

The Number Question: Muslim Demography and Islamophobia in India

- Muhammed Mashkoor MP

Abstract

There has been a sharp increase in the frequency of statements from the Hindu right wing in India about the Muslim 'conspiracy' or 'population jihad' to become the numerical majority in the country in the last two years. The fear that Muslims would overtake Hindus has been repeated after almost every census in the history of India. What I am interested in looking into in this context is how deep and old the fear of Muslim population in India is. Analysing the political and academic debates over Muslim birth rate in India, this paper argues that those who spread the fear of Muslim population and those who oppose the right wing and try to defend the minority share the same idea that Muslim birth is essentially a threat to the country if they become the majority. When the right-wing spreads the fear of Muslims overtaking the majority, the opposite party, especially from academia with the help of data guarantees that the community will not become a majority soon if not ever.

The Year 2018 started with news from Rajasthan about a statement made by a ruling BJP MLA on Muslim population in India. In his controversial Facebook post, Banwari Lal Singhal alleged that Muslims are bearing more children with an aim to outnumber Hindus and to take control of the country by 2030. The statement came ahead of a bypoll to the Alwar parliamentary seat. "Muslims were giving birth to 12-14 children...while Hindus restrict the number to one or two. The way the Muslim population is increasing, the existence of Hindus is in danger. It is a well-planned conspiracy to have a Muslim in the chair of president, prime minister and chief ministers," he wrote. It's not surprising to see such a statement from a BJP MLA as same concern is frequently expressed by the right wing in India from time to time. What I am interested in looking into in this context is how deep and old the fear of Muslim population in India really is. Analysing the political and academic debates over Muslim birth rate in India, this paper argues that those who spread the fear of Muslim population and those who oppose the right wing and try to defend the minority share the same idea that Muslim birth is essentially a threat to the country if they become the majority.

Muhammed Mashkoor MP is M.Phil Candidate at International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai.

Email: mashkoop@gmail.com

When the right-wing spreads the fear of Muslims overtake the majority, the opposite party, especially from academia with the help of data guarantees that the community will not become a majority soon if not ever.

There has been a sharp increase in the frequency of statements from the Hindu right wing in India about the Muslim conspiracy or 'population jihad' to become the numerical majority in the country in the last two years. The year 2015 was marked by two key religious demographic data in the demographic discourse in the country viz.: 'The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050' released by America based PEW research centre, and the latest Indian census data by religious groups. The Pew projection analysis revealed that Muslims are the only major religious group projected to increase faster than the world's population as a whole and India will have the largest Muslim population of any country in the world surpassing Indonesia. Along with the projection, the PEW research centre published an article titled 'Why Muslims are the world's fastest-growing religious group'. The article pointed out that "India's number of Muslims is growing at a faster rate than the country's majority Hindu population, and is projected to rise from 14.4% of India's 2010 population to 18.4% (or 311 million people) in 2050".

These reports were received in India with an outburst of anti-Muslim hate speeches by Hindu rightwing leaders. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Sadhvi Prachi called Hindu women for having four children. She said "A lion doesn't have just one child. We also need four children in each family. One will fight the enemies on the border, give one to saints, give another to VHP(Vishwa Hindu Parishath) for social work". Sakshi Maharaj, a Member of Parliament from the same party said: "the concept of four wives and 40 children will not work in India, The time has come when a Hindu woman must produce at least four children in order to protect Hindu religion." The media carried inflammatory and misleading headlines. The Hindustan Times' headline, for example reads 'Hindus less than 80% of the country's population'. When most of the print media tried to highlight the decline of Hindu population, with the exception of 'The Hindu' that published the story highlighting that the census data shows fertility rate of women of the Muslim community is falling faster with the headline 'Muslim population growth slows'. Taking the advantage of the time, VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) working president Pravin Togadia wrote in RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) mouthpiece 'Organiser-' "A serious extinction seems to be on the anvil. And it is of Hindus. There is method in the systematic growth of Muslims. Now, if we do not stand up

against the 'Population Jihad', Bharat will soon be an Islamic state. It is also must to strictly implement two children norm irrespective of the political pressures. The latest Census figures are a wake-up call”.

