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K. S. James and T.V. Sekher (2023): *India Population Report* Cambridge University Press (xxviii+572)

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India's demographic transition holds significant importance in global population studies, not only because of its sheer size but also due to its diverse patterns, regional variations, and complex socio-economic changes. With India now officially recognized as the world's most populous country, critical issues such as fertility decline, ageing, internal migration, rapid urbanization, and changing workforce participation have become central to both national planning and global development discourse. In this context, *India Population Report* by K. S. James and T. V. Sekher (2023), published by Cambridge University Press, serves as a valuable resource for researchers and policymakers alike. The book provides (a) a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary demographic scenario in India, (b) a critical examination of the challenges arising from geographically and socio-economically heterogeneous patterns of fertility, mortality, health transitions, and migration flows and (c) an assessment of the opportunities that these dynamics present for advancing inclusive well-being and sustainable development.

This review focuses on critically evaluating the book by analysing its content, structure, and contributions, specifically its use of data, regional analysis, policy implications, and

treatment of gender, inequality, and population transitions. The authors introduce the basic concepts of population change in India, anchoring them through two of the country's most prominent demographers, thereby offering a strong foundation for understanding the key demographic processes at play.

The content is organized into two parts. The first part focuses on demographic changes including fertility, mortality, migration, ageing, and the challenges they pose to society. The second part explores interlinkages between socio-economic factors, demographic and health indicators. These health indicators cover maternal, child, adolescent and occupational health. It also includes the role of population policy in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Together, the two parts comprise of 12 articles, providing empirical and analytical perspectives on key aspects of India's demographic and health transition.

The first part of the book provides a thorough examination of India's core demographic shifts, focusing on fertility decline, mortality patterns, population ageing, migration flows and the epidemiological transition. These chapters lay a strong empirical foundation by analysing large-scale survey data to trace historical trends and identify emerging

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challenges. The section highlights persistent regional and socio-economic disparities that complicate India's demographic transition, emphasising the heterogeneity of experiences across states and populations. Notably, the analysis of fertility differentials and ageing underscores the urgent need for adaptive policy frameworks that respond both to demographic opportunity and burden. By situating demographic change within broader socio-political contexts, Part one advances scholarly understanding while equipping policymakers with critical insights into population trends likely to shape India's development trajectory in coming decades.

In the second part, the volume demonstrates the value of integrating demographic insights with public health, gender, urban, and development studies. These chapters not only document the consequences of demographic change but also offer pathways for equitable policy responses. The emphasis on evidence-based analysis, regional differentiation, and structural determinants makes this section especially useful for policymakers, health planners, and development practitioners. This section successfully reinforces the central argument of the volume: that population dynamics are deeply intertwined with broader issues of health equity, sustainability, and social justice.

The authors contextualize demographic shifts within broader socio-political developments, such as the Green Revolution, the implementation of family planning policies, and public health interventions; they also consider the potential of India's youthful population to drive growth, while highlighting structural gaps in education, skills, and employment that must be addressed. From the book's front matter and introduction, we know that it draws on

landmark surveys and research on population, health, ageing, fertility, nutrition, migration, and women and children undertaken by the International Institute for Population Sciences. It seeks not just to measure the problems but to identify "thrust areas for further research and action."

One of the book's core strengths lies in its treatment of fertility transitions. The authors show how fertility decline has not been uniform across states; while southern and western states have achieved replacement-level fertility, some northern states, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, still struggle with high fertility and limited contraceptive access. The book critically examines the factors influencing fertility decline, such as female education, urbanization, socio-economic status, and cultural norms.

A particularly insightful chapter (Chapter 4) focuses on the mortality and epidemiological transition in India, discussing improvements in life expectancy, reductions in infant and maternal mortality, and shifts in disease burden from communicable to non-communicable diseases. However, chapter emphasizes the persistence of inequities in health outcomes, especially across caste, class, and rural-urban divides.

Chapter 5 addresses gender roles and help-seeking behaviour among women experiencing marital violence in India. The study highlights that three-quarters of women who have experienced domestic violence remain silent; education and indicators of agency, such as freedom of movement and control over resources, remain poor. This suggests the importance of policies that foster accessible, women-friendly formal support systems, while also empowering women to assert their rights despite societal stigma and resistance.

Moreover, Chapter 6 argues for a more comprehensive social scheme for the elderly. It emphasises evaluating both awareness and utilization of existing old-age support programs while also identifying the barriers limiting access among older populations. The findings show that about 18 percent of the elderly utilise any form of health policy, and a significant proportion remain unaware of government social security and pension schemes.

