

## 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**

