Population Puzzle: An Assessment of the Influence of Hindu Nationalism on Demographic Policymaking in India
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POPULATION PUZZLE

AN ASSESSMENT OF
THE INFLUENCE OF HINDU NATIONALISM
ON DEMOGRAPHIC POLICYMAKING IN INDIA

भाजपाच नं.1

छोटा परिवार सुखी परिवार
A SMALL FAMILY IS A HAPPY FAMILY

भारत
INDIA

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<u>Acknowledgements</u>

I sold my pride down the river now

I guess I finally figured out

That what kept me afloat when the waves came

Were the decks of a boat bearing your name

Isaac Anderson - Moving Mountains

To my mother and father, who gifted me the world and made endless sacrifices to ensure I could realize my full potential in it and to my brother, who has taught me the true meaning of unconditional support and many important life lessons, I strive to make you proud each and every day.

To Kira, Christine and Kenan, nothing I do, including writing this thesis, would be possible without you believing in me. This planet is so much better off with you on it.

MSc Thesis

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Abstract

Continuous human expansion on a planet with finite resources has intensified a variety of polluting practices and resulted in major resource inequality across the globe. Though the idea that population control is an appropriate solution to the issue of overpopulation has seemingly disappeared from the sphere of politics since the mid 90's, this thesis considers the resurgence of discussions to adopt a more coercive approach toward population management in India by investigating the extent to which Hindu nationalism influences contemporary demographic policymaking in India. While India's Hindu nationalist legislators maintain that such a policy is a necessity considering the looming environmental crisis and lack of sufficient resources, there is a considerable disconnect between such claims and the country's current demographic development. Therefore, this thesis aims to unveil governmental motivations behind the push for a two-child policy by examining policymakers' attitudes and their framing of population growth as a justification for the novel two-child policy proposal.

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Introduction

Despite the pressures that the ever-increasing world population places on the environment, state infrastructures, and the labor market, the implementation of restrictive demographic policies remains a difficult and controversial topic in the realm of global politics. This is largely due to concerns regarding their potential to undermine individuals' fundamental right to make free reproductive choices. Since the mid-1990s, a paradigm shift has taken place in the international development agenda, as governments and non-state actors began to abandon a demography-centered approach in favor of one that focuses on women's rights as the key contributor to development (Rao 2008, 55). By 2021, most governments that had previously used coercive measures to control population growth, such as China, Vietnam, and Iran, have either loosened or completely abandoned their restrictive population control policies (BBC 2020).

However, India remains an exception to the aforementioned trend as policymakers have proposed the adoption of a coercive bill as an amendment to the Indian constitution that actively attempts to decrease population growth (Mandhani 2020). More specifically, it includes a two-child policy, which would reward those choosing to have only one or two children by giving them preferential access to a range of government benefits (Live Law India 2020; The Citizen 2020). Although 125 members of parliament in the upper house signed the bill, it remains highly controversial and is yet to be legalized (Mandhani 2020). Nevertheless, similar proposals have been brought forward in the past, and albeit with no success, several states in the country have adopted demographic policies that prevent those with three or more children from running in local government elections or obtaining government jobs (Nalapat 2019).

Since India is predicted to overtake China as the world's most populous country within this decade, and has been at the center of population growth discourse for many

decades the policy makers' push to adopt for coercive demographic policies may initially appear to be a reasonable approach to reduce population growth (UN 2019, 1). One might question why this is a puzzling phenomenon worth researching due to the fact that while the implications of such a proposal may be problematic, the approach in itself may be sensible considering India's large population size. As a matter of fact, India's population growth has slowed down significantly since the 1960's as fertility rates have dropped from an average of 6 births per woman in 1960 to 2.2 births per woman in 2018 (World Bank 2021). Considering that the fertility rate needed to sustain current population levels lies at 2.1 births per woman, it becomes evident that India has entered a new stage of demographic transition as it approaches replacement fertility levels (Haub and Sharma 2015, 2-3). Given this data, it appears that even without a two-child law, India has already made considerable progress in stabilizing its population dynamics, raising the question of why some policymakers are now considering a more coercive approach to demographic development necessary.

One explanation for this may be found when taking into consideration the rise of Hindu nationalism in India over the past two decades, which has consolidated itself in the continuous electoral victories of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Chopra 2019, 21). Hindu nationalism as an ideology concerns itself with the (re) establishment of a Hindu nation of India and the notion of a superior Hindu race, and thus serves as a reason to suspect that Hindu nationalist politicians may have an interest in government-led population planning that goes beyond a sustainability-driven agenda. This suspicion grows when taking into consideration that the recent proposal has been brought forward by policymakers who are members of the Hindu right.

There is a noticeable disconnect between on the one hand, a strong trend towards smaller families and on the other, the repeated attempts by lawmakers, both successful and rejected, on national and local levels to implement laws disincentivizing reproduction, which

is why this thesis aims to answer the following research question: *To what extent does Hindu nationalism influence contemporary demographic policymaking in India?*

Such research is relevant to deepening the knowledge generated about the reciprocal relationship between demographic dynamics and politics, as shown by the relatively recent emergence of the field of political demography (Leuprecht and Goldstone 2013, 1). Examining why India chooses to push for population control policies despite a decline in births may reveal important information about current tensions in Indian society and improve insight into key actors' attitudes and agendas in relation to demographic trends and population management.

