Declining Fertility Rates in India

Why in news?

The recently released empirical data from the National Family Health Survey 2019-20 (NFHS-5) shows that States and UTs are experiencing a sharp decline in fertility rates.

What does the fertility data show?

> **Total fertility rate (TFR)** is the average number of children born to a woman in her reproductive years (15-49 years).
>
> **Replacement level fertility** is the level of fertility at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next, i.e., the level of fertility needed to keep the population the same from generation to generation.

- Except for Bihar, Manipur and Meghalaya, the fertility rates have gone **below the replacement level of 2.1** children per woman.
- The TFR in Lakshwadeep and J&K have gone substantially below the replacement level with 1.4 children per woman.
- In all the 7 Northeastern states, the fertility rates range from 1.1 in Sikkim to 1.9 in Assam, except Manipur (2.2) and Meghalaya (2.9).
- Among populous states, the TFR has gone down to 1.6 children in West Bengal.
- It is only 1.7 each in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh.
- In Telangana and Kerala, the fertility rate is getting stabilised at 1.8 children per woman.
- Even in Bihar, where the TFR is 3, there is a relative decline in fertility from 3.4 in NFHS-4 (2015-16).

> It is said that by 2031, all the states of India would reach TFR levels below the replacement rate of 2.1.

What are the key reasons for the decline?

1. Increase in female education levels
2. Postponement of marriage
3. Access to family planning methods / high contraceptive prevalence rate
4. Declining infant mortality rate
5. Declining neonatal mortality rate

- E.g., Bihar with the highest TFR of 3 - Maximum percentage of illiterate women at 26.8%
- Kerala had among the lowest fertility rates - The literacy rate among women is 99.3%.
- So, fertility rates are determined more by socio-economic factors and not religion. [There is a perception/myth that the fertility rates are higher among the Muslims.]

What does this call for?

- With sustained low TFR, the population will start shrinking as it is happening in countries like Japan, Germany and Russia.
- So, it would be odd to limit the family size anymore.
- The focus has to be on -
    i. employment opportunities so that the "limited working population" in the near future is skilled enough
    ii. meeting out the higher medical costs as the population ages and productivity shrink
    iii. having an affordable social security system that provides pension to the elderly
- On the other hand, States with higher fertility rates like Bihar and UP need to work on improving schooling, income levels, and reduce neonatal and infant mortality rates.

Source: The Indian Express, Livemint

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