
BOOK REVIEW

Population and Human Development in Districts of India

Aalok Ranjan Chaurasia

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Few countries present demographic complexity on the scale of India. Continental in size, characterised by profound regional inequalities and extraordinary social, cultural and economic diversity, India has long challenged demographers seeking to reconcile national trends with local realities. Since the 1951 classic study *The Population of India and Pakistan* by Kingsley Davis, research on India's population has increasingly moved from broad national generalisations towards more disaggregated studies of states, regions and communities. Aalok Ranjan Chaurasia's *Population and Human Development in Districts of India* represents one of the most ambitious efforts to extend this tradition to the district – the administrative level where demographic processes are translated into policy and where development interventions ultimately succeed or fail.

The volume's central premise is both theoretically compelling and practically important: national averages conceal much of the demographic variation that shapes India's development trajectory. Districts, rather than states alone, provide an essential unit for understanding the interaction between fertility, mortality, population growth and human development. Although this proposition appears intuitive, research studies rarely pursue with the empirical depth demonstrated in this monograph. Drawing upon census data, National Family Health Survey

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information and demographic modelling, Chaurasia constructs a comprehensive account of demographic change across India's 640 districts.

The book's major intellectual contribution lies not simply in presenting district-level statistics but in establishing a framework in which local diversity becomes central to understanding India's demographic future. Rather than treating districts as subordinate administrative units, Chaurasia argues that they represent the principal arena for evidence-based planning because they embody India's heterogeneity in population dynamics, economic conditions, health outcomes, and social development. This perspective reflects a longstanding principle in demographic analysis: population processes must be interpreted within their institutional and social contexts rather than viewed as isolated numerical trends.

Chaurasia situates the study within the broader history of decentralised development planning in India. Although district planning has been advocated since independence, effective implementation has often been constrained by inadequate demographic information. The absence of a population census after 2011 has further intensified this challenge, leaving planners increasingly dependent upon older census data and more limited district-level information from surveys (a census of India is scheduled for completion in 2027). The book addresses this empirical gap by integrating available sources into a unified assessment of district-level demographic conditions.

This concern with evidence-based planning places the volume within the wider literature on population and development in India. Earlier scholarship frequently examined relationships between population growth and development at national or state levels. Kingsley Davis established important conceptual foundations by relating fertility decline, mortality transition, urbanisation and social change to broader processes of modernisation. Ashish Bose highlighted regional disparities through his influential analysis of the BIMARU states (an acronym for the high fertility, less developed Indian states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), demonstrating that demographic transition proceeded unevenly across India. Tim Dyson further integrated demographic history with political economy, while Amartya Sen broadened development analysis by emphasising human capabilities and social welfare rather than economic growth alone.

Chaurasia's contribution differs from these earlier works primarily in analytical scale. Rather than revising established demographic theory, he demonstrates that many familiar propositions become more complex when examined at the district level. The national demographic transition remains the overarching framework, but its local expressions reveal substantial variation in timing, pace and developmental consequences.

Methodologically, the volume is impressive. Few demographic studies attempt to model population change for every district in a country of India's size and diversity. Chaurasia employs logistic growth models to estimate district population trajectories and applies joinpoint regression techniques to identify changes in growth patterns over time. These approaches move beyond simple comparisons of intercensal growth rates by providing continuous estimates of demographic change. The modelling discussion is rigorous yet accessible to readers familiar with applied demography.

The modelling strategy also reflects a sophisticated understanding of demographic transition theory. Population growth is not assumed to follow a constant exponential pattern but rather an S-shaped trajectory in which growth accelerates, reaches a turning point, and eventually slows as fertility declines. Chaurasia demonstrates that this logistic framework provides a reasonable representation of population trajectories for most Indian districts, suggesting that classical demographic transition theory remains relevant when applied at local levels with appropriate empirical flexibility.

Particularly valuable is the author's careful treatment of data limitations. Issues arising from changing district boundaries, incomplete observations, and census under-enumeration are addressed directly rather than overlooked. This transparency strengthens confidence in the analysis by demonstrating that the statistical models are informed by demographic approximations rather than mechanical exercises.

The opening chapters reconstruct district-level population growth from 1951 to 2011, project future trends to 2041, and estimate eventual population stabilisation. Together, these analyses reveal the extraordinary diversity of India's demographic trajectories. Some districts have progressed far through the demographic

transition, while others continue to experience rapid growth. This variation reinforces one of the book's central arguments: national averages provide an increasingly inadequate basis for planning in a country whose demographic futures differ substantially across local populations.

A notable strength is the integration of demographic modelling with policy relevance. Forecasts are presented not as statistical exercises alone but as essential tools for anticipating future demands for education, health care, housing, employment and infrastructure. In this respect, the volume exemplifies applied demography at its best, where methodological sophistication serves practical public policy objectives.