In the first chapter, the thesis provides an overview of the consulted literature in order to construct the theoretical framework. The second chapter outlines the research design as a qualitative-method study whereas the third chapter presents a historical overview of demographic policymaking in India while further discussing fertility in relation to Hindu nationalism. Next, the fourth chapter analyzes recent attempts to adopt coercive population control methods in India. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the findings and answers the research question.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1.1 Ideas, Discourses and Population Growth

This thesis approaches the analysis of the selected data from a social constructivist perspective, because the subject matter is concerned with the influencing power of ideas. Examining the topic of demographic policymaking in India using a social constructivist lens allows one to examine actors' underlying preferences and ideological motifs. This especially applies to policymakers campaigning for a two-child policy and how their preferences are possibly shaped by past experiences as well as preconceived notions about others in society (Hurd 2010, 300-301). While some scholars maintain that it is actors who hold active power over ideas, this research operates from the perspective that, when grounded in discursive practices and institutions, such as governmental bodies, ideas can serve as powerful influences on actors behaviors (Carstensen and Schmidt 2015, 326-329). Within this specific discursive institutionalist approach, which the authors have coined 'power through ideas', actors may use ideas rather than e.g. physical force or monetary incentives in order to convince others to do something. Such an understanding of the relationship between ideas and power emphasizes actors ability to engage critically with the ideas they hold, which enables this research to examine the ways in which actors strategically operationalize ideas (Ibid).

In this context, the term "ideology" is an image of what a "good society" is and entails ideas about the measures that are necessary to mold such a society. Hence, this image identifies means as well as ends (Hinrich and Munger 1994, 1-3). Ideologies are commonly defined as clusters of ideas shared by groups of people and, as such, act as the basis of in-group attitudes and beliefs which in turn inform the production of discourse (van Dijk 1997, 138). Discursive practices and ideological acquisition are closely interconnected , whereby discourse is informed by ideology and at the same time, may also serve to facilitate the

processes of conceiving and legitimizing new strands of ideology (Ibid.) As ideologies and their respective discourses inform individuals understanding of the world around them, they are highly influential and can serve not only to justify political action, but also may become weaponized in order to e.g. villainize others in order to achieve underlying ideological goals (Pascale 2019, 898).

Some scholars have argued that the primary function of ideology in politics is to enable voters to predict how politicians will act in relation to a variety of issues. Since the information about future policy requiring problems is limited, voters trust that their elected policy makers will rely on their ideological position to guide their choices, a notion which allows shared ideology to serve as an influential tool gaining political power (Chandra 2007, 37). Traditionally, the impact of ideology on policy decisions has often been theorized about in the context of the left-right spectrum of political ideologies. However, recent scholarly works have highlighted that such an approach neglects important complexities and the influence of economic and environmental ideologies on contemporary world politics (Blair 2020, 72-73).

Though largely rooted in empirical scientific investigations, research on and discussions about demographic concerns are not free of the influence of pre-existing ideologies and can also easily be integrated into such ideological frameworks, thereby becoming value-laden. If demographic findings are framed, through discursive practices, as a problem to be solved based on a natural and economic resource scarcity claim or as an environmental threat, this can create strong ideological levers to convince people that restrictive measures are warranted (Harvey 1994, 534-536). This resonates with the discursive institutionalist argument that, in order for a policy idea to be persuasive, it must be relevant, applicable and coherent, and these requirements can be fulfilled trough such a discursive threat construction (Carstensen and Schmidt 2015, 324).

Negative attitudes toward the effects of population growth, which may be used as such levers, are largely informed by theories concerning the effects of demographic dynamics on resource security, environmental sustainability, and economic development. Both (neo-) Malthusians and environmentalists are, to varying extents, concerned with the Anthropocene, a theoretical concept suggesting that alterations on the Earth's surface are a direct result of human action (Clapp and Dauvergne 2011, 9). In fact, increased population growth is perceived to be a serious threat to sustained human survival on planet earth due to limited resources and pollution caused by human activity (Ojeda et al. 2020, 316). Contemporary environmentalists also take the issue of overconsumption into consideration and argue that both of these aspects need to be addressed in order to prevent environmental collapse (Ibid.).

However, population concerns are theorized about beyond the scope of environmental concerns. While some economists have optimistically argued that population growth can have positive effects on the economy, others have challenged this view and hypothesized that an increasing population can hinder sustained economic development. Though some empirical evidence suggesting that periods of accelerated population growth may be beneficial for an economy in the long run does exist (Kuznets 1967, 171; Simon 1981), some scholars remain skeptical about the economy's ability to grow at the same rate as the population (Bloom and Canning 2003, 2). Population growth may result in a mismatch of labor supply and demand, which may cause significant problems, such as large-scale unemployment and growing poverty (Ehrlich 1986, 7-8; Peterson 2017, 12).

Highlighting the above-mentioned theories is relevant to this research as they may elucidate the motivations of policymakers in India to limit family sizes and enable justifications of such proposals in the name of sustainable development. However, concerns about the effects of population growth and density regarding the environment or economic

stability may not be the only attitudes fueling the perceived need for a two-child policy in India.

1.2 The Ideology of Hindu Nationalism

Over the past two decades, Hindu nationalism has become a strong ideological force in the Indian political landscape. The newfound success of Hindu nationalism and its associated social and political movements have been consolidated in the recurring electoral victories of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as well as the expansion of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a volunteer-based cultural organization representing the Hindu Right (Chopra 2019, 21). Contemporary Hindu nationalists have successfully identified this niche in the social sphere and present their belief system as a politico-ideological tool to recover what they argue is a "common Hindu identity," which had long been lost due to colonialism (Chakrabarty and Jha 2019, 1-2). This ideology is also called *Hindutva* (Hinduness), which seeks to build the *Hindu rashtra* (Hindu nation) and emphasizes the importance of a common race, shared lineage, and singular culture (Jaffrelot 2007, 86). Generally, culture as well as religion are considered recognizable markers of a distinct Hindu identity. However, within the framework of Hindutva, these features are utilized to invoke the sentiment of racial superiority (Patil 2017, 28-29).

