

Religion Data of Census 2011: IV

The case of Bihar continued

In the previous post, we gave details of how in Bihar, the Hindu growth rate has surpassed that of Muslims in several districts and the overall gap between the growth rates of the two communities has narrowed. In this post, we explain why this narrowing of the gap should not be read as the beginning of the 'demographic transition' that the demographers generally talk about. What is happening in Bihar is a sociological, and perhaps political, response of the society to the persistent imbalance in the growth of different communities and not any routine demographic phenomenon. It is important to see it in this light to draw the right conclusions and lessons from it. In the later part of this post, we give further details of the religious profile of Bihar. We shall continue the story of the emerging restoration of balance in the next post, where we discuss the case of Jharkhand.

What is happening in Bihar is not 'demographic transition'

We have noticed that in Bihar the gap between the growth of Muslims and Hindus has narrowed considerably during 2001-11. However, this narrowing of the gap in Bihar, as also in some other parts of the country, is *not* a consequence of the 'demographic transition' that the demographers are fond of talking about. The phenomenon seems a sociological, or political, response to the imbalance in growth and skewing of the shares of different communities that has been happening for several decades. It cannot possibly represent the 'usual' slowing down of the demographic expansion of all communities at a certain stage of 'development' because:

One, Bihar has hardly reached the stage of demographic stabilisation yet. During 2001-11, population of the State has grown by 25.4 percent, which is far above the national average of 17.7 percent and is the highest among the major States of India. Assam and West Bengal seem to be much farther on the path of demographic stabilisation; but in those two States, the gap between the growth of Hindus and Muslims has only widened during 2000-11, as we shall see in due course. Kerala is perhaps the farthest on the demographic transition curve; growth rate of the total population there has declined from 9.42 percent in 1991-2001 to 4.91 percent in 2001-11. Yet the gap between the growth rate of Muslims and Hindus has widened from 115 percent in 1991-2001 to 475 percent in 2001-11. Bihar also continues to be the least literate and the least urbanised State of India and therefore an unlikely candidate for demographic transition.

Two, the narrowing of the gap is not a uniform phenomenon spread across the districts of the State; it is not as if the growth rates of the Muslims and the Hindus have come nearer each other everywhere. What has happened in fact is that in some districts the Hindu growth rate has surpassed that of the Muslims; this has brought down the overall gap between the Muslim and Hindu growth rates. But in many of the districts, the gap between the Muslim and Hindu growth rates can be very wide in either

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direction. Thus in Sheikhpura, Jehanabad and Nalanda, the gap between the Hindu and Muslim growth rates is as high as 101, 49 and 45 percent, respectively, in favour of Hindus, while in Katihar, Araria and Purnia the gap is 45, 38 and 34 percent, respectively, in favour of Muslims (See, Map A of the previous post).

From the above, it seems certain that the phenomenon of the narrowing of the gap in growth between the Muslims and Hindus in Bihar is not a consequence of the normal progression of population through different stages of growth and decline that the demographers talk about. It seems to be the result of a contention between the two communities for demographic space. As a result, where Hindus dominate the population, they have established a growth ascendancy over the Muslims, and where Muslims have a substantial share in the population they have registered substantially higher growth than the Hindus. There is, of course, nothing new in the Muslim growth surpassing that of others, especially in regions where they already have a strong presence, but the Hindu growth beginning to surpass that of Muslims in districts where they dominate is a new phenomenon.

It is perhaps not entirely appropriate to look upon the growth rates of different communities in terms of a contention between them for demographic space. But, an objective reading of the available data leaves one with the distinct impression of such a contention happening from district to district, and sub-district to sub-district in Bihar and in several other States. The impression becomes even stronger when we look at the religious demographic data of Jharkhand, which we would be presenting in the next post. The situation in Jharkhand seems even more contentious, because unlike in Bihar, where mainly the Hindus and Muslims are in competition in most districts, in Jharkhand, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and ORPs all seem to be vying for demographic space.

Muslims and Christians have been expanding their presence in different parts of the country for several decades; such expansion can be seen in the religious tables of all the decennial Censuses since 1881. But, all those earlier Censuses do not convey the impression of different communities competing for space, because there was no competition. It was a one-sided game, with the share of Hindus declining everywhere and the Muslims and Christians occupying the additional space. The Census of 2011, however, reveals a new trend of Hindus approaching and even surpassing the growth of Muslims (and Christians) in certain districts and sub-districts. This is why the census numbers have begun to look like a fascinating drama of a historic contention between different communities for demographic ascendancy.

It would be interesting to speculate on the causes of the religious demographic change in India taking this new turn. We shall do so after looking at the profile of several other States and delineating the contours of the phenomenon in detail. But before we proceed to Jharkhand, the next State in our list, let us look into some of the remaining significant features of the religious demography of Bihar.

Christians and Others in Bihar

In the Table here, we give the numbers for the current and the previous Censuses for all the eight religious groups for which the Census of India counts the numbers.

	Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, ORPs and RNS, 2001-2011					
	Population in thousands		Share in Percent		Decadal Growth %	
	2011	2001	2011	2001	2001-2011	
Hindus and Muslims constitute almost the entire population of Bihar. Of the total of 10.41 crore people counted in 2011, 10.36 crore are either Hindus or Muslims. We have discussed the relative share and growth of Hindus and Muslims in the previous post; that covers the most significant aspects of the religious demography of the State.	Total	1,04,099	82,999	100.00	100.00	25.42
	Hindus	86,079	69,077	82.69	83.23	24.61
	Muslims	17,558	13,722	16.87	16.53	27.95
	Christians	129	53	0.12	0.06	143.23
	Sikhs	24	21	0.02	0.03	14.43
	Buddhists	25	19	0.02	0.02	35.26
	Jains	19	16	0.02	0.02	17.59
	ORPs	13	53	0.01	0.06	-74.60
	RNS	252	38	0.24	0.05	566.70

Christians

Of the remaining about 4.6 lakh people of the State, who are counted in the other 6 religious categories, 1.29 lakh are Christians. Their number in 2001 was 53 thousand and only 31 thousand in 1991. During 2001-2011, the share of Christians in the population of Bihar, though still low, has doubled from 0.06 percent to 0.12 percent. The increase has been much more pronounced in the rural areas, where their numbers have increased from 30 thousand in 2001 to 97.6 thousand in 2011; in the urban areas there has been only a modest rise from 23 to 32 thousand.

The small number of Christians in the State is distributed across all districts, but their share in the population is the highest in Jamui (0.48 percent) and the neighbouring Banka (0.30 percent). Besides these two, their presence is relatively high in Purnia (0.24%), Katihar (0.28%) and Kishanganj (0.34%); in Pashchim Champaran (0.22%) and in Patna (0.21%). Except for these six, there is no other district, where Christian share is above 0.20 percent. But during 2001-2011, they have shown substantial growth in every district of the State, except Sheikhpura, where their numbers have declined from 375 in 2001 to 313 in 2011. We have come across Sheikhpura earlier as the district where the Hindu growth has been substantially higher than Muslims. In fact, both Muslims and Christians, and also Buddhists, have recorded negative growth in this district.

Sikhs

There are only 24 thousand Sikhs in the State; their number has increased slightly from 21 thousand in 2001. The number of Sikhs in the urban areas of the State has actually declined from 12,743 in 2001 to 11,761 in 2011; their number in the rural areas, however, has increased from 8,037 to 12,018. This decline of Sikhs in the urban areas of Bihar is surprising; but the numbers of Sikhs have undergone more substantial changes in several other States of the country.

Jains

Like the Sikhs, the Jains also have witnessed a decline in their numbers in the urban areas of Bihar from 12,903 to 11,339; their number in the rural areas has, however, increased from 3,182 to 7,575. The total number of Jains has increased marginally from 16,085 to 18,914.

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Buddhists

Buddhists in Bihar have increased from 18,818 in 2001 to 25,453 in 2011, recording somewhat higher growth than the total population. Their numbers in the urban areas have declined from 2,873 to 1,898; but in the rural areas, they have grown substantially from 15,945 to 23,555.

The Buddhists in Bihar is concentrated particularly in Buxar and Kaimur (Bhabua); somewhat more than half of the Buddhists in the State are counted in these two districts.

Other Religions and Persuasions (ORPs)

The number of persons counted under the Census category of ORPs in Bihar has declined from 52,905 in 2001 to 13,437 in 2011. In 1991, however, there were only about 4.3 thousand ORPs counted in the State. Thus the sudden spurt of 1991-2001 in the ORPs has now been reversed to a large extent.

The share of ORPs is significant only in Jamui; the total of 3,438 ORPs counted in the district form 0.2 percent of the population. In all other districts, their share is far less than 0.1 percent.

Detailed data for the religions included under ORPs has not been released yet for 2011; but, in Census 2001, the ORPs of Bihar were mainly Sarnas.

Religion Not Stated (RNS)

The number of persons counted under this category in Bihar has sharply risen from 37,817 in 2001 to 2,52,127 in 2011. Of these, 2,11,872 are in the rural areas and 40,255 in the towns and cities of the State. The share of RNS in the population is the highest in Sheohar at 0.53 percent and Gaya at 0.44 percent. But in most of the districts RNS now form more than 0.20 percent of the population.

Since the increase in the RNS is spread across both the rural and urban areas and across almost all districts, it is difficult to imagine it as a spurt in atheistic sentiments among some sections of the population. What could then this sudden increase in the RNS numbers in Bihar, as well as in the country as a whole, represent?

We have given these details about the religious profile of the population of Bihar to indicate the vastness of the sociological information that the religion tables of the Census hold within them. Indian society is in ferment; equations between different communities and the sentiments and commitments of people are changing in different ways. The religion data of the Census offers one way of looking at and understanding the changes that the Indian society is going through.

Dr. J. K. Bajaj
Centre for Policy Studies
policy.cpsindia@gmail.com
www.cpsindia.org

November 3, 2015