

Playing Politics with Census Data

It began innocuously. When the Census data reported the specific details on the religion-wise population on 5 September 2004 it claimed that the growth in the Muslim population during the previous ten-year period was 36 per cent, while the Hindu population during this period increased by only 20.3 per cent. The analysis also presented that Muslim population increased by 1.5 per cent to 36.1 per cent over the 1981-91 Census period. Correspondingly, the growth rate of the Hindu population dropped by 4.8 per cent.

There was immediate response: scientific and emotional. At the scientific level it was soon corrected by the Census authorities themselves that contrary to the early report, the Muslim population had decelerated during 1991-2001 decade. In fact, it had a greater deceleration than the growth of the Hindu population. The Census authorities came out with the explanation that it was due to the 'unadjusted growth rates' and exclusion of Jammu and Kashmir Muslim in 1991, that this confusion arose.

However, the harm had already been done. A controversy, thankfully dying out, followed immediately particularly among the fanatics and that created further divide in an already fissured society.

We need to ask the question, why was this data needed at all? In a society where religion has increasingly been used to divide people and create communal disharmony, highlighting of such data is in itself bound to exacerbate the communal divide. On the other hand one can also argue that, as the data is available, why not discuss it.

There are three primary lessons to be learned from this controversy. First of all, there can be no two opinions on the necessity to be meticulous about methodologies of data collection, analysis, and reporting on such sensitive issues. There has been sufficient reprimand by the civil society on the incompetence of the Census authorities in providing an incorrect picture of the religion-wise growth of population during the 1991-2001 period. It has definitely been pointed out that the Census authorities fermented a completely needless and damaging controversy. This should never again happen.

Secondly, why is the nation still unable to go beyond vested interpretations of such basic demographic data? The errors apart, religion-wise data reflect an essential social reality. Can the larger society, including the politicians interpret these data not just for party interests? Can such data be seen as help in the appreciation of the rich diversity that the country has and in planning for the sustenance and growth of the same diversity.

That leads to the third issue and the lesson involved in this unfortunate controversy. For us in India, people are still a liability. We have not woken up yet to the vast human potential that the Indian population is. Whether it is planners, or demographers, no one had definitively intervened in the national policy formulation and the general popular awareness to realise that the vast human populace of India, irrespective of religion, caste or creed, is a vast reservoir of human resources. It is not to argue that overpopulation should not be checked. On the contrary, the argument is that when the focus is purely or primarily on population control and not on human resource development, it is only a short-term goal and approach. After all, economists and demographers do agree that equitable economic growth indeed is the best birth control measure yet available.

The controversy over the religion-wise Census data was indeed unfortunate and should never again be repeated. However, looking beyond the controversy, one realises the biggest challenge of

the increasing population in India. India's overall population is poised to overtake China in a few years and this will negate all the progress that we achieve in the socioeconomic realm. Can India show the kind of political will that China and other countries have shown? If so, the controversies and debates would be worth the effort. As economist and demographer Julian L. Simon once said, "the most important benefit of population size and growth is the increase it brings to the stock of useful knowledge. Minds matter economically as much as, or more than, hands or mouths." This can become a reality in India, if the leadership, both political and academic, can go beyond the controversies. In this, it must be reiterated; the religious leadership has a major responsibility.

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