

# India faces deepening demographic divide as it prepares to overtake China as the world's most populous country



India is poised to become the world's most populous country Composite: Guardian Design/ AFP/Getty Images

## **India's entrenched north-south divide is growing as its population changes, with serious social and political consequences**

**Hannah Ellis-Petersen in Delhi**

Mon 14 Nov 2022 06.30 GMT

The cry of a baby born in **India** one day next year will herald a watershed moment for the country, when the scales tip and India overtakes China as the world's most populous nation.

Yet the story of India's population boom is really two stories. In the north, led by just two states, the population is still rising. In the richer south, numbers are stabilising and in some areas declining. The deepening divisions between these regions mean the government must eventually grapple with a unique problem: the consequences of a baby boom and an ageing population, all inside one nation.

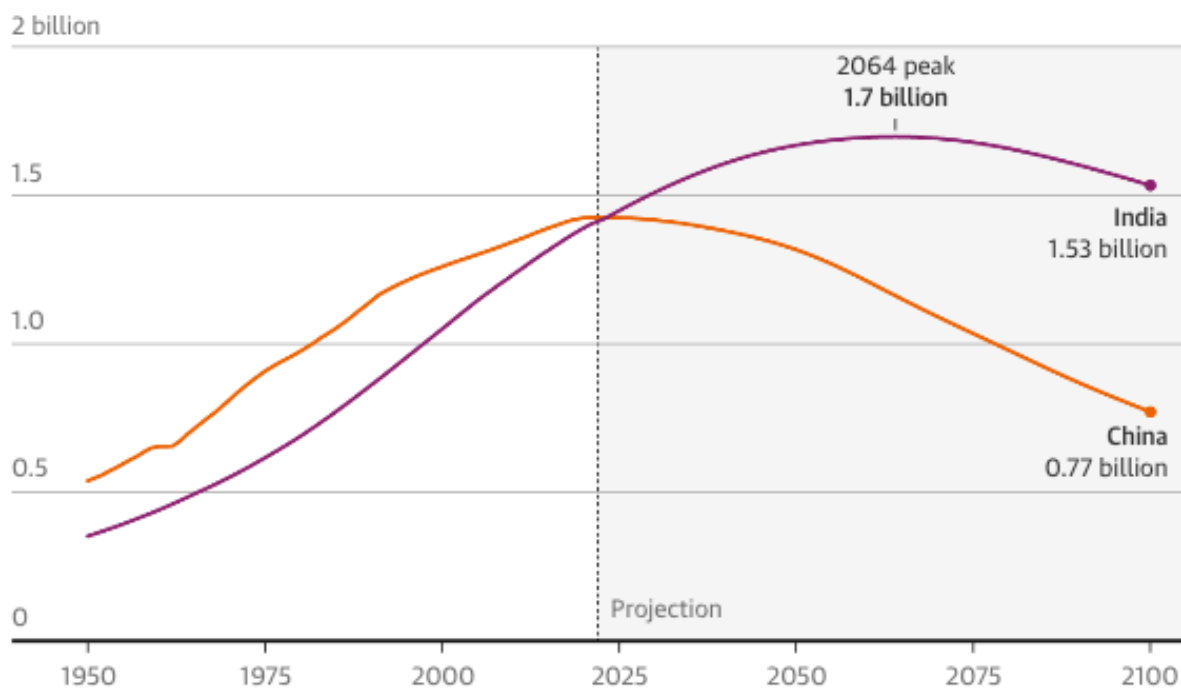
India is currently home to more than 1.39 billion people – four times that of the US and more than 20 times the UK – while 1.41bn live in China. But with 86,000 babies born in India every day, and 49,400 in China, India is on course to take the lead in 2023 and hit 1.65 billion people by 2060.

On 15 November the world's population will reach a total of 8 billion people. Between now and 2050, over half of the projected increase in the global population will happen in just eight countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, the United Republic of Tanzania – and India.

The growth will place huge pressure on India's resources, economic stability and society, and the repercussions will reach far beyond its borders. As a country on the forefront of the climate crisis, already grappling with extreme weather events 80% of the year, diminishing resources such as water could become decisive factors in what India's future population looks like.

## India is projected to overtake China as the world's most populous country in 2023

Population estimates for 1 January each year to 2021 and medium variant projections thereafter



Guardian graphic. Source: UN. Note: data for China excludes Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan

## **One country, two stories**

Fears of “population explosion” in India – where development caves in beneath the weight of an uncontrollably expanding population and the country’s resources are overrun, leaving millions to starve – have abounded for over a century.