These reports were received in India with an outburst of anti-Muslim hate speeches by Hindu rightwing leaders. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Sadhvi Prachi called Hindu women for having four children. . Sakshi Maharaj, a member of parliament from the same party said: "the concept of four wives and 40 children will not work in India, The time has come when a Hindu woman must produce at least four children in order to protect Hindu religion." The media carried inflammatory and misleading headlines. The Hindustan Times' headline, for example, read 'Hindus less than 80% of the country's population'. When most of the print media tried to highlight the decline of Hindu population, with an exemption of 'The Hindu' that published the story highlighting that the census data shows fertility rate of women of the Muslim community is falling faster with the headline 'Muslim population growth slows'. Taking advantage of the time, VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) working president Pravin Togadia wrote in RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) mouthpiece 'Organiser' "A serious extinction seems to be on the anvil. And it is of Hindus. There is method in the systematic growth of Muslims. Now, if we do not stand up against the 'Population Jihad', Bharat will soon be an Islamic state. It is also must to strictly implement two children norm irrespective of the political pressures. The latest Census figures are a wake-up call”.

The fear that Muslims would overtake Hindus has been repeated after almost every census in the history of India (Mukherji 1909; Datta 1993). Many hold the view that the collection of population number by religious groups was aimed at creating communal tensions over the relative variations in the numbers. The real intention of British colonial government behind the collection of a detailed demographic data of religious groups has been subjected to serious debates in India. The domination of religious, racial and cultural categories in Indian census and that of economic categories in the census of Great Britain is pointed out by Bhagat and Praharaj (2005) to show the divisive intentions of the religious categories in the census. Bose (2005) argued that the purpose of publication of detailed data about religious, tribal and caste groups was to create divisions among the Indian people. According to Gill (2007) the objectives of the census were to understand the demographic and social structure of the country which was essential for strengthening the colonial grip

over the people, to make a better understanding of the resource potential, both demographic and cultural; and to enhance the demographic visibility of the Christians in the country. Even if the published data have created communal divisions, the British government could not be blamed that they collected this valuable data to divide and rule the country (Gill 2007).

Though the real intention of British government behind its special attention on the religious demography of the country, it is evident that the British government officials have often made deliberate attempts to divide the Muslim and Hindu communities on the religious line to dilute the freedom movements. M.C.J.O' Donnel, Census Commissioner of Bengal for 1891 census, published a document in which he calculated the number of years it would take the Hindus to disappear altogether from Bengal. This report created tensions between the communities. In 1905, the government divided Bengal, the epicentre of freedom fight, on religious lines. According to Bhagat (2001), the divide and rule policy is blatantly visible in the Bengal division. He argues that the incident was a precursor to the division of the country in 1947. Religious communities were mapped, indicating their geographic distribution and minority-majority status in each census reports. It provided extensive descriptive and statistical accounts of religious conversion and re-conversion each year. This data was used to compare and analyse the relative position of communities. In reality, the census was not the reason for the growth of fear of Muslim population rather it provided authoritative evidence for the already existed anxieties.

The census data of 1901 provided a concrete document for Hindutva groups to prove their much older argument that the Hindu population is going to be overtaken by Muslims. The census marked a decrease in the proportion of Hindus from 75.1 percentage in 1881 to 72.9 percentage (Davis 1951). Using 1881, 1891, 1901 census data, in 1909 Colonel U.N. Mukherji made a linear projection of rate of Hindu decline on the basis of demographic trends visible in the census results and concluded that it would take less than 420 years for the Hindu race to disappear entirely from the face of India. He titled the series of articles 'Hindus, a Dying Race'. In 1926, Swami Shradhananda, a personal friend of Mukharji, wrote a book titled 'Hindu Sangathan; Saviour of the dying race' to discuss how to protect Hindu 'race' from the predicted extinction. He quoted the 1911 Census report that says "The number of Muhammadans has risen during the decade (1901-11) by 6.7 percent as compared with only five percent in the case of Hindus. There is a small but continuous accession of converts from Hinduism and other religions, but the main reason for the relatively more rapid

growth of the followers of the Prophet is that they are more prolific." to legitimate his arguments. Mukherji's book continued to be a weapon of right wings to create Muslim population fear. The Hindu Mahasabha named "They count their gains, we calculate our losses" for a pamphlet in 1979. The title was taken from the book 'Hindus, a Dying Race'.

