

Population Growth and Regional Disparities in India: A Geographical Analysis

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Abstract

India's demographic transition is increasingly defined not by a single national growth trajectory but by marked spatial differences in the timing and consequences of fertility decline, population momentum, migration and ageing. This paper examines population growth and regional disparities in India from a geographical perspective. It uses a descriptive, analytical and comparative secondary-data design, drawing principally on Census of India 2011, the Sample Registration System (SRS) Statistical Report 2024, National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), and the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections for India and States 2011-2036. The analysis distinguishes observed census change from later survey estimates and official projections. Census 2011 recorded national decadal growth of 17.64 per cent during 2001-11, but the rate ranged from 25.42 per cent in Bihar to 4.91 per cent in Kerala. By 2024, the national TFR had fallen to 1.9, while Bihar (2.9), Uttar Pradesh (2.6), Madhya Pradesh (2.4) and Rajasthan (2.3) remained substantially above low-fertility states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal (1.3 each). Official projections further indicate a simultaneous expansion of the working-age population and rapid ageing: the share aged 60 years and above is projected to rise from 8.4 per cent in 2011 to 14.9 per cent in 2036. The paper argues that India is best understood as a set of asynchronous demographic regions. Region-specific policies are therefore required for human-capital formation, reproductive health, employment, migration management, urban infrastructure and population ageing.

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1. Introduction

Population change is a central concern of population geography because demographic processes are never distributed uniformly across space. Fertility, mortality and migration determine the numerical growth and redistribution of population, but each is shaped by regional differences in

social development, education, gender relations, economic opportunity, settlement structure, health systems and institutional capacity. India is especially suitable for geographical analysis because its very large population is distributed across states and districts that have entered the demographic transition at different times and at different speeds. A national average can therefore conceal sharply contrasting regional demographic realities.

The latest completed nationwide population census remains Census 2011. It counted 1.21 billion people and recorded a national decadal population growth rate of 17.64 per cent during 2001-11 (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India [ORGI], 2011). The national slowdown was substantial compared with earlier decades, yet interstate variation remained pronounced. Bihar grew by 25.42 per cent, Rajasthan by 21.31 per cent, Madhya Pradesh by 20.35 per cent and Uttar Pradesh by 20.23 per cent. At the other end, Kerala recorded growth of only 4.91 per cent. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal occupied intermediate positions. These contrasts demonstrate that the Indian demographic transition has always had a distinct geography rather than proceeding as a uniform national sequence.

The contemporary pattern is even more revealing when fertility is considered. The SRS Statistical Report 2024, released by ORGI in 2026, estimates India's total fertility rate (TFR) at 1.9 children per woman, below the conventional replacement benchmark of about 2.1. However, Bihar recorded a TFR of 2.9, Uttar Pradesh 2.6, Madhya Pradesh 2.4 and Rajasthan 2.3, while Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal were at 1.3 and Maharashtra at 1.4 (ORGI, 2026). The rural-urban difference is also important: the national rural TFR was 2.1 compared with 1.5 in urban areas. Thus, low national fertility coexists with pockets of substantially higher fertility and with large populations still moving through the later stages of demographic transition.

This spatial unevenness has consequences that extend beyond population size. States with relatively high fertility and a young age structure will continue to add large cohorts to the labour force even as fertility declines, a process driven by population momentum. States that entered low fertility earlier are ageing more rapidly and may face slower labour-force growth, rising old-age dependency and greater demand for health and care services. Migration links these contrasting demographic regions by moving workers from younger, labour-surplus areas towards economically dynamic and often lower-fertility urban regions. Population growth, age structure and migration must therefore be analysed together rather than as separate demographic topics.

Demographic transition theory provides the broad conceptual framework for this paper. It explains the long-term shift from high mortality and high fertility to low mortality and low fertility, with a phase of rapid growth when mortality decline precedes fertility decline. Yet the Indian case requires a spatially differentiated interpretation. Dyson and Moore (1983) showed that kinship systems and female autonomy can shape demographic behaviour, while Drèze and Murthi (2001) demonstrated the importance of female education and child mortality in explaining district-level

fertility variation. More recent research confirms that India's overall fertility decline has been accompanied by persistent geographical heterogeneity (Roychowdhury et al., 2026). The relevant question is therefore not merely whether India is completing its demographic transition, but where, when and with what social and economic consequences the transition is occurring.

