,000 females) for the under-7 population has increased from 1,058 in 1991 to 1,078 in 2001. Sharp increases have been observed in prosperous states like Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, Uttaranchal, Maharashtra, and Chandigarh. Explanations for this 20-point difference are disturbing. Improvements in primary health care may have reached boys faster than girls, or worse, more girls may have been aborted or allowed to die after birth. These findings are consistent with those of the second National Family Health Survey. It revealed that, for infants under 1 year old, male mortality exceeds female mortality by 5 percent but that,

after the age of 1, sex differentials in mortality are reversed. According to the survey, the number of deaths of girls ages 1 to 4 is estimated to be 1.5 times higher than the number of deaths among boys of the same age because of relative nutritional and medical neglect of girls (by this age, breastfeeding ceases).

India could have done better at slowing growth had successive governments accorded population the attention it receives under the National Population Policy. This latest census should help focus attention on priorities: reducing the population growth rate in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, whose performance has lagged behind the rest of the country, and promoting health, literacy, and better status for girls and women.

The results described here are provisional (minor revisions will be made in the fall) and partial. Still to come are data on the contribution of women to household economies, the homeless population, and the disabled population.

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