

How should South India deal with its ageing population?

Why have concerns been raised over aging populations in South India? Can people be incentivised to have more babies to impact this trend? What role can internal migration play?

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An aging population (which Naidu spoke of) and a smaller population (that Stalin referred to) are two separate concerns.

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has said his government is working on a [law to incentivise residents of the state to have more children](#). “We are already in deficit. Having less than two children leads to the rapid decline of the young population,” he said.

Earlier, when asked by [The Indian Express](#) about concerns among Southern states that their smaller populations might impact their representation in Parliament after the delimitation of constituencies, Naidu had said: “South India, with a lower fertility rate, is already facing the aging issue, and it will gradually impact North India as well.”

On Monday, [Tamil Nadu](#) Chief Minister M K Stalin joked about the potential reduction of South India’s share in parliamentary seats due to lower population growth rates: “Why not aim for 16 children?”

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What do data say on aging and overall population size?

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With Census 2021 delayed, the most recent population projections available are in a 2020 report of a technical group within the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

As the chart shows, India's population is projected to age with each passing year. The proportion (percentage) of people in the 60+ age bracket will rise across the board — even though the increase in the Northern states will be smaller than in the South. This is because most Southern states transitioned to a lower fertility rate sooner than the Northern states. For example, [Uttar Pradesh](#) is projected to achieve the Replacement Level of Fertility only next year — that is more than two decades after [Andhra Pradesh](#).

POPULATION BY PERCENTAGE IN DIFFERENT AGE BRACKETS

INDIA	2011	2036 (PROJECTED)
0-14 years	30.9	20.1
15-59 years	60.7	64.9
60+ years	8.4	14.9

Andhra Pradesh	2011	2036	Uttar Pradesh	2011	2036
0-14 years	25.2	15.7	0-14 years	36	22
15-59 years	64.8	65.3	15-59 years	56.7	66.1
60+ years	10.1	19	60+ years	7.3	11.9

Source: Population Projection by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

Here's what else the report projected:

* In the 25 years from 2011 and 2036, India's population will increase by 31.1 crore. Almost half — 17 crore — will be added in five states: Bihar, UP, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh. As much as 19% of the total population increase during 2011-36 is expected to occur in UP.

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* The contribution of the five Southern states — AP, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu — to the total increase in population during 2011-2036 is expected to be only 2.9 crore, or 9%.

* With declining fertility and increasing life expectancy, the number of older persons in the population is expected to more than double from 10 crore in 2011 to 23 crore in 2036, their share in the population rising from 8.4% to 14.9% during this period.

* In Kerala, where lower fertility and mortality rates were achieved much sooner than other states, the proportion of persons aged 60 years and older will increase from 13% in 2011 to 23% in 2036 — or almost 1 in 4 individuals. The population of UP, by contrast, is expected to be comparatively younger — the share of 60+ individuals in the state population is expected to increase from 7% in 2011 to 12% in 2036.

Why is an aging population, and a relatively smaller population, a concern?

An aging population (which Naidu spoke of) and a smaller population (that Stalin referred to) are two separate concerns.

Typically, if two-thirds of the total population is in the working-age bracket it implies a “dividend” — because the dependency ratio (that is, the percentage of population that is not earning and is dependent on others) is less than 50%.

Dependency is of two kinds: those below the age of 15, and those above the age of 60. A high percentage of aging population does imply that the state may have to spend more on taking care of this growing population.

The issue of the total population of a state being lower compared to other states is different. This issue has come into sharp focus in public discussions on electoral delimitation — where fears have been expressed that Southern states could end up getting penalised by way of fewer seats in Lok Sabha for having made the demographic transition before the North (and especially the so-called “BIMARU” states).

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So, do government policies to boost fertility, as Naidu mentioned, work?

Naidu referred to some countries — such as Japan, China, and countries in Europe — that are also struggling with aging populations. But there is no real evidence that people who have reached a certain level of prosperity and education can be incentivised to have more babies.

Academics such as social demographer Sonalde Desai, Distinguished University Professor Emerita at the University of Maryland, and P M Kulkarni and Deepak Mishra of JNU, are unanimous that pro-natalist policies have had very little success.

“Virtually nowhere in the world — Japan, China, Korea, France etc. — have pro-natalist policies worked. The only place where such policies had some impact to the extent that they did not allow the fertility rate to plummet to very low levels were in Scandinavian countries. Here the policies were more in the shape of family support, childcare support, gender equality, paternity leaves etc.,” Desai said.

However, she stressed that even giving financial support doesn’t do enough to encourage families to have more babies.

Why do statements like the ones made by Naidu matter?

These statements demonstrate the stark turnaround on the stand taken by politicians, especially from the Southern states, on the population question.

Roughly five decades ago, the main concern facing India was rapid population growth, fuelled by high levels of fertility (births per woman). The situation was once deemed so grim that many wondered if India would even have enough food to feed its teeming millions.

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Over the decades, however, India has been able to arrest the pace of population growth — an achievement that has been led by several Southern states. Andhra Pradesh achieved the Replacement Level of Fertility — that is, an average of 2.1 children per woman — in 2004, making it the fifth Indian state to do so after Kerala (1988), Tamil Nadu (2000), Himachal Pradesh (2002), and West Bengal (2003). Andhra Pradesh used to have a law that barred people from contesting in local polls if they had more than two children; Naidu has repealed it.

However, while individual states are witnessing considerably lower levels of fertility than in the past, India's inherent population momentum has meant that it is now the most populous country on the planet.

If incentives don't work, what is the way forward to address concerns about population?

"The simplest solution is (internal) migration," Desai said.

There are three contributors to the total population: fertility, mortality, and migration. Both Desai and Kulkarni said migration can even out the imbalance caused by the mismatch in the pace of the demographic transition between North and South India.

Of course, such migration is already underway. "What's more, the Southern states will get people in the working age," Desai said. In other words, destination states don't have to spend on nurturing a young population, their education, etc.; they can straightaway benefit from the working-age migrant population.

This is the model that the United States has employed over the decades — it is immigrants, their economic output and their fertility, that has helped sustain America's economic dominance over the world.



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Both Kulkarni and Mishra underscored that rather than having more children, the concern for India should be to boost the economic productivity of its labour force, and to ensure that the benefits of the ongoing demographic dividend are cashed fully.