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India's birth control measures resonate among its Muslims, priests play a role

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Summary

- Muslims say small families can afford education for all children
- Some Muslim priests propagate need for birth control
- Younger generation of Muslims driving change, even among poor
- Fall in Muslim birth rate busts Hindu nationalist myth

NEW DELHI/MORADABAD, India, April 12 (Reuters) - Syed Mohammed Talha says he is proud that his seven-year-old daughter attends a prestigious Montessori school in India's national capital region.

The school is expensive, with annual fees at 255,000 rupees (\$3,113), but the Muslim businessman says he is happy he can afford it.

"If I had a second child I couldn't have afforded to send them both to this school," said Talha, 42, who lives in Noida, a satellite city adjoining New Delhi.

"Having just one child allows us to be focused on her, give her a good education, lots of facilities, there are many benefits."

Talha's pleasure in having a small family underlines a growing trend among India's minority Muslims, long known for large families with the highest population growth rate across India's religious communities.

With India set to overtake China and become the world's most populous nation this month, the shrinking of its Muslim families underlines the

success of its decades-old population control programmes and signals demographic stability, experts said.

Reuters spoke to six Muslim men and women as well as seven community leaders, population experts and Islamic scholars. All agreed there was a marked increase in awareness among Indian Muslims about birth control and family planning.

Muslims are India's second largest religious community and accounted for 14.2% of the 1.2 billion population, according to the once in 10 years census in 2011. The majority Hindus accounted for 79.8%.

The 2021 census has been delayed but the United Nations has projected India's population will touch 1.42 billion this month. The country's Muslim population is the world's third-largest after Indonesia and Pakistan

The trend of smaller Muslim families has become visible in the last 15 years, with the National Family Health Survey showing a fall in the Muslim fertility rate – the average number of children a woman has – to 2.4 in 2019-21 from 2.6 in 2015-16 and 3.4 in 2005-06.