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Population control plans in two Indian states prompt concern



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Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state with around 230 million people. PHOTO: AFP

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NEW DELHI - A move by two Indian states to propose policies enforcing a two-child norm has prompted concern.

Demographers and women's rights campaigners have questioned the need for the policies amid falling fertility rates and concerns that coercive measures will adversely affect women and marginalised communities.

Earlier this month, Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, with around 230 million people, unveiled a Bill to cut down population growth. It proposes denial of government jobs, subsidies, promotions and the right to contest local elections to those with more than two children.

The north-eastern state of Assam last month also proposed plans that would see families with more than two children being rendered ineligible for state government benefits.

A population control policy is already in place in Assam - those with more than two children are not eligible for government jobs.

While India is expected to overtake China as the most populous country by 2027, fertility rates in most states have dipped below the population replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman.

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Fertility levels have fallen below this mark in 15 of the 18 states and federally administered territories for which data has been released under the latest National Family Health Survey.

These include Assam, which has a fertility rate of 1.87. While fresh data for Uttar Pradesh (UP) has not been released, its rate was recorded at 2.7 in 2015-16, falling from 3.82 a decade earlier.

India's overall rate was pegged at 2.2 in 2015-16, down from 2.7 in the previous decade. It has been achieved largely through better education, increased awareness and voluntary use of contraception.

Dr Ali Mehdi, who leads the Health Policy Initiative at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, said a coercive two-child policy is not needed in India, given its falling fertility levels, as well as the concern of a growing dependent population.

"States such as UP and Bihar already have a huge ageing population, and it will not take too much time for them to start greying very quickly, following which they will not be able to alter the trend," he told The Straits Times.

In 2018, government data indicated the country had a 60-plus population of 108.2 million. Of this, Uttar Pradesh accounted for 15.6 million and Bihar 7.5 million.

The Uttar Pradesh government also released a population policy on July 11 that says "attempts would be made to ensure there is a population balance among various communities".

The state is governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party and heads into assembly elections in the first quarter of 2022. There are concerns that this policy is targeted at Muslims and intended to draw support from the Hindu majority, a charge the state has denied.

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Muslim women have higher fertility rates than their Hindu counterparts in Uttar Pradesh and Assam, as well as in other states. In Uttar Pradesh, it is 3.1 for Muslims, while Hindus have a fertility rate of 2.67. In Assam, this figure is 2.38 for Muslims and 1.59 for Hindus.

Dr Mehdi argues that this comparison overlooks wide socio-economic disparities between Hindus and Muslims, such as literacy and poverty, that are responsible for higher fertility.

Muslims generally have a weaker socio-economic status than Hindus in India. "You have to compare equals with equals - that is poor Hindus and poor Muslims," he added.

In Gujarat, where the Muslim community is more prosperous, the total fertility rate is 2.12, even lower than that of Hindus in Uttar Pradesh.

A 2005 study by demographer S. Irudaya Rajan found that states with small differentials in Hindu-Muslim fertility rates also have low differentials in Hindu-Muslim female literacy levels, indicating a correlation between better female literacy and lower fertility rates among Muslims as well.

"I think if there's one thing that they (those seeking to bring down population growth) should really go very strongly on, it is female education," said Dr Mehdi.

Easier access to contraception methods has also been linked to lower fertility levels. This has been the case in Bangladesh and Indonesia, two Muslim-majority countries that reduced fertility levels significantly by offering a wide choice of contraception methods, many of which are temporary and short-acting ones.

Muslim women in India generally have a higher unmet need for family planning, including in Uttar Pradesh and Assam. Thirteen per cent of married women in India reported this unmet need; this figure is 16.4 per cent for Muslim women.

Ms Poonam Muttreja, the executive director of the Population Foundation of India, told The Straits Times that the focus should be on meeting this unmet need instead of coercive population control measures.

"They take attention away from what is the right thing to do," she said. "Instead of spending more money on introducing more contraception methods, getting family planning services to remote areas, to the poorest and marginalised, the administration will be spending its time and resources trying to implement these incentives and disincentives."

A 2005 study in five states where a two-child qualification norm had been put in place in local bodies found that its implementation had led to a rise in sex-selective and unsafe abortions, men divorcing their wives, and families giving up their children for adoption so they could contest polls.

"It will become a demographic disaster if we continue on this path," said Ms Muttreja.

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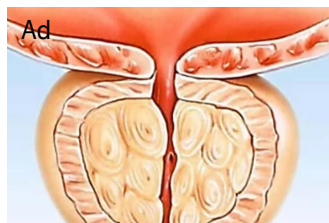
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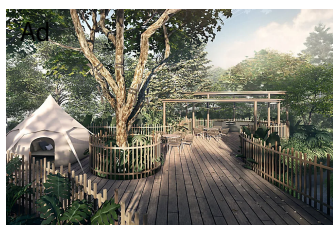
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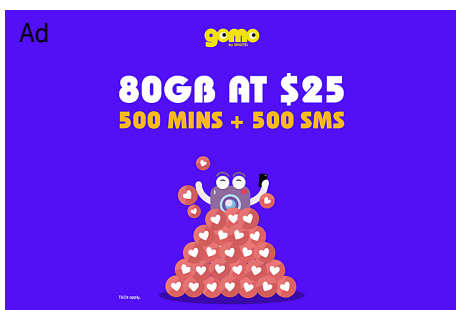
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