A methodological caution is essential. Because no new completed census population count is yet available after 2011, contemporary state population totals are based on official projections or other statistical systems rather than a fresh enumeration. The present paper therefore separates three types of evidence: observed intercensal change from Census 2011; recent fertility and vital indicators from SRS and NFHS; and future population and age-structure patterns from the Technical Group's official projections. This distinction prevents projected or survey-based figures from being incorrectly presented as census counts.

The study addresses four interrelated objectives: to examine the spatial pattern of population growth and fertility transition across Indian states; to identify the demographic processes underlying persistent regional disparities, especially fertility, population momentum, age structure, rural-urban differences and migration; to compare the emerging demographic trajectories of relatively youthful high-growth states with those of low-fertility and ageing regions; and to assess the implications of these regional differences for human development, labour supply, migration, urbanisation and population policy. Correspondingly, it asks how population growth varies geographically, which processes explain the divergence, how uneven transition is reshaping India's age structure, and what forms of territorially differentiated policy are required.

The central argument is that India's demographic geography is increasingly characterised by asynchronous transition. Some states still experience comparatively strong natural increase and population momentum, while others are already dealing with very low fertility and faster ageing. At the same time, metropolitan and economically dynamic regions may continue growing through migration despite low fertility. Consequently, the major analytical divide is no longer simply between 'high population' and 'low population' states; it is between regions located at different points in demographic transition and connected through labour, migration and urban systems.

2. Literature Review

Demographic transition theory remains the principal framework for interpreting long-run changes in population growth. In the classical formulation, mortality decline initially creates a widening gap between births and deaths, producing rapid natural increase. Fertility subsequently declines, reducing growth and altering the age structure. The transition first increases the share of working-age population relative to dependants and later raises the proportion of older persons. Dyson (2010) stresses that this transition is not simply a sequence of vital rates but is intertwined with social transformation, urbanisation, family change and development. This wider interpretation is especially relevant to India because the transition has occurred at different speeds across regions.

One influential explanation of India's demographic geography focuses on gender and kinship. Dyson and Moore (1983) argued that differences in kinship organisation and female autonomy between northern and southern India were associated with differences in demographic behaviour. Although later research has refined and sometimes challenged broad regional generalisations, their work established that fertility cannot be explained adequately by income alone. Social relations within households, women's mobility, marriage systems and decision-making power influence reproductive outcomes and therefore help to produce spatially differentiated fertility regimes.

Drèze and Murthi (2001) provided a major empirical contribution by analysing fertility variation across Indian districts. Their results highlighted female education and child mortality as particularly important correlates of fertility, while demonstrating that several conventional indicators of modernisation had weaker independent effects once other factors were considered. The study is important for a geographical analysis because it shows that demographic behaviour responds to social development and child survival at subnational scales. It also provides a strong basis for interpreting the later fertility decline of northern and central states as part of broader improvements in education and health rather than merely as an outcome of population-control programmes.

District-level work by Guilmoto and Rajan (2013) further demonstrated the spatial character of fertility transition. Using indirect estimates from Census 2011, they showed that fertility decline had diffused widely but retained strong geographical clustering and considerable district-level variation. This finding warns against treating state averages as homogeneous. Large states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or Madhya Pradesh contain urban districts and development corridors with fertility patterns that can differ markedly from remote rural areas. The geographical scale of analysis therefore matters.

More recent evidence suggests continued convergence without complete uniformity. Roychowdhury, Singh and Sharma (2026), using successive NFHS rounds, document a substantial national decline in fertility between 2005-06 and 2019-21 while showing that several large northern and central states retained higher fertility than much of southern and western India. Their analysis reinforces two points relevant here: the national average has moved into a low-fertility regime, and regional disparity persists because states entered the transition at different times and because socioeconomic determinants remain unevenly distributed.

A second literature concerns age structure and the demographic dividend. Aiyar and Mody (2011) exploited interstate differences in age composition and found a substantial association between the working-age ratio and per-capita economic growth. Their results suggested that demographic change contributed meaningfully to India's post-1980 growth and that later-transition states could benefit as their working-age shares rise. Jain, Goli and Jana (2025), using a longer time horizon and more recent methods, similarly found that the economic return to demographic transition

depends strongly on a supportive policy environment, including healthcare, decent employment and gender empowerment. The demographic dividend is therefore not a mechanical result of a youthful population; it is a conditional development opportunity.