The relative growth of Muslim population became the most comfortable and most convincing tool in the hands of Hindu nationalists. Rao (2011) opined that "Whipping up anxiety about Muslims would be one way to weld together hugely diverse, and often antagonistic, castes into one community, erasing the structural divisions in the caste society". Though the India government decided to discontinue the collection of religious data in Census, anything related to population has been used to sensationalise the Muslim population and propagate Islamophobia. Referring to the two child policy (non-mandatory) a right-wing leader Sadhavi Rithambara stated "The state tells us Hindus to have only two or three children. After a while, they will say 'do not have even one'. But what about those who have six wives, 30-35 children, and breed like mosquitoes and flies?" (Cited in Kakar 1996). Basu (1997) cites a similar statement by Sadhavi Saraswati. She said "For every five children the Hindus have, the Muslims have 50. And who feeds these 50 children? Hindus do! After Muslims divorce, the waqf boards support the children with taxes that we pay. Within 25 years you will be living like a poor minority in this country."

After the Independence, the Indian government decided to discontinue the collection of religious data in Census. It is interesting to note that the publication of census data on literacy and work participation by religion for the first time in independent India coincided with the decision to incorporate a question on religion in the British census in 2001. The 2001 census was the first ever census in the history of the country in which the data on religious communities have been cross-classified by literacy, sex ratio, child sex ratio (0-6 age group) and workers (Bose 2005). In the post-independence India, extensive research has been carried out by academia to cross-check the anti-Muslim demographic arguments. Basu (1997) sums up all the assertions of Hindu right wings in three points (1) The Muslim population in India is growing intolerably fast and will soon swamp the Hindu majority in terms of absolute numbers. (2) Muslim fertility is higher than Hindu fertility because of the legal ability of Muslim men to have several wives. (3) Muslim fertility is also higher than Hindu fertility because Islam is opposed to family planning. Social scientists developed certain hypotheses to explain the population growth differentials. The 'characteristics hypothesis' argues that the

differences in fertility are determined by the socio-economic characteristics of the particular group of people (Freedman and Whelpton 1961; Jones and Nortman 1968; Goldscheider and Uhlenberg 1969). Whereas the ‘particularized theology hypothesis’ attributes it on the theological dictums on marriage, contraception, and abortion. The ‘minority status hypothesis’ states that minority status of a community could form a particular kind of fertility behaviour (Goldscheider and Uhlenberg 1969; Day 1984). According to Dyson and Moore (1983) regional factors outweigh religious ones in fertility behaviour of a community. They argue that Hindus and Muslims show more similarities with each other within regional demographic regimes than they do with co-religionists elsewhere in the subcontinent.