This specific phenomenon, in which religious features are subsumed in favor of building an ideology that is highly focused on notions of a common origin, has been attributed to the influence of oriental scholarship during the colonial period (Ibid; Van Der Veer 1999, 422). As early as the mid-19th century, Hindu ideologues began to incorporate the orientalist notions of Aryan race theory into their own writings, arguing that Hindus were descendants of the 'Aryas', a race that was at the time considered 'superior' and believed to be responsible for most of societies achievements, an idea which enabled the racialization of

religious identity in India (Baber 2004, 706). By extension, the idea of a superior Hindu race and the construction of a primordial link between the Indian nation and Hinduism in the form of the political ideology of Hindutva has led to the othering of non-Hindu Indians.

Muslim Indians are particularly affected by this ideology due to the longstanding tensions and historical record of conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the region (Anand 2011, 5-6). These tensions are partially a result of the racialized discourse which emerged during the colonial period. As early as 1899, Hindu scholars publically expressed their concerns about a perceived decline of the Hindu race due to increased inter-faith marriages between Muslims and Hindus and began to argue that Muslims are strategically using reproduction to outnumber Hindus demographically, a discourse which continues to be reproduced by Hindu nationalist today (Baber 2004, 707).

Within contemporary Hindu nationalism, Muslims are perceived as traitors who are disloyal to their country by rejecting Hinduism and also actively responsible for hindering the rise of a powerful, united Indian nation (Chakrabarty and Jha 2019, 48). In conjunction with the BJP's increasing political dominance in India, the party has aided in the construction of the Muslim other as an "enemy on the inside" and a threat to the Hindu community by portraying Muslims as foreigners and terrorists (Patil 2013, 702). Hindu nationalists have claimed that a Muslim expansionist agenda exists, supposedly entailing forced conversions, a scheme of systematic migration, and high reproductive activity as a means to increase the size of the Muslim community in India (Jeffery and Jeffery 2002, 1806). Some scholars have described the Hindu Nationalist ideology using the term "porno-nationalism" due to its immense concern with the presumed predatory sexual behaviors of Muslims, framed as a danger to the integrity of Hindu bodies (Anand 2011, 49).

Basu's (1997) theory of the politicization of fertility suggests that, in some cases, contemporary demographic policy interventions are not based on empirical demographic

findings. Instead, they may be designed to achieve specific targets based on the political agenda of the group or institution that is pushing for such policy changes (Basu 1997, 5-6). Furthermore, politicized demographic policy proposals are not concerned with immediate measures to limit population growth, such as supplying contraceptives, but instead address more distant fertility rate determinants, such as women's status in society (Ibid., 14). Taking into consideration this particular theory and the fact that Hindu nationalist politicians and policymakers have an ideological interest in preserving the "Hindu race," this thesis considers Hindu nationalism as a potential driving factor for demographic policymaking in India.

Policymakers may justify their quest for proactive population control by referring to myths surrounding the comparatively higher fertility rates within Muslim communities rather than by appealing to factual evidence (Jeffery and Jeffery 2002, 1816-1817). If one subscribes to the narrative that Muslim Indians may soon outnumber Hindus, while simultaneously valuing the notion of Hindu self-preservation or perceiving Indian Muslim citizens as a threat, then this belief may serve as a legitimization for restrictions of reproductive freedoms. The emphasis on reducing the population growth of the Muslim population rather than incentivizing Hindu families to have more children also resonates with the notion that the Hindutva elites' actions are guided by the principle that "destroying is more important than building" - an idea expressed by scholars when reflecting on the 1992 destruction of the Babri mosque, largely demanded by and organized through the RSS and the BJP (Benvir 2019, 41:19; Filkins 2019).

Traditionally, the notion of self-preservation serves pronatalist policies targeting the population that is worried about being outnumbered rather than widely applicable restrictions on family size (King 2002, 373). Yet, this novel route of antinatalist policymaking may be necessary to accommodate the interests of governing Hindu nationalist parties under the guise

of competing concerns about population growth and its environmental and economic consequences.

Chapter 2: Research Design

Ontologically, this thesis is grounded in constructivism and argues from the perspective that social phenomena are constructed and continuously revised by social actors (Bryman 2008, 19). The research conducted is particularly interested in the relational interactions between policymaking, ideology and policymakers preferences and how these variables have changed and developed overtime. Furthermore, this study critically examines the discourses in which Hindu nationalist participate and operates from a perspective that acknowledges pre-existing structures of inequality and underlying social tensions between Muslims and Hindus in India (Anand 2011, 5-6).

Based on the assumption that both evidence-based concerns and ideological motives can influence public policy formulation (Carstensen and Schmidt 2015, 324), this thesis undertakes a single case study analysis in order to investigate the extent to which the political ideology of Hindu Nationalism informs contemporary demographic policymaking in India. As highlighted earlier, India is an exceptional case within the international community due to governmental discussions concerning the implementation of a two-child policy, which is why a single case study design is appropriate (Yin 2009, 47). In terms of consulted literature, this thesis will be built on a considerable amount of scholarly work, particularly in regards to the theoretical framework and contextual information, as well as materials provided by media outlets in order to obtain information about recent developments, which have not yet been captured in academic writing.

