

## Inter-Regional Variation in the Growth of Muslim Population in India: A Geographical Perspective

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### Abstract

*The 2001 Census of India, has thrown up important issues pertaining to inter-religious variation in population growth. The results have demographic implications for the country as a whole, but disparity in the rates of growth among different religious groups living in India has been interpreted to convey more political meanings. Significantly higher rates of growth among the Muslim population vis-à-vis the other religious groups is interpreted as a major challenge to India's efforts to achieve demographic transition on the one hand and an impact of continuing influx of migrants from across the border on the other. There are other views which hold that the continual rise in the Muslim population is a reflection of their abject poverty, illiteracy and low level of modernization. A geographical perspective appears to be essential in understanding areas of excessive growth and those that experience a growth rate equal to or less than the other religious groups.*

For a variety of reasons religion has been the most potent source of ethnic identity, internal cohesion and external conflicts. Indian society, perhaps more than any other, represents a pluralistic social order which at best can be described as an inclusive society. Though usually perceived as the land of the Hindus, the country has been home to nearly all the religions of the world. Over 12 percent of the total population has embraced Islam while a little over 2 per cent belong to Christian religion-the two constituting the minority religious groups of non-Indic origin. The Indic group includes the Buddhists, the Jains and the Sikhs. The problem of identity based on religion assumes nuances of meanings in a country as vast as India and as populated as India. A very interesting aspect of religious diversity in India refers to the spatial patterning of the religious groups who are concentrated in a definite locale in different eco-regions of India.

Geographic patterning in the distribution of these religious groups has been responsible to a very great extent in the emergence of regional nuances in religious practices. A study of the spatial distribution of the major religious groups indeed helps one to understand the role of religion in defining the parameters of Indian social space and the socio-cultural regionalism based on it. Contemporary religious problems in India are becoming more demographic in its content. Inter-religious variation in population growth rate is assuming important connotations. Disparity in the rates of growth among different religious groups living in India has been interpreted to convey more political meanings. Significantly higher rates of growth among the Muslim population vis-à-vis the other religious groups has been seen as a major challenge to India's efforts to achieve demographic transition on the one hand and an impact of continuing influx of migrants from across the border on the other. There are other views which hold that the continual rise in the Muslim population is a reflection of their abject poverty, illiteracy and low level of modernization. Rise in the proportion of Christian population also has been seen as an attempt by the missionaries to convert the Hindu population. These are important demographic issues that demand a geographical perspective through mapping of religious groups

in different regions and their relative growth in order to answer some of the emotive issues confronting Indian polity.

The recently concluded 2001 Census of India, the results of which are now available, has thrown up important issues pertaining to inter-religious variation in population growth rate. The results have demographic implications for the country as a whole, but disparity in the rates of growth among different religious groups living in India has been interpreted to convey more political meanings. Significantly higher rates of growth among the Muslim population vis-à-vis the other religious groups has been seen as a major challenge to India's efforts to achieve demographic transition on the one hand and an impact of continuing influx of migrants from across the border on the other. There are other views which hold that the continual rise in the Muslim population is a reflection of their abject poverty, illiteracy and low level of modernization. The paper analyses the patterns of population growth among the Muslim population in different geographical regions of India using district level data so as to critically assess the views expressed in public as well as in scholarly circles. A geographical perspective appears to be essential in understanding the areas of excessive growth and those that experience a growth rate equal to or less than the other religious groups. It would also be beneficial to examine what has been the pattern of growth in areas where the Muslim population traditionally has a strong presence and the areas where they are a minority. The paper using GIS techniques of mapping opens up a discourse on Muslim identity in India. Variation in the rates of population growth experienced by different religious groups in India has always been a contentious issue in both the public and in the scholarly circles alike. The issue assumes nuances of meanings when it concerns the religious minority groups. The Christians account for around 2.3 per cent of the population of India constituting the third largest religious group after the Hindus and the Muslims. Their spatial distribution however is extremely uneven and they are confined to a few pockets in the country where they constitute a majority. The proposed paper analyses the patterns in differential growth rates experienced by the Muslim population in areas of their traditional strongholds as well as in areas where their presence has been negligible. The data has been analysed at the district level to provide an insight into micro-level variations. An important dimension of their spatial distribution is related to their presence in large measure in areas of tribal concentration. Spatial patterns in the growth of Muslim population reveal interesting facts which has been correlated with the issue of conversion to Islam-an issue that has been debated over the years. Using GIS technique, the regional patterns have been mapped to provide answers to the problems of conversion as well as other issues concerning Muslim identity in India.