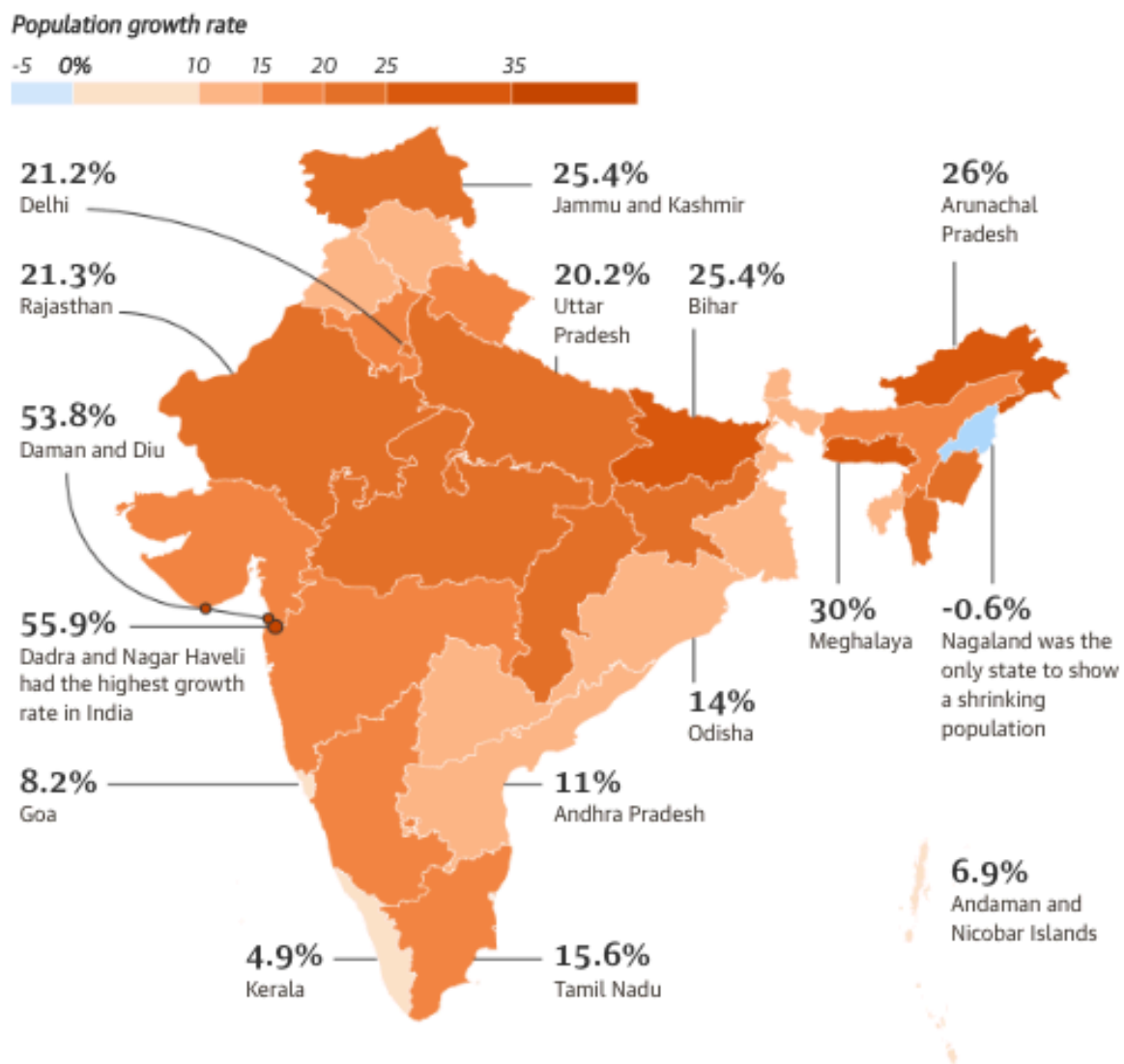
Post independence, India’s population grew at a significant pace; between 1947 and 1997, it went from 350 million to 1 billion. But since the 1980s, various initiatives worked to convince families, particularly those from poorer and marginalised backgrounds who tend to have the most children, of the benefits of family planning. As a result, India’s fertility rate began to fall faster than any of the doomsday “explosion” scenarios had predicted.