Based on the previously accessed literature, I hypothesize that contemporary demographic policymaking in India is primarily influenced by Hindu Nationalism. This understanding stands in contrast to the idea that demographic policymaking in India is influenced by pessimistic perceptions of population growth informed by concerns regarding the environment, which will serve as the main competing hypothesis. In order to test the given hypotheses, the thesis aims to build a novel explanatory narrative by applying a combination of two qualitative methods.

As established in the literature review, discourse is not only informed by ideology, but also plays in active role in constructing ideological frameworks in the first place (van Dijk 1997, 138). In the given case, analyzing the present discourses and systemically assessing policymakers' public attitudes towards population growth aids in gathering evidence regarding existence of a link between Hindu nationalist ideology, discursive practices and current demographic strategies. By closely examining the discourse used by key policy actors, statements can be linked to each other and placed within their broader ideological context in order to reflect changing discourse dynamics over time (Schmidt 2011, 2). To achieve this, this thesis examines a variety of materials, in particular records of speeches and other types of commentary given by key policymakers in India between 2002 and 2020, which have been made available by media outlets. Applying critical discourse analysis, the selected materials are analyzed by focusing on the ways in which they reflect on actors' attitudes towards population growth as well as how they may express larger underlying ideological frameworks. Additionally, critical discourse analysis entails exploring the relationship between reality and a particular discourse, which is particularly useful for this research in the context of examining the myth of Muslim overpopulation (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 3).

Furthermore, process tracing serves as a tool to consider alternative explanations, in particular the competing hypothesis that demographic policymaking in India is influenced by a variety of factors, including pessimistic perceptions of population growth informed by concerns regarding the environment. This combination of qualitative methods aids in the assessment of whether policymakers' claims about their interest in a two-child policy are deceptive by uncovering conflicting statements and policy decisions (Yin 2009, 141). Considering the novelty of the core hypothesis, process tracing makes an important methodological contribution to this research by building on the diagnostic evidence derived through discourse analysis.

The theory building procedure of this research is based on three analytical steps. First, the third chapter builds a strong foundation for the following examinations by providing crucial contextual information regarding the historical development of demographic policymaking as well as the existing myths surrounding Muslim fertility in India, which have been derived from a broad literature analysis. Secondly, the fourth chapter, in which discourse analysis and process tracing are made use of, is initially concerned with chronologically assessing shifting Hindu nationalist narratives in relation to demographic concerns. In the first two sections, past statements are examined in order to highlight Hindu nationalists leaders changing stances on the question of population control and to call attention to inconsistencies. The third section serves to take a closer look at the proposed policy and tests whether or not the provided justifications for this bill are coherent with other policy actions undertaken by Hindu nationalist actors. Lastly, all findings are summarized in a coherent conclusion.

Chapter 3: Demographic Dynamics in India: Realities and Myths

3.1 A Brief History

As established earlier, population growth in India has significantly decreased over the past sixty years, with total fertility levels dropping to 2.2 births per woman in 2018 (World Bank 2021). In fact, when examined and compared on the state level, most of India's 29 states have now reached replacement fertility levels, which means their total fertility rate is around 2.1 or lower (NFHS-5 2020). However, this decline did not occur without governmental interventions.

Following a period of high mortality during the influenza pandemic, the Indian population began to grow steadily around 1921 (Srinivasan 2017, 1-3). When the government-appointed Population Policy Committee presented its first five-year plan in December 1952, the newly independent nation of India made history by becoming the first country to adopt a family planning program. Multiple five-year plans followed, which emphasized continuous budget increases for family planning services and incentivized male sterilization through monetary compensation. In 1972, India legalized abortion, further

diversifying the range of family planning options publically available (Srinivasan 2017, 20-22).

From 1975 to 1977, the government launched an aggressive family planning strategy that resulted in the mass sterilization of an estimated 8.3 million Indian men in just two years, many of whom were forced (Haub and Sharma 2006, 14). Following this coercive demographic planning strategy, India's policymakers strongly advocated that all family planning must be non-compulsory. The resulting trend towards non-coercive, indirect population management policies was further consolidated after the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and its development-focused action program, of which India became a signatory (Srinivasan 2017, 61-62).

Beginning in the early 2000s, the Indian government introduced a novel approach to demographic development. Rather than perceiving population growth as an issue, governmental actors began to frame population growth as an economic advantage by actively advertising the nation's future demographic dividend to incentivize multinationals to invest (Follett 2020, 20). The term demographic dividend describes a specific stage in the demographic transition process that ensues following a population boom, when the cohort of working-age persons in a given country outnumbers those who are non-working. When this occurs, high labor supply combined with a low number of dependents can enable rapid economic development (Bloom et al. 2002, 33-37). However, considering the recent push for reduced family sizes, this period of optimism can arguably be described as having come to an end and has been replaced with a more negative attitude toward population growth.

3.2 The Great Debate: Muslim versus Hindu Fertility

While demographic trends have significantly shifted over time, the pattern of higher fertility rates among India's Muslim population has persisted. Nonetheless, total fertility rates have

been declining across all communities in India and this gap appears to be steadily narrowing. Fertility rates among Muslims have decreased from 4.4 births per woman in 1992 to 2.6 in 2015, while fertility rates among Hindu women fell from 3.3 in 1992 to 2.2 in 2015. This reflects a 40 percent drop in births for the former group and a 35 percent decline among the latter within the same period (Quarishi 2021, 97-98). This data, derived from India's National Family Health surveys, further shows that by 2015, intervals between successive births had significantly increased among Muslim women and the number of unplanned children was reduced by roughly 50 percent in comparison to 2005. These findings debunk the myth that Muslims as a religious group are fundamentally averse to family planning, with most data suggesting that they are actually accepting new family planning approaches faster than their Hindu counterparts (Rampal 2019). Furthermore, demographers have hypothesized that the proportion of Muslims in India will at the most rise to 20% of the overall population before eventually stabilizing (Pasupuleti et al. 2017, 167).