The literature nevertheless leaves room for an integrated geographical synthesis. Fertility studies often concentrate on determinants of reproductive change, while demographic-dividend studies focus on age structure and economic growth. Migration studies, meanwhile, emphasise the redistribution of labour and population. For contemporary India, these dimensions increasingly intersect. Higher-fertility states also tend to retain younger age structures; low-fertility states are ageing more rapidly; and migration moves working-age people across these demographic regimes. The present paper therefore brings census growth, current fertility, official projections, age structure and migration into a common spatial framework while maintaining a clear distinction between observed, estimated and projected data.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a secondary-data-based, descriptive, analytical and comparative research design. No questionnaire, interview, respondent sample or field survey has been used. The geographical units of comparison are primarily Indian states, with national rural-urban comparisons and selected Union Territories included where they illuminate broader demographic processes. The approach is designed to identify robust spatial patterns rather than to estimate new causal parameters.

Four principal official data sources are used. First, Census of India 2011 Table A-02 provides observed decadal variation in population for 2001-11. Second, the SRS Statistical Report 2024 provides recent fertility and related vital statistics; it is an annual sample registration system and not a population census. Third, NFHS-5 (2019-21) provides nationally and subnationally representative survey evidence on fertility, reproductive health and socioeconomic differentials. Fourth, the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections for India and States 2011-2036, prepared under the National Commission on Population, supplies projected population totals and age structures. Selected figures are cross-checked with the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's Women and Men in India statistical compilation, which reproduces the Technical Group's projected age-structure series (MoSPI, 2022).

The principal indicators are decadal population growth, TFR, rural-urban fertility differential, broad age composition (0-14, 15-59 and 60+), median age and dependency ratio. Population growth is interpreted as the percentage change between Census 2001 and Census 2011. Fertility is interpreted through the most recent SRS estimate available for 2024, while NFHS-5 is used as a complementary survey source rather than merged mechanically with SRS. Age-structure analysis uses official projections because no new census enumeration after 2011 has yet supplied a complete age distribution for the country.

The analytical strategy has three stages. First, selected states are compared to establish the geography of historical growth and current fertility. Second, the relationship between fertility decline and changing age structure is examined through population momentum, the working-age share and population ageing. Third, migration and urbanisation are interpreted as redistributive processes capable of separating natural increase from actual population growth in destination regions. Demographic transition theory is the primary conceptual framework, supplemented by the concepts of demographic dividend, population momentum and spatial redistribution.

The study has several limitations. Census 2011 is now an old baseline, which means that exact post-2011 interstate population growth cannot yet be measured from a completed enumeration. Population projections depend on assumptions about fertility, mortality and migration, while SRS and NFHS differ in design and should not be treated as one continuous statistical series. State averages also conceal substantial district-level variation. The paper therefore avoids false precision, identifies the reference year for major statistics, and uses projections to discuss trajectories rather than to claim observed contemporary counts.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 National slowdown with persistent regional divergence

The most important national trend is a sustained deceleration of population growth. Census 2011 recorded India's population at about 1.21 billion and the 2001-11 decadal growth rate at 17.64 per cent. Yet the spatial range was wide. Bihar's 25.42 per cent growth was more than five times Kerala's 4.91 per cent. Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh also remained above 20 per cent, while Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal recorded lower rates. This pattern corresponds broadly to the earlier and later timing of fertility decline, but it should not be interpreted as a simple fertility map because migration, mortality and age structure also influence total population change.

Table 1 juxtaposes observed 2001-11 census growth with SRS 2024 fertility. The two columns refer to different periods and statistical systems, but the comparison is analytically useful because it shows the persistence of a broad spatial ordering. States that were among the faster-growing large states in 2001-11 generally remain on the higher side of India's fertility distribution, whereas several states that had already experienced slower growth now have very low fertility. The association is not perfect. Maharashtra, for example, has low contemporary fertility but retains large and growing metropolitan populations because of migration and urban economic concentration.

Table 1. Selected state-level demographic indicators: Census growth and SRS fertility

State / India	Population growth, 2001-11 (%)	TFR, 2024 (children per woman)
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India	17.64	1.9
Bihar	25.42	2.9
Rajasthan	21.31	2.3
Madhya Pradesh	20.35	2.4
Uttar Pradesh	20.23	2.6
Maharashtra	15.99	1.4
Tamil Nadu	15.61	1.3
West Bengal	13.84	1.3
Kerala	4.91	1.3

Note. Growth figures are observed Census 2011 decadal changes; TFR figures are SRS estimates for 2024. Sources: ORGI (2011, 2026).

