

**FERTILITY TRANSITION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA:
HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES**

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Research Guide

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks into the process of fertility transition in the North-Eastern Region of India (NER) from a historical and comparative perspective vis-à-vis India beginning 1901, using available data from standard secondary sources such as the Census, Sample Registration System and the National Family Health Surveys. Analysis of census data for the colonial period (1901-1941) reveals that the relatively higher population growth rates evinced by the region and its constituent states throughout the pre-Independence period as compared to the all-India average, was largely the result of incessant and relatively huge immigration into the Brahmaputra Valley initiated by the importation of ‘coolies’ and agriculturists from the over-populated areas of Bengal Province. More interestingly perhaps, indirect fertility estimates for the concerned period are indicative of an actual reproductive differential between NER (Assam) and all-India, with the former eliciting significantly higher fertility rates as compared to the latter during the pre-Independence period. Examination of socio-economic differences between Assam and India provide clues as to why such differentials might have existed during that time. Availability of a much greater amount of data for the post-colonial period allows for a greater flexibility of approach to examine fertility in NER and its constituent states. While we find that population growth rates for most of the period following 1951, continued to remain higher among the states of NER as compared to the all-India average at least partly due to continuing high migration into the region, there was a drastic change in the destination of the immigratory population- from the plain areas during the colonial period to the tribal dominated regions/states of NER in

the Independent era. No doubt, this has been one of the primary reasons behind the continuing socio-political turmoil in the region during most of the period following Independence. One of the rather important findings for this period, and especially the period after the 1990s, has been the stalling of fertility decline among the states of NER. Even though there have been discrepancies between the SRS and the NFHS, regarding the trend of fertility among the states of NER, indirect estimates based on census data corroborate the findings from the latter in that there has been insignificant reduction in fertility among the states of NER in the period following the 1990s till mid 2000s. Analysis of the determinants of fertility for NER and states presents several important results. The examination of the proximate determinants of fertility for the period 1990 to 2005, finds that as in the case of all-India and the major states, contraception is the most important proximate determinant of fertility. Interestingly, nuptiality has been also found to be a proximate determinant of much importance and its effect had been mostly towards reducing fertility as was seen in the case of Tripura and Nagaland. Results from the regression analyses (cross-sectional and panel data models) for the period 1991 and 2001 finds that women's status/autonomy as captured, for instance, by female literacy has significant fertility depressing effects. However, tribal status, at least as far as NER is concerned, is no longer a socio-cultural protection against the burden of repeated child-bearing for women. Indeed, to the contrary, ST status is associated with higher fertility rates in NER. Increasing son preference and broadly speaking, '*Sanskritization*' of the tribes, reflected for instance, in the relatively earlier and exogamous marriages among them, provide clues as to why such trends may have surfaced. Interestingly, we find that adherence to Christianity leads to lower fertility, possibly due to the higher age at marriage in this community. Also important

has been the factor of ethnic diversity in influencing fertility in NER. Indeed, we find that region or context specific factors may have significant impact on fertility differentials. For example, in our analysis we find that greater ethnic diversity leads to lower fertility, possibly due to the fact that these numerically smaller groups have been already assimilated to a great extent into the larger ethnic groups in the respective regions, and demographic war (or war on the basis of population strength) does not hold any significant promise for greater access to socio-political and economic power for these communities.

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*Dedicated in
loving memory of my father
Dr. Amitabha Sinha*

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