Despite evidence of the narrowing fertility gap between Muslims and Hindus, the existence of such a differential, which has been widespread public knowledge even in pre-independence India, has become a highly politicized subject of debate (Ibid., 147). Hindu nationalists have appropriated the idea that this fertility differential could lead the Muslim population to outnumber the Hindu majority in order to frame Muslim fertility as threat to the Hindu community. Despite the fact that such an outnumbering is statistically impossible based on contemporary demographic trends, Hindutva elites continue to exaggerate the existing pattern to fuel the conspiracy that Muslims are purposefully reproducing at higher rates as a form of demographic warfare (Anand 2011, 51).

Within this narrative, Muslim men are framed as hypersexual beings who do not shy away from strategically using polygyny, as a practice that is permissible in Islam, or perpetuating sexual violence toward Hindu women to outnumber India's Hindu population

(Anand 2011, 69-70). Hindu nationalists have actively perpetuated such myths, which not only misconstrue demographic trends but also ignore the factual reasons behind the higher fertility rates among Muslims. Though religious practices such as polygyny or views on contraception and abortion can influence fertility levels, scholars have argued that this role has been largely overstated (Jeffery and Jeffery 2002, 1816). Instead, Muslim Indians generally score lower than their Hindu counterparts in factors related to low fertility, such as literacy, employment, and access to the healthcare system. Such findings indicate that framing higher levels of fertility among Muslims solely within the context of religious differences only serves to demonize Muslim communities. It further overlooks the pressing need to improve their overall access to higher living standards as a means for population stabilization (Quarishi 2021, 211).

In short, there is no factual evidence that indicates that Muslims have co-conspired to outnumber Hindus in order to wield political power in India. In fact, the available demographic statistics reflect a decrease in the fertility differential between the two groups and shows that Muslim families have made considerable progress in reducing overall family size. As such, framing demographic dynamics as a Hindu versus Muslim issue ignores the root causes of differences in fertility levels while simultaneously enabling the incorporation of population politics into the Hindu nationalist ideology.

In order to gather evidence of the presence of such misleading narratives in the discussion surrounding the two-child policy proposal, the following chapter examines a variety of sources from the time prior to the official introduction of a two-child policy proposal to the general public in 2019. In addition, the chapter analyzes debates and events which surrounded and followed this proposal in order to explore the previously established hypotheses in-depth.

Chapter 4: Tracing the Shift in Demographic Policymaking

4.1 Pre-2019 Phase: Vilifying the Muslim Other and Taking Pronatalist Stances

The misconception that India's Muslims are covertly attempting to outnumber the country's Hindu majority has recently regained traction on social media, despite it not being a new phenomenon (Purohit 2019). After the 2002 Gujarat riots, a three-day-long conflict between Muslims and Hindus that resulted in over a thousand casualties and was followed by further outbreaks of inter-communal violence, the state government refused to establish refugee camps for Gujarati Muslims who had been forcibly displaced. Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister since 2014 and the chief minister of the Gujarati government at the time, justified this decision by stating that "relief camps are actually child-making factories. Those who keep on multiplying the population should be taught a lesson" (Filkins 2019).

Without explicitly saying who the term "those" represents, in this short statement, Modi expresses his view that it is Muslims who are responsible for India's population density, and thereby must be held accountable for their reproductive behaviors. He rationalizes this neglect of domestic Gujarati refugees, who were Modi's constituents at the

time, as a means to prevent further population growth and frames it as a well-deserved "lesson." As such, he contributed to further straining Hindu-Muslim relations in the region at the time. While Modi's words may have been understood as the mere agitated side remark of a politician under scrutiny at the time, in retrospect, this statement reveals crucial information regarding the now prime minister's Islamophobic attitude.

As previously explicated, in the years following this statement, the public narratives surrounding population growth in India became increasingly optimistic due to the potential for increased economic growth and competitiveness (Follett 2020, 20). The fact that, at the time, population growth was portrayed as a promising advantage in India's quest to establish itself as a major player in the global economy resulted in an overall more positive attitude towards demographic developments. By reframing the past population boom as an event that eventually will bring about positive changes through the demographic dividend mechanism, fears regarding population growth in India diminished and were replaced by a degree of optimism among policymakers and international actors alike (James 2008, 63). The shift in the general debate that took place may explain what the research conducted in digital newspaper archives discovered. As the 2010s began, members of the RSS and the BJP as well as religious leaders appear to have increasingly publicized their pronatalist stances by urging Hindus to have more children. Arguably, a more positive attitude toward population growth may have created an environment in which nationalist actors' pronatalist stances were not as easily dismissed as they had been during the periods in which India's population boom was perceived as a crisis.

In 2013, the Hindustan Times reported RSS General secretary Dattareya Hosbal's statement that "small family norms are posing a big threat to Hindus (...) Blindly following family planning norms by a community won't do any good to the country. It will trigger [a] serious imbalance in the country" (Babu 2013). This reflects Hosbal's clear condemnation of

governmental attempts to promote smaller family sizes by making claims that Hinduism is under threat. This most likely alludes to the widespread myth that it is realistically possible for Muslims to outnumber Hindus in India.

