

Religious Demography of India: Myths and Realities, Edited by Lancy Lobo and Jayesh Shah, Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2018. Pages 188. Price: 750

This edited volume contains papers presented at the National Seminar on the complex question of religious demography of India in contemporary times. Given the religion-based identity politics in the country, it is vital to examine the role of religious demography in India's democratic politics.

In view of certain anxiety about the Hindus being outnumbered in India, the issue of the differential growth rates of religious communities in the country has become prominent. Leela Visaria's paper, in this regard, discusses certain myths regarding religious demography and the differential population growth among the Hindus and Muslims. Drawing from the data on broad trends of religious demography from 1952 to 1971, she argues that even with differential growth rates between the two communities, India will not become a Muslim majority nation for centuries to come.

Visaria refers to socio-economic characteristics and geographical locations of different religious communities. According to her, the behaviour of these communities is more related to fertility behaviour. As late entrants to demographic transition, Muslims have been catching up at a faster pace in reducing their fertility and increasing the use of family planning methods. Another important conclusion of her study is that the Muslim community cannot be treated as the monolith group. The Muslims speak languages of the regions of India they reside in and emulate the behaviour or even compete with members of the dominant group in pursuit of education, vocation etc. The suggestion here is that one needs to study the various subgroups within the Muslim community and how the subgroups are responding to the socio-economic changes occurring across India and how flexibly they interpret religious precepts affecting their daily lives.

R.B. Bhagat's essay refers to 1901 census, which shows decline of the growth rate of Hindu population. From then, there is this myth of fear that somehow Muslims will turn out to be the majority community in terms of the overall population and that the Hindu population will come down. He also refers to certain groups propagating the theory that Hindus are a dwindling race and that there is a higher rate of fertility in Muslims, and it is recognized as essentially Islamic. By way of clarifying such myths, Bhagat maintains that Islam is not against family planning, and that polygamy, is not necessarily related to higher fertility among the Muslims. Bhagat also asserts that the Muslim community is not a homogeneous group and that

India's demography is marked by regional variations across India's multi-religious landscape.

Ambrose Pinto's essay points towards the 2011 census data that there is a declining trend in the growth rate of Muslims over the last three decades, and that it is sharper than the Hindu community. In fact, the rate of growth among the Muslim population has been falling consistently over the last three decades from 34.5 percent in 1991 to 29.5 percent in 2001, and 24.6 percent in 2011 census. He takes the view that the Hindus and Muslims are not homogenous communities. So the data on religious belief in the census should be viewed as indicative of culture rather than of religion.

V. Sebastian's essay maintains that religion is the main marker of the community and religion is considered as a colonial invention, by referring to the notion of 'majority' and 'minority' to characterize that Hindus and Muslims in numerical terms. The role played by the census in differentiating 'majority' and 'minority' in regard to religious communities is discussed. H.K. Dua's Foreword highlights pluralism as India's strength and does well to connect the whole debate on religious demography as it unfolds in the book. The focus on the theme of pluralism ably counters certain group's perspective that claims that India belongs to one religion only.

J.S. Bandukwala's essay involves a plea to embrace the ideas of Gandhi, Nanak and Kabir. U.N. Somayaju's essay advances some concerns about demographic population of Parsi population in India. Himanshu Sekhar Mishra's essay on 'Kandhamal Riot' provides an argument connecting role of demographic composition, manipulation of identity and communal polarization in Kandhamal district of Orissa.

The essays comprising the edited volume provide understanding of the dynamics of religious demography in the context of prevailing myths and realities with reference to various factors. The discourse on religious demography, however, needs to be supplemented by essays relating to the sociology of religion and a more nuanced discussion of sociology of major religious communities in India.

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