A small family is now the norm in India, and with the annual population growth rate less than 1%, fears of population-driven collapse are no longer seen as realistic. In the 1950s, a woman in India would give birth to an average of over six children; today the national average is just over two and still continuing to fall.

Nonetheless, the curbs on population growth have not been uniform across India, and India’s entrenched north-south divide has played out significantly in demographics, with ongoing social and political consequences.

For the next decade, one-third of India’s population increase will come from just two northern states, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Bihar, the only state in India where women still typically have more than three children, is not expected to hit population stability – 2.1 children per woman – until 2039. Kerala, India’s most educated, progressive state, hit that figure in 1998.

## The population growth rate between 2001 and 2011 tended to be higher in northern Indian states



Guardian graphic. Source: Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Telangana government state portal

In Bihar's poverty stricken area of Kishanganj, which has one of the highest rates of fertility in India, women said they had only recently begun to learn about the benefits of having fewer children.

The urge to have sons, who in parts of India are still considered much more desirable than daughters, remained a key motivator for women in the village. Surta Devi, 36, said she had six children in order to make sure she had two sons to "carry on our lineage".

“It was only after I gave birth to all my children that doctors told me about family planning,” said Devi.

Phullo Devi, 55, an illiterate labourer who had six children before she opted for sterilisation, said she wished she had done things differently. “If I had less children, I would have been able to raise them better and been able to educate them,” she said.

But Devi said things were slowly changing in the village. “Now health workers campaign house-to-house and make people aware about contraception and condoms. I absolutely want my sons and daughters to have less children so they don’t have to live in poverty,” she said.



An Indian woman and wife of a migrant worker hold her baby as she boards a bus Photograph: Harish Tyagi/EPA

### **The ‘youth bulge’**

A particular demographic challenge, widespread across India but particularly concentrated in poorer northern states, is that of the “youth bulge”. The median age of an Indian is 29 and the country is grappling with a vast, ambitious and increasingly restless young population, the majority of whom are unskilled, and for whom there are not enough schools, universities, training programmes and most of all, not enough jobs. Across India, youth unemployment is 23% and

only one in four graduates are employed. While female literacy is growing, **only 25% of women in India participate in the workforce.**

In Uttar Pradesh, where the median age is 20, there are over 3.4 million unemployed young people. Earlier this year, riots broke out in Bihar after more than twelve million people applied for 35,000 positions in the Indian Railways.

Vishu Yadav, 25, from Ghazipur district in Uttar Pradesh, has a masters degree, an education diploma and passed a teacher eligibility test, but is unemployed, with teaching jobs scarce and over a million people now applying for officer positions in the state civil service. “It’s a depressing, hopeless situation. I am eligible to become a teacher but I can not secure a position. There are too many young people with qualifications and not enough jobs,” he said.

Poonam Muttreja, the executive director of **Population** Foundation India, said there was still time for this young population to work to India’s benefit.

“India has a fantastic window of opportunity but it will only be there for approximately the next two decades,” said Muttreja. “We have the capacity to tap into the potential of the youth population but we need to invest in adolescent education, health and sexual health right away if we want to reap the benefits.

“Otherwise, our demographic dividend could turn into a demographic disaster.”

Muttreja said India’s youth risk fuelling population growth unless contraception and family planning services are improved, describing the situation as “woefully inadequate”.

Female sterilisation is still the most widely used contraceptive method in India, and that’s mostly by older married women. Of India’s tiny health budget, only 6% is put aside for family planning, and just 0.4% of that is invested in temporary methods such as the contraceptive pill or condoms.

“Currently we have almost 360 million young people, the majority of whom are at a reproductive age, and that number is only going to increase over the next few decades,” Muttreja said.



“The need for more temporary contraception methods is urgent. It will be very problematic if this need is not met.”

According to the UN, there are 10 million unwanted pregnancies in India every year. Abortion is legal in India, but was only legalised for single women this year. It remains taboo for married women and most abortions are carried out by village “quacks”, often with long-term health consequences.

Yet for several states in the south which now have falling populations, another challenge lingers on the horizon, one which is rarely mentioned. In the next 15 years, the average man from the southern state of Tamil Nadu will be 12 years older than someone from Bihar.



Residents of Tamil Nadu will be on average 12 years older than those from Bihar, in the next 15 years Photograph: Idrees Mohammed/EPA

“The crisis that the south will soon be facing is that of an ageing population,” said Aparajita Chattopadhyay, a professor at the International Institute for Population Sciences.

