



‘The Population Myth’ review: Not a ‘demographic’ battle

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With logic, and data from unimpeachable sources, former chief election commissioner S.Y. Quraishi’s book debunks the myth around exaggerated fears of Indian Muslim numbers

An impartial analysis of Islamophobia in India would reveal that what generated it was not Islam but a sense of political insecurity born out of exaggerated fears of Muslim numbers. These anxieties came to the fore in the early 1900s after the partition of Bengal, the passage of the Punjab Land Acquisition Act of 1900, and when the Indian Councils Act of 1909 introduced separate electorates for Muslims.

More recently, in September 2004, the VHP working president of north Gujarat region Chinubhai Patel expressed alarm at the 36% rise in the decadal growth rate of Muslims recorded in the 2001 Census and said that the community was “conspiring to convert ‘Hindu rajya’ into a Muslim country.” And in October 2019, BJP leader Surendra Singh warned that Hindutva will become endangered in the next 50 years unless population control laws are enacted in the country.

Wealth of material

S.Y. Quraishi’s *The Population Myth* seeks to counter this disinformation campaign with hard data. The book brings together a wealth of information from unimpeachable sources to show that Muslims can never outnumber the Hindus given the trend in the last 70 years, and that by 2101 the Indian population will stabilise around 1.7 billion, with 1.27 billion Hindus and 320 million Muslims. However, the stabilisation of the Muslim population will be slower by 40 years due to the lag in demographic transition.

These findings were more or less confirmed by a study published in *The Lancet* last year which suggested that by 2048 India’s population will peak at about 1.61 billion and decline to 1.093 billion by 2100. And if India is able to meet UN Sustainable Development Goals targets for education and contraceptives, the population would peak earlier and decline to 929 million by 2100.

Statistics provided by Quraishi also show that from a religious point of view Muslims have not just been open to the idea of family planning but far ahead in the acceptance of birth spacing methods than their Hindu counterparts.

Quraishi states that more than religion it is factors such as literacy, age of marriage, exposure to mass media, and economic conditions that determine the fertility levels of Indian Muslims. Yet he quite unnecessarily devotes three chapters spanning 105 pages to discuss the tenets of Islam on family planning, and population policies in Islamic nations.

Economic backwardness

These chapters offer nothing more than a collection of some Quranic verses, few hadiths, and a number of fatwas.

And the author fears fatwas enough to confess that when in 1994 he was accumulating data on family planning he sounded many ulema and imams “to make sure I don’t end up getting fatwas against myself.” It is this submissive attitude that has kept Muslims under the thumb of religious leaders, letting them micromanage their lives for centuries.

Indeed, the socio-economic backwardness of Muslims is mostly a result of letting clerics have their way on issues they know little about.

For instance, a dispassionate study of verses 6:151 and 17:31 would have yielded enough material for Quraishi to rethink his elitist neo-Malthusian argumentation that links scarcity of resources to overpopulation. Both verses warn Muslims against ‘killing’ their children fearing impoverishment or ruination (*imlaaq*) because the planet has been provided with enough resources (*rizq*) to sustain humanity. But Quraishi glosses over this Quranic statement instead of investigating it further.

Food wastage

A 2012 article in the *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* by a group of researchers led by agroecologist Eric Holt Giménez argued citing Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN that the world produces more than 1.5 times enough food to feed 10 billion people, the world’s 2050 projected population peak. But the bulk of industrially produced grain crops goes to biofuels and confined animal feedlots rather than food for the hungry.

Then there is the issue of food wastage. The United Nations Development Programme estimates that up to 40% of the food produced in India is wasted even before it reaches the consumer. In other words, hunger or lack of access to education, healthcare and other basic necessities do not appear to be due to overpopulation.

In July 2020, policy analyst Chelsea Follett of the Cato Institute in a forcefully argued paper titled *Neo-Malthusianism and Coercive Population Control in China and India* states that population growth can coincide with increasing abundance of natural resources and does not necessarily lead to scarcity. Her concern is that despite birth rates declining dramatically across the world without coercion neo-Malthusian ideas are seeing resurgence in India and elsewhere.

The political import of these scientific opinions is momentous. It means any legislative attempt to regulate India’s population based on unfounded fears would be as counter-productive as China’s failed population policy which not just affected the sex-ratio, but reduced the productive

workforce and resulted in an ageing society. The Communist state is now considering “more inclusive population policies” to boost birthrate.

Although Quraishi mentions China’s failed population policy and the significance of demographic dividend, his book does not contain any discussion on the pros and cons of the neo-Malthusianism it rehashes. It presents the one-sided view that family planning is the be-all and end-all of population stabilisation. Nevertheless, the book succeeds in exploding the myth that Indian Muslims are plotting a “demographic jihad” to capture power.

The Population Myth; **S.Y. Quraishi, HarperCollins, ₹499**