The national slowdown is therefore best understood as a convergence process with a persistent regional gradient rather than as uniform stabilisation. A large proportion of India's future demographic additions will occur in already populous northern and central states. This matters because absolute increments depend on both the rate of growth and the size of the base population. Even a moderate rate of increase in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar produces very large additions to school-age and working-age cohorts.

There are also important exceptions to any simple north-south division. The Northeast contains states with diverse fertility histories, while rapidly urbanising western and southern states can experience local population pressure despite low natural increase. A geographical analysis must therefore distinguish three overlapping dimensions: natural increase, migration-driven redistribution and the inherited age structure that produces population momentum.

4.2 Fertility transition, rural-urban differences and social development

Fertility is the most important long-run driver of the emerging regional demographic divide. SRS 2024 places India's TFR at 1.9, but the interstate range remains large. Bihar stands at 2.9 and Uttar Pradesh at 2.6, while Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are also above the conventional replacement level. At the low end, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal record 1.3 and Maharashtra 1.4. These values demonstrate that the national transition to below-replacement fertility has not eliminated regional differences in the timing or depth of fertility decline (ORGI, 2026).

The rural-urban contrast adds another geographical layer. Nationally, rural TFR is estimated at 2.1 and urban TFR at 1.5 in 2024. This gap reflects the combined influence of education, age at marriage, child survival, access to reproductive health services, employment structures, cost of childrearing and changing family preferences. It would be misleading, however, to treat urban residence as a single independent cause. Urbanisation is associated with a bundle of social and economic conditions that tend to reduce desired family size and facilitate access to contraception, while rural fertility also varies substantially between states.

Long-standing research helps explain these spatial differences. Dyson and Moore (1983) directed attention towards regional variations in kinship and female autonomy, while Drèze and Murthi (2001) found female education and child mortality to be central correlates of district-level fertility. These findings remain highly relevant because the states with later fertility transitions have also historically faced larger deficits in female schooling, reproductive health access and child survival. The causal pathways are complex, but the broad implication is robust: fertility transition is closely connected to social development and women's capabilities, not simply to administrative family-planning targets.

NFHS evidence reinforces the same conclusion. Roychowdhury et al. (2026) show that India's TFR fell sharply across successive NFHS rounds but that the spatial sequence remained uneven. The persistence of relatively high fertility in parts of the north and centre is therefore not evidence of demographic immobility; those states have also experienced substantial decline. Rather, it reflects a later starting point and continued socioeconomic differentials. This distinction is important for policy because it favours investment in education, health and reproductive choice over coercive population-control approaches.

Fertility decline also needs to be interpreted alongside population momentum. When a large share of the population is young, the number of births can remain high even after the average number of births per woman falls sharply. High-fertility states therefore do not have to remain above replacement level indefinitely in order to contribute strongly to India's future population growth. Their inherited age structure can sustain growth for decades.

4.3 Population momentum and the changing geography of population concentration

Official projections make the effect of population momentum visible. The Technical Group on Population Projections estimates India's population at about 1.426 billion in 2026 and 1.522 billion in 2036. These figures are projections, not census counts. Their value lies in showing the direction of demographic change under stated assumptions rather than in replacing enumeration. The same projections indicate that the working-age population will continue to expand through 2036 even as the child population contracts (National Commission on Population, 2020; MoSPI, 2022).

The geographical implication is that future population additions will be concentrated disproportionately in states with large youthful cohorts. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are particularly important because their demographic weight is already very large. As these cohorts move through education and into the labour market, the spatial distribution of demand for schools, colleges, training, housing, transport and jobs will shift further towards northern and central India. The same process will also sustain inter-state migration if employment creation does not match the scale of labour-force entry in source states.

Population momentum changes the interpretation of below-replacement fertility. A TFR of 1.9 at the national level does not imply immediate population decline because the number of women

entering reproductive ages remains large. Nor does it mean that all states will peak at the same time. Early-transition states may approach population stabilisation or even decline sooner, while later-transition states continue growing. India's future national population path is therefore the aggregate result of multiple state-specific trajectories rather than a single homogeneous trend.

The same logic applies within states. Metropolitan districts can gain population through migration even while their fertility remains extremely low. Rural districts can lose young adults through out-migration while retaining higher fertility. Consequently, changes in district population size may increasingly diverge from local natural increase. This is one reason why the next full census will be crucial for geographical research: it will enable direct observation of post-2011 migration, urban expansion and district-level redistribution that projections cannot fully capture.

