

India is often described as a collection of many countries held together by a common destiny and a successful democracy. Its diverse ethnic, linguistic, geographic, religious, and demographic features reflect its rich history and shape its present and future. No fewer than 16 languages are featured on Indian rupee notes. It is also only the second country to achieve a population of 1 billion. While it is an emerging economic power, life remains largely rooted in its villages. Only a small fraction of Indians are benefiting from the country's expanding industrial and information sectors.

India has more people than Europe, more than Africa, more than the entire Western Hemisphere. India's population will exceed that of China before 2030 to become the world's most populous country, a distinction it will almost certainly never lose. Just one group, Indian boys below age 5, numbers 62 million—more than the total population of France. India's annual increase of nearly 19 million contributes far more to annual world population growth than any other country.

This Population Bulletin presents a demographic portrait of the diverse country of India in the early years of the 21st century and offers insight into some of the forces driving continued growth.

A Rich History

Although the region has a rich and ancient history, present-day India is a relatively new nation. India gained independence from British rule in 1947, after decades of struggle against the former colonial power. The country was then partitioned into primarily Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The eastern part of Pakistan is today's Bangladesh. In the largest mass migration ever recorded, millions of Hindus left Pakistan to resettle in India, as millions of Muslims moved from India to Pakistan. The upheaval of the partition also unleashed a period of horrific violence between Hindus and Muslims, and sporadic conflicts between Hindus and Muslims and between India and Pakistan continue to this day.

At independence, India consisted of provinces defined by the British, along with more than 500 princely states whose territory was ultimately taken over by the new Indian government. Boundaries for today's states were largely drawn along language lines after independence. In the 21st century, India is a federal republic comprised of 28 states and seven union territories. States and union territories are split into 593 districts and 5,564 subdistricts.

New states are created periodically to ease the burden of governing as their populations grow or to provide separate states for ethnic and tribal groups. Three new states were created in 2000 when Jharkhand was split from Bihar, Chhattisgarh was cut from Madhya Pradesh, and a few mountain districts were carved out of Uttar Pradesh to form the state of Uttaranchal.

Part of Kashmir, along the northwestern border with Pakistan, is occupied by Pakistan, although India considers it Indian territory. Disputes over this territory have spawned intense political battles and

terrorism.

India's 1.2 million square miles (3.3 million square kilometers) equals about one-third the land area of the United States. In the far north, India is dominated by the grand sweep of the Himalayas, Hindu Kush, and Patkai mountain ranges, which soon give way to the vast and fertile Indo-Gangetic plain of the north, fed by such major rivers as the Ganges and Yamuna. Here are located many of India's most populous states such as Haryana, Delhi, Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal (see Figure 1, page 3). Moghuls invaded from Afghanistan in the 16th century, leaving a mark on the architecture, food, and dress of northern India still discernable today.¹ Hindi, India's official language of government, is spoken in much of the north, and the area from Rajasthan to Bihar is often referred to as the "Hindi Belt." This region, which contains just over 40 percent of the national population, is known for high birth and death rates, low literacy levels, and endemic rural poverty.

Mountain ranges divide north from south, marking the beginning of the Deccan Plateau that makes up much of southern India. The north/south division also marks enormous socioeconomic differences. In contrast to high illiteracy, rapid population growth, and poor health common in the north, the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu are known for high literacy levels, long life expectancy, and low birth rates. Throughout history, the south had more contact with an outside world attracted by its profitable spice trade. Trade and interaction with foreign people encouraged literacy and introduced a diversity of religions. Although Hinduism predominates throughout the region, Kerala, on the southwestern coast, has one of the highest proportions of both Christians and Muslims in India. That state has also historically been one of India's most advanced in terms of women's rights and education levels. Northeast India, barely connected to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land known as the Siliguri, or "Chicken's Neck," consists of seven smaller states, some carved out of the state of Assam, which are ethnically closer to Southeast Asia than to the rest of India.