“India will soon have over 10% of the population who are ageing, which in our context is a huge number. That presents significant problems in terms of

employment, in terms of social security but most of all for healthcare, where spending is still very low and the prevalence of diseases such as diabetes is very high among older people. This should not be ignored.”

### **A political problem**

The north-south divide has also enabled the politicisation of population in India. In the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, ruled by a hardline figure from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the high population has been used to justify the drafting of a population control bill, proposing coercive methods to ensure two children per couple.

The draft bill is seen by some as a thinly veiled attack on Muslims, fuelled by a pervasive yet inaccurate myth promoted by Hindu nationalists that the number of Muslims is fast outpacing Hindus, as part of a conspiracy by Muslims to become the majority in India. Muslims make up 14% of the population, Hindus are 80%.

“All this talk of population control measures in Uttar Pradesh is only to keep the controversy going and to give Muslims a bad name, stir up hatred and win the Hindu majority vote,” said SY Quraishi, a former Indian civil servant who recently published *The Population Myth*, a book demolishing the myths around Islam and family planning in India.

“As the data clearly shows, this suggestion of Muslims overtaking the Hindu population is a blatant lie.”

Quraishi emphasised that while Muslims in India do have higher fertility rates than Hindus, this is not due to religion but because Muslims are often poorer, less educated and with less access to health services. The Muslim fertility rate in India is also now falling faster than the Hindu rate.

BJP leader Ashwini Upadhyay recently submitted a petition to the supreme court calling for “an effective population control policy like China” to cope with the “population explosion”, though such policies have been rebuffed by the central BJP government.

Quraishi said rather than trying to emulate China’s population control measures, policymakers in Delhi should take them as a warning.



“In India people used to admire China’s policy of one child norm,” he said. “But now look, China has a population crisis on their hands, 70% of their population are ageing. That should be an important lesson for anyone talking about coercive measures: otherwise in a few decades that could be us too.”

## **Cities under pressure**

Though fears of an Indian “population bomb” have eased, one area already creaks under the strain of a rising population. India’s cities are some of the biggest and overburdened in the world, and in the next few decades they will get even bigger.

India is still largely rural, with about 33% of the population living in cities, but urbanisation is picking up pace. By 2035, 675 million Indians will live in cities and, according to UN projections, by 2050, more Indians will live in urban environments than villages. With a population of 20 million, India’s capital Delhi is already one of the largest and most polluted cities in the world. It’s expected to grow to 28 million by 2041, according to the city masterplan.



India’s capital, Delhi, is expected to grow to 28 million people by 2041. Photograph: Kabir Jhangiani/ZUMA Press Wire/REX/Shutterstock

In the biggest metropolises of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, housing, water, transport and sanitation infrastructure are already struggling to cope,

and this will only be exacerbated by climate change. In India's financial capital Mumbai, which is predicted to grow from 20 million to 27 million by 2025, 40% of people live in slums. In 2019, the city of Chennai ran out of water entirely.

“Urbanisation will drive important changes in this country in the coming decades but at the same time, the quality of life in Indian cities is already deteriorating fast,” said Rumi Aijaz, a fellow at the Delhi thinktank Observer Research Foundation.

“Adaptation of urban areas is one of the biggest challenges India faces as its population grows – but right now the government response is weak.”

## **What happens next**

Despite the continued rise in population in the north over the next few years, India's overall trajectory is one of declining fertility and eventual population stability. Yet just how far fertility will fall is still up for debate. Unlike in the west, India's declining fertility rate so far has not coincided with a change in family structure or marriage patterns, such as women choosing to marry and have children later, or not at all.

Instead, so far, the maternal expectations of Indian women have remained largely unchanged; the majority still get married by their early twenties, have two children while relatively young and then stop, often by opting for sterilisation.

As India develops and more women are educated and enter the workforce, experts say fertility norms will continue to shift. Back in the Bihar village of Kishanganj, Nazia Parveen, 19, who is studying at university, said she had already noticed the difference that women's education had made to the number of children being born locally.

“Now much fewer children are being born in the village and around 60% of the families are using family planning,” she said. “This is such a change from the past when there was no awareness, and it is all because of women's education. No one of my generation wants to have more than two children.”

*Mohammad Sartaj Alam contributed reporting from Bihar*