4.4 Age-structural transition: demographic dividend and ageing

The most consequential outcome of uneven fertility decline is the transformation of age structure. Official projections show a marked narrowing of the young population and a rapid increase in older ages. In 2011, 30.9 per cent of India's population was aged 0-14 years, 60.7 per cent was aged 15-59 and 8.4 per cent was aged 60 or above. For 2026 the corresponding projected shares are 23.8, 64.8 and 11.4 per cent; by 2036 they are projected at 20.1, 64.9 and 14.9 per cent. The projected median age rises from 24.92 years in 2011 to 34.48 years in 2036 (MoSPI, 2022).

These changes capture the dual character of India's demographic future. The working-age share remains high, sustaining the possibility of a demographic dividend, but the elderly population is expanding rapidly. The policy challenge is therefore not to choose between 'youth' and 'ageing' agendas; India must manage both simultaneously, and the balance differs by region.

Table 2. Projected transformation of India's broad age structure, 2011-2036

Year	0-14 (%)	15-59 (%)	60+ (%)	Median age (years)	Total dependency ratio (%)
2011	30.9	60.7	8.4	24.92	64.6
2021	25.7	64.2	10.1	28.34	55.7
2026	23.8	64.8	11.4	30.27	54.3
2031	21.9	65.1	13.1	32.38	53.7
2036	20.1	64.9	14.9	34.48	54.0

Source: MoSPI (2022), based on the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections for India and States 2011-2036.

Aiyar and Mody (2011) showed that increases in the working-age ratio can contribute substantially to economic growth, but the opportunity is not automatic. A large labour force becomes a demographic dividend only when people are healthy, educated, employable and productively

absorbed. Jain et al. (2025) strengthen this point by showing that healthcare, decent employment and gender empowerment condition the economic return to demographic transition. The challenge is particularly significant for younger northern and central states because the scale of future labour-force entry will be exceptionally large.

Low-fertility states confront a different set of priorities. Earlier fertility decline means that states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu are moving more quickly towards older age structures. Rising longevity and a smaller flow of new labour-force entrants increase demand for geriatric healthcare, long-term care, accessible housing, social security and productivity improvements. Labour shortages in some sectors may also increase the economic importance of interstate migration from younger states.

This creates a potentially complementary national demographic geography. Younger states can supply workers to older and more urbanised regions, while destination economies can provide employment opportunities and remittance flows. Yet this complementarity is not self-executing. Migrants require portable social protection, affordable housing, fair labour conditions and access to health and education. Without these institutions, demographic complementarity can reproduce spatial inequality instead of reducing it.

4.5 Migration, urbanisation and the separation of fertility from population growth

Migration is essential for understanding why fertility and population growth do not always move together. A region with very low fertility can still experience rapid population growth if it attracts migrants, while a high-fertility region may experience slower realised growth if out-migration is substantial. Major metropolitan regions, industrial corridors and service-sector centres therefore need to be interpreted as demographic destinations as well as economic spaces.

This process is visible in the contrast between low fertility and continued urban concentration in states such as Maharashtra and in the National Capital Region. Migrants are disproportionately concentrated in working ages, which can keep destination populations relatively young even where local fertility is very low. Source regions may simultaneously experience the departure of working-age adults, changes in household structure and growing reliance on remittances. The demographic effects of migration therefore operate in both directions.

Urbanisation further reduces the analytical value of a simple state-level high-growth/low-growth classification. Urban districts within relatively high-fertility states can exhibit low fertility and rapid in-migration, while rural districts may remain characterised by higher fertility and out-migration. Future research based on the next census should therefore move beyond state averages towards district and metropolitan-region analysis, including migration corridors linking eastern and northern source areas with western, southern and northern urban destinations.

The policy implications are substantial. Destination cities require investment in rental housing, transport, water, sanitation and public health that reflects de facto population rather than only locally registered residents. Source states require employment and skill strategies that improve both local opportunities and the productivity of migrants. A national demographic strategy that ignores mobility would therefore misread the mechanism through which India's diverse regional age structures are becoming economically connected.

4.6 Regional demographic disparity as a development and planning challenge

Regional demographic disparity matters because different age structures generate different types of public demand. In youthful states, a large child and adolescent population requires sustained expenditure on schooling, nutrition, reproductive health, skill formation and first-time labour-market entry. In ageing states, the fiscal and service burden increasingly shifts towards chronic disease, elder care, pensions and accessible infrastructure. The demographic composition of a state therefore changes the sectoral priorities of development planning even before changes in total population size are considered.