Population Change

The Indian subcontinent has long been one of the world's most populous regions, but as in many of today's developing countries, population growth took off in the 20th century. India began the century with a population of about 238 million and ended it with 1 billion (see Table 1). India added another 100 million by 2006, when its population reached an estimated 1.1 billion. This phenomenal growth followed a century of relatively stable population size, according to most historical estimates.

Scholars differ in the historical estimates of the region's population, but many assume that the population was roughly 200 million in the early 1800s. India's population total remained more or less static during the 19th century, reflecting a slender balance of births over deaths.² Growth slowly accelerated in the late 1800s. By 1871, India's population had reached 255 million (see Figure 2). The first population census was conducted in 1872, and a census has been taken every decade since (see Box 1, page 6).

India's population growth pattern is typical for a high-fertility and high-mortality country in that

population grew quite slowly, even declining in the early 20th century. High birth rates were counterbalanced by high death rates, along with periodic famines, outbreaks of lethal diseases such as cholera and smallpox, and endemic parasitic diseases such as malaria.³ But epidemics and famines receded in the first half of the 20th century. The year 1921 is often referred to as the "Year of the Great Divide," because it marked the shift from a pattern of relatively static population size to one of steady and often rapid increase. As the mid-20th century approached, growth began to accelerate as the more serious threats to public health waned: Death rates fell but birth rates remained high. India's population growth rate peaked between the 1971 and 1981 censuses, but growth in absolute numbers has not yet peaked. The country added 16 million people annually in the 1980s and 18 million annually in the 1990s until the present.

India's population growth slowed as the birth rate gradually declined beginning in the late 1960s. Since the early 1970s, the birth rate has fallen from just under 40 births per 1,000 population to 24 per 1,000 in 2004. This decline reflected the concerted effort by the government to slow population growth (see Population Policies, page 14).

Mortality

India's mortality has declined at a sluggish rate (see Figure 3). In the early 1970s, the infant mortality rate (IMR) was about 130 deaths to infants under age 1 per 1,000 live births. By 2004, the IMR declined to about 58. In recent years, the pace of improvement has quickened. Maternal mortality has also declined since the 1970s, although at 540 maternal deaths per 100,000 births in 2000, the rate remains higher than in many other less-developed countries, and nearly 10 times higher than in China.⁴

Declining death rates, especially among infants and young children, boosted the average life expectancy for Indians from about 50 years in the early 1970s to 63 years for the 1999-2003 period. The national average is similar to levels in neighboring Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. Yet, life expectancies are above 70 years in some Indian states such as Kerala, and other Asian countries, including Sri Lanka and Thailand, and are 80 or above in Singapore and Japan, suggesting there is considerable room for improvement in India. A substantial fall in mortality could boost population growth unless accompanied by further declines in the birth rate.

Life expectancy at birth varies by nearly 20 years among Indian states, ranging from 57 years in Madhya Pradesh to 74 in Kerala (see Table 2). These vast differences reflect a large gap among states in education and access to health services.

Age and Sex Profile

The history of high birth rates has kept India's population relatively young: In 2005, about 36 percent of the population was below age 15 and just 4 percent was age 65 or older. The broad-based age and sex population "pyramid" taken from United Nations projections shows this youthfulness clearly (see Figure 4). More than half the population is below age 25. The young population virtually guarantees further

growth, as these young people produce their own families, who will also require additional schools, jobs, and housing.

Sex Ratio at Birth

One of the most striking features of India's population profile is its abnormally high ratio of males to females, particularly at young ages. While about 105 boys are born for every 100 girls in most countries, the ratio is about 113 per 100 in India, and it ranges up to 129 per 100 in some states (see Table 3). This skewed ratio has been increasing.