The chapter on migration (Chapter 7) is especially insightful, analysing internal and international mobility patterns. It explores seasonal and distress migration, and the feminisation of labour migration while highlighting the inadequacy of existing data systems to capture the true scale and conditions of mobile populations. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the sudden reverse migration, are discussed critically, with attention to policy lapses and the vulnerabilities of informal labour markets.

In the second part of the book, the chapter on malnutrition among women, children, and adolescents offers a disaggregated view of nutritional deficiencies, linking them to educational attainment, economic status, and gender disparities. The authors argue that while India has made progress in reducing under-nutrition, the persistence of chronic malnutrition and anaemia, especially among adolescent girls, reflects deep-rooted inequities that require multi-sectoral interventions.

Another chapter examines maternal health and the SDGs: the authors assess India's progress toward key global health targets. The analysis reveals significant inter-state disparities in maternal health outcomes and identifies socio-economic inequality as a

critical barrier to universal access. By using NFHS and DLHS data, the chapter provides a robust evidence base for improving maternal health services and reducing inequality through targeted policy measures.

The book also contributes methodologically, in its chapter on localizing the SDGs at the district level. Recognizing the limitations of national averages, the authors propose a framework to monitor SDG progress sub-nationally. This is particularly relevant for researchers and policymakers interested in spatial inequality and evidence-based development planning.

An important contribution on urbanization and housing infrastructure critically examines the demographic and infrastructural pressures on India's growing urban centres. The authors highlight growth of informal settlements, inadequate housing, and lack of basic services in urban peripheries, underscoring the need for inclusive and sustainable urban planning.

The final chapter addresses occupational health among industrial workers; it sheds light on a relatively under-explored area in Indian population research. It demonstrates the health risks faced by industrial workers in both formal and informal sectors, especially in hazardous industries, and calls for stronger occupational health regulation, workplace safety norms, and integrating occupational health into national health planning.

Thematically, *India Population Report* (2023) focuses on five key areas: (i) demographic diversity across Indian states, (ii) gender and reproductive health rights, (iii) social inequality and exclusion, (iv) the potential and pitfalls of the demographic dividend, and (v) the urgent need for data-driven governance. James and Sekher carefully

balance statistical analysis with a substantive, human-centred approach. The book's attention to intersectionality, examining how caste, class, religion, and gender shape demographic outcomes, is especially commendable. One of its most impressive features is its regional disaggregation. By moving beyond national averages, the authors highlight the stark differences in population dynamics and service delivery between states, making a compelling case for decentralised planning and targeted interventions.

Despite its many strengths, the book could have benefitted from including more direct narratives or participatory perspectives from young people themselves. It rarely includes youth voice or qualitative insights from younger generations. A comparative chapter situating India's demographic trajectory with those of neighbouring South Asian countries (for example, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka) may have enriched the discussion further. Additionally, a more detailed assessment of health systems' capacity, health infrastructure, and financing, especially for emerging non-communicable diseases and mental health, would have strengthened the analysis. Also, although the front matter states that the volume "identifies thrust areas for further research and action," in many chapters the translation from diagnosis to strategy is less developed; more detailed policy roadmaps or prioritisation of strategies would increase its impact.

In particular, more discussion of climate change, environmental impacts, and how they interact with demography (e.g. migration induced by climate stress, morbidity due to heat, etc.) seems under-represented even though these are becoming major issues for population and health. Also, more attention to gender beyond

reproductive health (for example, men's health, masculinities, gender roles among men, gendered labour, etc.) could add nuance.

Overall, India Population Report by James and Sekher is a timely and important contribution to the field of Indian demography. Through its multidisciplinary approach and empirically grounded chapters, the volume provides a comprehensive understanding of the country's demographic transition, associated health and development challenges, and the complex regional and socio-economic variations that shape these processes. By addressing themes such as fertility decline, mortality patterns, migration, ageing, gender inequality, and the health implications of demographic change, the book offers valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike. What sets this volume apart is its ability to bridge demographic analysis with broader development concerns, including urbanization, occupational health, and SDGs. The focus on interlinkages between population dynamics and public health makes it not only a scholarly resource but also a practical guide for designing inclusive and evidence-based policies. Despite some limitations in youth perspectives and deeper health system analysis, the volume succeeds in capturing the current demographic moment with clarity, depth, and policy relevance. Overall, this book is essential for those engaged in population studies, public health, social policy, and development research. It not only reflects where India stands in its demographic journey but also raises critical questions about how the country can respond strategically and equitably to shape a healthier and more sustainable future.