These differences interact with existing regional inequalities. Several states with later fertility decline also have lower per-capita income and weaker social indicators than early-transition states. A rapidly expanding working-age population can become a major development advantage, but only if education quality, health, women's participation and employment creation improve sufficiently. Otherwise, population momentum can intensify unemployment, informal work, pressure on urban infrastructure and distress migration. Demography creates opportunity and constraint; institutions determine which predominates.

The policy response should therefore be differentiated rather than uniform. Relatively high-fertility districts need voluntary, rights-based reproductive health services, better maternal and child health, girls' secondary education and delayed marriage. Youthful states require large-scale investment in schools, higher education, vocational training, manufacturing, services and urban job creation. Low-fertility and ageing states need health and care systems designed for older populations, policies to raise productivity and labour-force participation, and mechanisms to integrate migrants. Metropolitan destinations require migrant-inclusive urban planning and portable social protection.

A territorially differentiated approach also avoids a common policy error: treating fertility reduction as the only objective of population policy. Once fertility is already very low, further decline can accelerate ageing and eventually reduce labour-force growth. Conversely, in higher-fertility states, improvements in education, health and women's agency are likely to support continued voluntary fertility decline while also raising human capital. The appropriate demographic intervention therefore depends on the stage of transition, not on a single national target.

Better data will be central to this shift. The long interval after Census 2011 has increased dependence on projections and sample surveys. These sources are indispensable, but they cannot fully replace a complete population enumeration for fine-scale spatial analysis. Updated census data will allow researchers to test whether state-level fertility convergence has translated into convergence in population growth, how migration has modified regional age structures, and which districts are moving most rapidly towards ageing or urban concentration.

5. Conclusion

India's demographic transition is advanced at the national level but remains strongly differentiated across space. The evidence reviewed in this paper shows that the national deceleration of population growth coexists with substantial regional variation in fertility, population momentum, migration and age structure. Census 2011 recorded a 2001-11 growth rate of 17.64 per cent for India, but Bihar grew by 25.42 per cent while Kerala grew by only 4.91 per cent. By 2024, the national TFR had fallen to 1.9, yet Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan remained well above the levels reported for Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Maharashtra. The broad geographical structure of demographic transition therefore persists even as fertility converges downward.

The study's first research question concerned the spatial pattern of population growth. The answer is that growth has been concentrated more strongly in northern and central India, although migration complicates the pattern by sustaining population expansion in low-fertility urban destinations. The second question concerned the processes behind regional divergence. Fertility is fundamental, but its effect is mediated by women's education, child survival, rural-urban conditions, population momentum and migration. The third question concerned age structure. Official projections show the child share declining rapidly while the elderly share rises from 8.4 per cent in 2011 to a projected 14.9 per cent in 2036, even as the working-age share remains high. India is therefore simultaneously experiencing a demographic-dividend phase and a transition towards population ageing.

These findings support the paper's central argument that India should be conceptualised as a set of asynchronous demographic regions. Younger, later-transition states face the challenge of converting population momentum into human capital and productive employment. Earlier-transition states increasingly face ageing, care needs and slower labour-force renewal. Migration connects these regions and can generate national economic complementarity, but only if migrants are incorporated into housing, labour, education, health and social-protection systems.

The policy implication is not a uniform population-control strategy but a differentiated demographic-development strategy. In relatively high-fertility areas, the priority should be voluntary reproductive health, girls' education, maternal and child health and expanded economic opportunities for women. In youthful states, human-capital formation and job creation are urgent.

In low-fertility ageing regions, social protection, geriatric care, productivity and migrant integration become increasingly important. National policy should facilitate mobility and portability of entitlements so that labour can move more efficiently between demographic regions.

The principal limitation of this analysis is the absence of a completed post-2011 census population count. Contemporary fertility estimates and official projections provide strong evidence of the direction of change but cannot substitute fully for updated enumeration at state, district and urban scales. Future research should use the next census results to measure post-2011 population growth directly, map district-level fertility and ageing clusters, estimate migration corridors and test the degree of demographic convergence. Until then, academic accuracy requires a strict distinction between census observations, sample-based estimates and projections.

India's demographic challenge is therefore no longer adequately described as simply the management of a very large population. It is increasingly a question of where population growth and labour-force entry are concentrated, where ageing is accelerating, and how migration connects regions experiencing different stages of transition. A geographical perspective makes these differences visible and provides a stronger basis for region-specific development planning than national averages alone.

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