In addition, in early 2015, the BJP Member of Parliament (MP) Sakshi Maharaj was quoted by The Times of India as saying that "the concept of four wives and 40 children will not work in India and the time has come when a Hindu woman must produce at least four children in order to protect [the] Hindu religion" (Rai 2015). Here, Maharaj is referring to the Islamic practice of polygyny, thereby reinforcing preexisting myths that Muslims bear more children than Hindus. In his example, he suggests that Muslim women were having ten children each, although the last census published in 2006 indicated that Muslim women were having an average of 3.4 children, a rate which had come down to 2.6 by 2015-2016. Even if this most recent data was not available to Maharaj at the time, the above-mentioned insinuation is largely exaggerated and perpetuates misconceptions about Muslim fertility. Just like Hosbal, Maharaj implies that such fertility levels pose a feasible threat to Hinduism and, in his statement, portrays reproducing at higher rates as a sort of religious duty.

Shortly after this, The Hindu, one of India's largest newspapers, published an article claiming that the list of people urging Hindu women to reproduce at higher rates continues to get longer. It attributed this statement to an important religious leader, Shri Vasudevanand Saraswati, who expressed the following during a speech: "It is because of Hindus' unity that Modi has become Prime Minister. In order to maintain their majority status, every Hindu family should give birth to ten kids" (Joshi 2015). While one may understand the demand to bear ten children as somewhat of a hyperbole, Saraswati interestingly establishes a link between Modi's political success and his reliance on a unified Hindu voter base. In addition, Saraswati, similar to Hosbal and Maharaj, feeds into the idea that the majority status of Hindus in India is fragile, despite the fact that they constitute 80 percent of the population.

In the following years, members of the BJP continued to make statements similar to those discussed above on occasion. However, between 2017 and 2019, national and international news outlets increasingly published articles and opinion pieces debunking the myth of Muslim overpopulation as a form of fake news (e.g. The Atlantic 2017, Live Mint 2018, The Quint 2019). In 2018, The Times Of India, the country's largest English newspaper, published an editorial urging political leaders to "stop spreading the Muslim overpopulation fake news." It also argued that they "spread fact-less [*sic*] demographic alarm only to capitalize on majoritarian victimhood (...)," highlighting not only the baseless nature of such statements, but also pointing out the fear-mongering methods that the Hindu Right employs when discussing demographic developments (TOI Editorials 2018).

The quotes taken from prominent figures within the BJP and RSS reflect the Hindu nationalist pronatalist stance at the time. They also suggest that a minor escalation took place in the public discourse, transitioning from a cautious approach of arguing that small family norms might be harmful to encouraging women to have between four to ten children. Although these statements are problematic due to their misrepresentation of India's demographic realities and perpetuation of a Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, the pronatalist attitudes that they express match what is expected of nationalist stances toward family planning and demographic policies.

In general, when nationalist leaders intend to alter existing demographics, they aim to discourage high birth rates among minorities while simultaneously adopting a reverse approach in relation to the dominant group (King 2002, 384), which constitutes a form of population engineering. Although international pressure often, though not always, prevents extreme cases of population engineering, such as genocide, nationalist leaders have nonetheless utilized methods such as forced migration and pronatalist policies to maintain or improve the majority population's demographic status (Ibid.). The fact that scholars have

identified the pattern of nationalist groups actively adopting pronatalist positions in relation to their specific community makes the following developments in India all the more interesting.

4.2 Re-Introducing Malthusian Narratives and Redefining Citizenship in 2019

In 2019, India held general elections, which led to a further consolidation of the BJP's political power as it increased its parliamentary majority in what some have called a landslide win (Dale and Jeavans 2019). Narendra Modi, re-elected to serve his second term as the country's prime minister, delivered his sixth Independence Day speech on August 15, 2019. Despite having given a speech for this occasion a number of times, this was the first address to the nation in which he brought up the issue of there being a "population explosion" in India.

In his first Independence Day speech in 2014, Modi alluded to the preexisting demographic dividend discourse by stating that "65 percent population of the country happens to be under the age of 35 years. Our country has the largest number of youths in the world. Have we ever thought of deriving an advantage out of it?" (Indian Express 2014). Although he did not mention demographics at all during his address to the nation in 2015, he highlighted the potential of India's young population in 2016, 2017, and 2018 (PM India 2015; Economic Times India 2016; Financial Times 2017; Indian Express 2018). This indicates that in his first term as Prime Minister, Modi's Independence Day speeches' references to demography exclusively underlined the economic potential of having a large youth cohort.

However, in 2019, Modi changed his approach to express concern over a "rapidly increasing population":

> I would like to highlight the issue of population explosion in one country from the aegis of the Red Fort today. This rapidly increasing population poses various new

challenges for us and our future generations. In our society, there is a section which is very well aware of the consequences of the uncontrolled population growth. They all deserve accolades and respect. This is also their expression for their love for the nation. (...) The people who have played this huge role need to be honoured, and by setting them as examples we need to inspire the segment of the society who are still not thinking on these lines. We need to worry about population explosion (Business Today 2019).

Considering the continuous decline in India's population growth rate since 1960, it is surprising that Modi expresses concern about the country's demographic trajectory and suggests that the country is undergoing a "population explosion." A population boom, or "explosion" as Modi frames it, occurs when birth rates are increasing while mortality is significantly declining, none of which are trends that demographers observe in India. While India's total population has grown steadily, this development is the result of a population explosion that occurred around the mid-20th century (World Bank 2021).