The overriding explanation is the abortion of female fetuses (see Box 2, page 10). While abortion has been legal in India since 1972, sex-selective abortion has been illegal since 1994. However, the government has not effectively enforced the ban. The practice has increased, especially in wealthier states, such as Haryana and Punjab, and in urban areas, where couples are more likely to have access to the prenatal tests to determine their fetus' sex. The government has redoubled efforts to enforce the ban in recent years in the face of growing alarm at the frequency of female feticide.⁵

Efforts to stem the practice of sex-selective abortion include a broader campaign to improve the status of women and to encourage parents to value daughters as well as sons. In districts where son preference is especially strong, initiatives involve medical professionals, religious leaders, schools, television shows, and politicians. A "Save a Girl Child" campaign highlights the achievements and value of young girls.⁶ This desire to enhance the value of daughters was behind the government's decision to choose a baby girl as India's official "billionth baby," born in Safdarjung Hospital in New Delhi on May 11, 2000.

Some states are initiating their own campaigns. Delhi is launching a "Girl Child Protection Scheme" campaign under which 5,000 rupees (US\$111) will be deposited in the name of every girl born in a government hospital or maternity home. The money and accrued interest will be given to the girl when she reaches 18 and completes a specified level of education.⁷ The Punjab government will give a reward of 250,000 rupees (US\$5,556) to communities that achieve a target sex ratio among recorded births. Jalahmazra village in Nawashahr, Punjab, received this reward in 2006.⁸

Geographic Diversity

The Indian population is heavily concentrated in the broad fertile northern plains. Historically higher birth rates in the northern states continue to shift a larger share of India's population growth northward. Four northern states-Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh-often referred to as the "BIMARU" states, accounted for 40 percent of India's population, but 47 percent of the country's population growth between 1991 and 2001.⁹ Uttar Pradesh, with 166 million people in 2001, is by far India's most populous state and is larger than Pakistan and Bangladesh (see Table 4, page 7).

Fertility decline has been most dramatic in southern states, and those states contribute less and less to

India's annual population growth. Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu accounted for 22 percent of the country's population in 2001, but contributed only 14 percent of its population growth. This disparity is certain to increase.

'India Lives in its Villages'

Although many Westerners associate Indian life with teeming megacities, as the country's registrar general said in 2005, "India lives in its villages."¹⁰ A large majority of Indians live in relatively small localities and are engaged in farming or some activity related to farming. In 2001, the average Indian lived in a village of about 4,200 people; 72 percent of India's total population was classified as rural, and 58 percent of workers were engaged in agriculture (see Figure 5). Just 11 percent of Indians lived in large cities of 1 million or more residents (see Figure 6).

Many Indians who live in relatively populated areas are classified as rural because their communities are highly dependent on agriculture and lack the population density required for the official urban designation. In general, India classifies communities as urban if they have at least 5,000 people; a population density of at least 400 people per square kilometer (1,000 per square mile); and less than 25 percent of the male labor force engaged in agriculture. Accordingly, many of the 16 percent of Indians living in places with 5,000 to 19,999 people are classified as rural.

Throughout most of India, rural residents have lower educational levels, higher mortality and fertility, higher poverty, and fewer modern amenities than urban residents (see Box 3, page 11). Rural-to-urban migration has been much slower than in Latin America and in other world regions. Most Indians live their entire lives within a relatively limited geographic area.

Urban India

Before 1951, defining an urban area was left entirely to the discretion of local authorities, leading some demographers to joke that "in the pre-independence era, some princely states of India, in order to lay a claim to respectability, were inclined to treat any habitation with a lamppost as an urban centre."¹¹ The definition of an urban place in India has varied, but now is similar to that used in most other developing countries. In addition to the criteria mentioned above, some places-centers of government, for example-are officially designated as urban regardless of their other characteristics.

As in other countries of South Asia, India's urban population has grown relatively slowly for the last century. The percentage of Indians living in urban areas rose from 11 percent in 1901 to 28 percent in 2001. Rural areas added significantly more people than urban areas between 1991 and 2001: 114 million compared with 69 million (see Table 5). . . .