The later chapters extend the demographic-development framework beyond population dynamics to examine fertility, longevity and human development. A central contribution is the demonstration that India's demographic transformation cannot be understood through aggregate indicators alone. The district perspective reveals the uneven geography of India's demographic transition and reinforces the view that population processes are embedded within social institutions, economic structures, and cultural systems.

The analysis of fertility transition is particularly important. Chaurasia shows that fertility decline in India is neither uniform nor simply a consequence of modernisation. Instead, it reflects the interaction of education, mortality decline, gender relations, access to reproductive health services and changing aspirations regarding family size. This interpretation places India's experience within the broader demographic transition literature associated with Davis, Frank Notestein, Ansley Coale, Ronald Freedman and John Caldwell. Fertility decline occurs as child survival improves, children become less economically necessary for household security and families increasingly invest in the quality rather than quantity of children.

The district-level evidence adds considerable depth to this theoretical perspective. India's national fertility decline conceals substantial internal variation. Some districts have reached fertility levels comparable to advanced industrial societies, whereas others continue to experience relatively high fertility and slower improvements

in mortality and human development. Demographic transition is therefore not a single national process but a collection of locally specific transformations shaped by historical, institutional and socioeconomic conditions.

The discussion of mortality and longevity represents another important contribution. Improvements in life expectancy reflect not only medical advances but also broader changes in public health, nutrition, education, sanitation, and access to services. Yet Chaurasia demonstrates that these gains remain unevenly distributed. Some districts have achieved health outcomes associated with more developed societies, while others continue to face mortality patterns characteristic of earlier stages of development.

This emphasis on inequality in demographic achievement is among the book's important strengths. National indicators may suggest considerable progress while concealing persistent disadvantage. District-level analysis therefore provides a more accurate representation of India's demographic transformation and a stronger foundation for policy intervention.

The relationship between fertility and human development provides the volume's strongest theoretical contribution. Chaurasia moves beyond the population-control perspective that influenced earlier Indian policy and presents demographic change as both a consequence and a determinant of development. This approach aligns closely with Sen's human development framework, in which improvements in education, health, and capabilities expand individual choices and contribute to demographic change. Lower fertility is thus interpreted not merely as a policy objective but as an outcome of broader improvements in human welfare.

The book contributes significantly to debates about India's demographic future. India's emergence as the world's most populous country has renewed attention to population ageing, urbanisation, labour-force change, and regional divergence. Chaurasia provides an important corrective to interpretations that view population stabilisation as a simple national achievement. Earlier population growth will continue to shape India's age structure for decades, and district-level differences in fertility, mortality and development will influence future demands for social services and economic planning.

Chaurasia places India's demographic future within the broader framework of environmental sustainability. Rather than treating population stabilisation as an end in itself, he presents it as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development, consistent with both the United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and India's National Population Policy 2000. The latter explicitly defines population stabilisation as attaining a level compatible with sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental protection. By embedding demographic analysis within this wider policy context, Chaurasia demonstrates that population trends cannot be understood in isolation from the ecological constraints and resource pressures that shape India's long-term development prospects. This perspective broadens the book's contribution beyond conventional demographic analysis, highlighting the integral relationship between population dynamics, environmental stewardship and sustainable development.

The policy implications are substantial and varied. Demographic strategies must move beyond uniform national programmes and recognise regional realities. Districts experiencing rapid fertility decline and population ageing require different approaches from those where fertility remains higher and human development indicators remain weaker. Effective policy therefore requires demographic knowledge combined with locally tailored development strategies.

The book's methodological ambition creates opportunities for future research. Its extensive statistical documentation provides a foundation for deeper analyses of the mechanisms producing regional differences. More attention to international comparisons could further clarify how India's demographic transition resembles and differs from experiences elsewhere in Asia. These observations, however, do not diminish the significance of Chaurasia's contribution. The book succeeds because it combines rigorous demographic measurement with a broader understanding of development, demonstrating that population change is simultaneously a demographic, social, and economic process.

Viewed within the tradition of demographic research on India, *Population and Human Development in Districts of India* is a major achievement. It reflects the fundamental insight that population trends must be interpreted through the social structures that produce them. Fertility rates, mortality levels and population distributions are not merely demographic outcomes; they are

indicators of deeper transformations in social organisation, economic opportunity and human capability.

Overall, Chaurasia's volume makes an important contribution to the literature on population and development in India. It bridges classical demographic transition theory with contemporary applied demography and provides an unusually detailed account of how demographic change unfolds across diverse local contexts. Its greatest achievement is demonstrating that India's demographic future cannot be understood solely through national statistics. Rather, it is a mosaic of district-level experiences shaped by distinctive combinations of fertility behaviours, mortality change, human development, and social conditions.

For scholars of population studies, development economics and Indian society, this book provides both a valuable empirical resource and an important analytical contribution. It confirms that the demographic transition remains one of the defining processes shaping modern societies while demonstrating that pathways to demographic change are historically specific and geographically uneven.