If Modi had framed the issue in terms of having to deal with the consequences of previous spikes in population growth, then his claims would be based on scientific data. However, as of 2021, India remains on track to stabilize its population in the near future and some of its states have already reached below replacement fertility levels (NFHS-5 2020). Additionally, the data that Modi repeatedly referred to in his previous speeches to highlight the benefits of having a young population is derived from the same sources, such as the Census of India, which also report on nationwide drops in fertility levels. This makes it rather difficult to believe that the prime minister would be oblivious to such demographic trends.

Furthermore, Modi's remarks are not only noteworthy because they contradict the demographic reality of India, but also because they appear to set the scene for a number of demography-related policy proposals and changes that the BJP-led government would bring forward in the following period. As previously discussed, nationalist leaders often rely on a

variety of methods to improve their populations' demographic status, including by adjusting the parameters of citizenship.

In December 2019, the government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (also: CAA law), an update to India's Citizenship Act of 1955, which provides refugees from neighboring countries with a claim to Indian citizenship. However, this offer applies to all religious groups with the exception of Muslims from India's Muslim-majority neighbors. Prior to this law, religion had never been a criterion for obtaining Indian citizenship. This policy change indicates a shift away from the country's secular constitution and serves as strong evidence for the BJP-led government's desire to specifically exclude Muslims from maintaining or acquiring equal rights in India (Ramachandran 2020, 18- 19).

More evidence for this claim can be found when examining the Indian government's plans to establish a National Register of Citizens (NRC), an institution that could strip away individuals' citizenship. This is because it requires individuals to bring forward certain documents to prove their nationality, an announcement which came only a few months after the government's decision to revoke Kashmir's constitutional claims to partial autonomy. Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, had used its autonomous status to ban non-Kashmiris from purchasing land in order to preserve the state's distinct demographic fabric, a policy choice which has been overruled. Political activists have expressed their worries that these policy changes are part of a larger social engineering agenda and fear the consequences that such legislative actions will have for Indian Muslims (Ibid.; BBC 2019). Such significant policy developments can arguably be viewed as attempts to further marginalize India's Muslim population, which corresponds with the core concepts of the Hindutva ideology that imagines India as a Hindu state.

In his 2019 speech, Modi also clearly portrays those who have small families as fulfilling a patriotic duty. In addition to the above-mentioned quote, the prime minister also

explicitly stated, " (...) this small section of responsible citizens is self-motivated [*sic*] to keep their family small. Not only do they contribute to the welfare of their family but also to the good of the nation. They express patriotism" (Business Today 2019). In light of the fact that members of the Hindu Right have continuously perpetuated the idea that Hindu women ought to have more children to protect Hinduism, Modi's decision to honor those with small families marks a clear departure from his previous political stance and re-introduces population growth as a threat. While this divergence may stem from demographers noting that India is ill-prepared to benefit from the demographic dividend, it may also be motivated by genuine concerns about the effects of population pressure on existing infrastructures and long-term resource sustainability. In the following section, the policy proposal is analyzed and contextualized in relation to sustainability issues so as to determine the extent to which the Hindu right is concerned with protecting the environment.

4.3 The 2020 Constitution Amendment Bill

In February 2020, members of parliament brought forward a bill, which aimed to amend the constitution to include article 47A, which reads as follows:

> The State shall promote small family norms by offering incentives in taxes, employment, education etc. to its people who keep their family limited to two children and shall withdraw every concession from and deprive such incentives to those not adhering to [the] small family norm, to keep the growing population under control (Live Law India 2020).

The proposal included a statement of reasons that had been written by Anil Desai, an MP of the Shiv Sena, a far-right Hindu nationalist party closely aligned with the BJP, who explained the apparent need for such an amendment by stating the following:

> Population explosion will cause many problems for our future generations. We have to be concerned about population explosion. The Centre as well as State Governments should launch schemes to tackle it. Our natural resources are extremely overburdened. The rate of growth of any country is directly related to size of its population. Natural resources like air, water, land, woods etc. are subjected to over exploitation because

> of overpopulation. (...) Today, there is also a need to encourage the people to keep small family by offering tax concessions, priority in social benefit schemes and school admissions etc. and at the same time discourage them from producing more children by withdrawing tax concessions, imposing heavy taxes and by making other punitive provisions for violations (...) (Ibid.).

This justification falls in line with Modi's framing of current demographic developments as an ongoing "population explosion" and adds to his concerns by elaborating on fears regarding the pressures that a growing population may place on limited resources. Such neo-Malthusian reasoning does in fact bring forward valid concerns about the effects of overall population density on the environment. However, it is rather unexpected that an MP of the Shiv Sena party who represents the state of Maharashtra would stress this need for the Indian government to regulate demographic developments as a means to meet sustainability goals. When the Maharashtra local elections were held just four months before Denai brought forward the above-mentioned proposal, environmental activists specifically highlighted the lack of environmental protection measures in both the Shiv Sena's and the BJP's manifestos (Chatterjee 2019).

Although the BJP featured climate change in its general election manifesto for the first time in 2019 while further having outlined targets to increase its renewable energy capacity, sustainability issues were only addressed in the infrastructure section. With no mention of the Paris agreement or other global sustainability targets, only 116 words out of the 18,327-word-long manifesto actually relate to climate concerns (Dolsak and Prakash 2019). In 2020, international news outlets reported that the Modi-led government had come under scrutiny for weakening environmental protection policies. The changes to the environmental impact assessment (EIA) regulations, which the BJP proposed, would provide those leading industrial, construction, and mining projects with access to a variety of natural resources without prior environmental clearance. In addition, this further erases local communities' ability to report environmental violations (Afonso et al. 2020, Zargar 2020).