Surprisingly the academic interventions that aim to fact check the Islamophobic arguments of rightwing groups fall into the trap of the logic of the fear of Muslim population becoming the majority in the country. After analysing population growth differentials between Hindus and Muslims during 1951-1971, Visaria (1974) writes: “even if the differentials in the rate of growth of Hindus and Muslims persist, India will not become a Muslim-majority nation for centuries to come. Further, the differentials observed so far most unlikely to continue in future.” Presenting two scenarios in which the Muslim population may or may not grow to outnumber the Hindus over a period of more than 300 years, Bhatia (1990) concludes similarly. He says that “all community populations should reach stability within 100-150 years, effectively eliminating the basis and need to consider whether Muslims may eventually dominate numerically in India that there was no sound reason to believe that Muslims would become a majority community in India”. Here, it is clear that the concern of academic researchers is to ensure that the Muslim population is not going to overtake the majority, hence to panic is fruitless. On the basis of Hindu-Muslim growth rate differentials of 1981-91, Kulkarni (1996) estimated that if the observed differentials in Hindu-Muslim growth rates continue in future, it will take about 250 years for the Muslims population to catch up with the Hindu population numerically, let alone be a majority. According to Bhat (2004), the Muslim population can at the most reach up to 20 percent of the total before it stabilises by the end of this century. He writes: “Thus the fear that Muslims would outnumber Hindus in India as a whole is totally unwarranted”. Bhagat and Praharaj (2005) also conclude in the same way. He says “It is true that a Hindu-Muslim differential in fertility persists in India’s demographic reality, but it is no more than one child. It is also not too large to swamp India’s Hindu majority in the foreseeable future”.

From the blatantly islamophobic statement of a BJP MLA to the academia, the underlying assumption in the demographic discourses in the country is the fear of Muslim fertility. The ghost of Mukherji that created the fear that the Hindu race is going to die shortly is hunting the consciences of both the Hindu nationalists and academia. While the Hindu right-wing skillfully utilises this fear to accumulate votes and unite the fragmented community, academia takes the responsibility to console the Hindu nationalist sentiments by guaranteeing them that Muslim population in India is not going to outnumber the Hindu population and it is unlikely that the Hindu community is going to extinct. It is evident that the fear of Muslim population in India is as old as the very commencement of collection the data systematically and deep and wide enough to cut across the ideological affiliations.

References

- Bhagat, R. (2001). Census and the Construction of Communalism in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4352-435.
- Bhagat, R. (2003). Role of Census in Ethnic and Racial Construction: US, British and Indian Censuses. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 686-91.
- Bhagat, R. (2004). Facts and Fiction. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4292-4294.
- Bhagat, R., & Praharaj, p. (2005). Hindu-Muslim fertility differentials. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 411-418.
- Bhatia, P. (1990). Population Growth of Various Communities in India- Myth and Reality. *Demography India*, 121-129.
- Bose. (2005). Beyond Hindu-Muslim Growth Rates: Understanding Socio- Economic Reality. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 370-374.
- Brass, P. (1992). *The Politics of India since Independence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brass, P. (1992). *The Politics of India since Independence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Datta, P. (1993). 'Dying Hindus: Production of Hindu Communal Common Sense in Early 20th Century Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1305-1319.
- Day, L. (1984). Minority-Group Status and Fertility: A More Detailed Test of the Hypothesis. *Sociological Quarterly*, 456-472.
- Dyson, T., & Moore, M. (1983). On kinship structure, female autonomy, and demographic behavior in India. *Population and development review*, 35-60.
- Freedman , R., & P K Whelpton . (1961). Socio-economic Factors in Religious Differentials in Fertility. *American Sociological Review*, 608-614 .

- Gill, M. (2007). Politics of population census data in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 241-249.
- Goldscheider, C., & P R Uhlenbeg. (1969). Minority Group Status and Fertility', , 74(4):. *American Journal of Sociology*, 361-373.
- Jones, G., & D Nortman . (1968). Roman Catholic Fertility and Family Planning: A Comparative Review of Literature. *Studies in Family Planning*, 1-27.
- Kakar, S. (1995). The construction of a new Hindu identity. In K. Basu , & S. Subramanium, *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity* (pp. 204-235). New Delhi : Penguin.
- Kulkarni, P. (1996). Differentials in the Population Growth of Hindus and Muslims in India, 1981-91, Monograph Series No 1,. New Delhi: Population Foundation of India.
- Mukherji, U. (1909). *Hindus – A Dying Race*. Calcutta: M. Banerjee and Co.
- Rao, M. (2010). On Saffron Demography . *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27–29.
- Visaria, L. (1974). Religious Differentials in Fertility. In A. Bose, P. Desai, A. Mitra, & J. Sharma, *Population in India's Development 1947-2000* (pp. 361-374). Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.