

Religion, Fertility and 'Common Sense' Making Sense of Demography in India

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The sectarian forces in India have kept politicising the population growth of Muslims not on the basis of demographic correlates but on the basis of a pernicious propaganda that stereotypes popular common sense perceptions. These ill-founded notions are so often repeated that these have become part of the popular common sense, normalising the falsification of "reality" created by sectarian forces of either religious affiliations. Why are these mythical constructions increasing despite the fact that the authentic empirical data sets—Census, National Family Health Surveys—negate the same?

The myth of Muslims outnumbering Hindus and the Hindus becoming a minority in India is not new. This propaganda has been used by sectarian forces since the dawn of the previous century. *The Hindus: A Dying Race*, a book written by U.N. Mukherji in 1909, is an ironic testimony. In consequence, these forces have had a long time for their ideas to become part of the social common sense (Puniyani 2004: 69). The rhetoric and slogans of sectarian forces generally move around Muslim population growth and in unison try to present an opaque picture of Muslim demography in order to sustain the latter's hegemonic constructions around religion and fertility. The sectarian forces have kept on politicising the population growth of Muslims not on the basis of demographic correlates but on the basis of a pernicious propaganda stereotyping popular common sense perceptions (Jeffery and Jeffery 2006: 1; Shahid 2014: 152). Valenta (2012) rightly noted that one of the crucial aspects of the debate about Muslims in India is the inverse relation between the intensity of the discussion and the paucity of the empirical facts (p 35).

In India, the seemingly common strategy is to use religious identity as a singular marker for constructing an "us" versus "them" debate (Sen 2006). Such a fictitious and highly perilous binary of "us-them," undoubtedly thrives on propagating the mythical population outgrowth of one group in contrast to another. It rests on creating the illusion of a "greater" destiny of one group against the other.¹ This is illustrated, for example, in the statement that the population of Hindus in India is declining while that of Muslims is increasing and that soon

the Muslim minority will become a majority and in the democratic game of numbers they would eventually rule over the then Hindu minority (Shahid 2015: 2). This is a chimerical thing that is hoped for but is in fact illusionary and impossible to materialise. But these ill-founded notions are so often repeated that these have become part of popular common sense,² normalising the falsification of "reality" created by the sectarian forces of either religious affiliations.

There is a surfeit of quantitative studies and also limited qualitative studies negating the claims on Muslim fertility and their population growth (Shariff 1995; Basu 1997; Datta 1999; Rao 2004; Bhat and Zavier 2005; Bose 2006; GoI 2006; Jeffery and Jeffery 2006; Bhaktra, Valente and Soest 2010; Kulkarni 2010). The national-level data sets—Census of India; National Family Health Surveys (NFHS)—have amply proved the fallacy of Muslim outgrowth. Despite this, the popular perception of Muslim fertility, family planning, and population growth are inundated with various myths and misconceptions. Ironically, the quantum and severity of these myths and misconceptions are increasing rather than decreasing. The pertinent question is why are these mythical constructions increasing despite the fact that the authentic empirical data sets are negating the same? This calls for a serious analysis.

There is a need to demystify these popular perceptions by locating the stock narratives and the politics of common sense on Muslim population growth. It is in this context that this article aims to revisit the debate on Muslim population growth by making sense of the popular common sense perceptions and the stock narratives through the Gramscian lens of language, hegemony and common sense.

Methodology

There is no better way to gain an understanding of a society than through its stock of stories—myths, fables, parables, and the tales—thus further elevating the prestige of the narrative form (Kakat 1989: 3). No different is the manner in

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