Reacting to the outrage triggered by this policy draft, the government restricted access to the websites of at least three large environmental advocacy groups, including the prominent Fridays For Future, who were spearheading campaigns against the proposal (Joshi 2020).

Considering these events, it is reasonable to question whether the BJP and parties affiliated with Hindu Right policymakers are truly as concerned with sustainability issues as the cited materials aim to suggest. While policymakers claim to care about these issues when in need of justification for a proposal as controversial as a potential two-child policy, the lack of attention to climate matters in the parties' respective manifestos in addition to the actions taken by the government to dismantle certain environmental protection laws suggest otherwise.

This contradiction is particularly puzzling since all developments described in this and the preceding section have taken place between April 2019 and July 2020. As such, the Hindu nationalist parties' non-coherent stance on sustainability implies that the most recent demographic policymaking attempts are being justified to the public through a sustainability-focused narrative, although it remains ambiguous whether this is motivated by the genuine desire to protect resources. After all, it is the very same resources, namely air, water, land, and forests, which the two-child policy aims to protect, despite being threatened when conservation-related legislation such as EIA regulations are significantly weakened. This strongly suggests that Hindu nationalist concerns about the environment are not as genuine as the examined statements related to the proposed two-child policy imply.

Finally, when interpreting the Indian government's stance on demography-related matters, one ought not to forget the remarks made by Modi in 2002, in which he not only insinuates that Muslims are to be blamed for India's population growth, but also argues that their actions warrant punishment. Looking at the given proposal, the proposed systematic exclusion from a range of social services is the type of "lesson" that Modi arguably would

like "those who keep on multiplying the population" to learn. Considering the prevalent myths about Muslim fertility and the fact that Muslim families continue to have more than two children on average as of 2021, such a policy would likely disproportionately affect Muslims and further alienate them from the Hindu majority.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to evaluate the extent to which contemporary demographic policymaking in India is influenced by Hindu nationalism. Following a thorough analysis of the academic literature, it has become evident that Hindu nationalism acts as a force of anti-Muslim propaganda that has become increasingly powerful with the recent rise of the BJP and its associated organizations. After providing brief contextual information about the government's past population planning strategies, the thesis explained myths regarding Muslim fertility, followed by an analysis of statements given by prominent members of Hindu nationalist organizations over the past twenty years in relation to population growth in India.

Having examined multiple sources, the research demonstrated that Hindu nationalist actors have significantly changed their stance on the need for population control policies over a relatively short period of time. The most notable shift in framing occurred during Modi's

2019 Independence Day speech, which preceded the 2020 constitution amendment bill. Publically, this repositioning on the issue of population growth has been justified by communicating a concern regarding resource scarcity and sustainability. As a result of this finding, the thesis assessed whether the general issue of sustainability has played an increasing role in Hindu nationalist parties' manifestos and the current government's recent policymaking. The actions taken by Indian legislators in 2020 targeting the dismantling of pre-existing environmental protection laws suggest that, in fact, the opposite seems to be true. The lack of interest in environmental preservation outside of the context of the proposed two-child policy makes the public justification for such a policy appear incoherent, which strongly suggests that contemporary demographic policymaking in India is in fact primarily influenced by Hindu Nationalism.

When evaluating the proposed two-child policy, it is important to note that as of 2021, statistically speaking, it is Muslim families who have more than two children and would subsequently be more affected by such an exclusionary policy than Hindus whose birthrates have already declined to 2.2 children per woman. While this finding in itself is not firm proof that such a demographic policy specifically targets India's Muslim community, the proposal must be assessed in the context of other policies brought forward by the Hindu Nationalist government. Hence, since Hindu nationalist actors perceive Muslims as not only foreign but also potentially threatening to the imagined Hindu nation of India, it becomes clear that the revisions of Kashmir's autonomous status, the CAA law, and concurring plans to establish a National Register of Citizens serve as legislative actions that target and further marginalize India's Muslim population. While this discrimination is arguably more implicit in policy choices regarding Kashmir, it is overtly visible in the CAA law that denies citizenship to Muslim refugees and through the establishment of the NRC, which could systematically strip millions of Muslim Indian nationals of their citizenship, essentially rendering them stateless.

Overall, this thesis has illustrated that India's policymakers are politicizing the subject of fertility under the guise of sustainability concerns to further marginalize Muslim citizens. This finding is in congruence with existing critical scholarship on the effects of Hindu nationalism on Muslim communities in India. Empirical data on India's demographic developments illustrate that birth rates have and will continue to steadily decline among all groups. This demonstrates how the issue of an ongoing population explosion brought forward by Modi and other policymakers is fabricated as there is no identifiable need for the government to further intervene with its citizens' reproductive choices. Instead of trailblazing innovative methods of demographic management in order to tackle a looming environmental crisis, the proposed two-child policy in India is arguably designed to further the othering of Muslims that is already engrained in the Hindutva ideology.

Given that this thesis concerned itself with building a novel explanatory narrative and was limited in its scope, further investigations may apply a broader variety of methods to test and add to the presented theory. In addition, approaching the given issue from a critical feminist perspective may reveal how such policy proposals can be understood not only as an attack on the Muslim population of India, but on women's bodies in particular. Lastly, this thesis highlighted a link between the practice of othering of Muslims in India and the governments' attempts of population engineering and further future research on the issue may contribute to revealing additional dangers of this phenomenon within the Indian context.

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