

Research Article

## Impact of Demographic Shifts on Family Structures and Social Policy

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**Abstract:** India is experiencing significant demographic shifts, including a growing elderly population and a decline in the traditional extended family structure. By 2050, individuals aged 60 and above are projected to comprise 19% of India's total population, presenting challenges to social cohesion and healthcare systems. This study analyzes these shifts, focusing on aging trends, family structure transformations, and their social implications. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines demographic data analysis and in-depth interviews with 40 participants, including policymakers, sociologists, urban planners, and older adults from both urban and rural areas. Findings reveal a transition from extended to nuclear families, particularly in urban regions, resulting in greater vulnerability for older adults due to social isolation and caregiving gaps. The study calls for policies targeting elderly healthcare, and intergenerational support. Recommendations include enhancing healthcare services for older adults, improving pension schemes, and prioritizing age-friendly urban planning. Despite limitations such as small sample size and geographical focus, this research provides valuable insights for policymakers. Future studies should investigate the broader societal impacts of aging, particularly in healthcare, education, and economic productivity, and explore the role of technology in elder care, especially in rural areas.

**Keywords:** Aging Population, Demographic Shifts, Family Structure, Intergenerational Solidarity, Social Policy.



## 1. Introduction

India is currently undergoing a significant demographic shift characterized by declining birth rates, rising life expectancies, rapid urbanization, and evolving family structures [1]. These changes are reshaping the country's social and economic landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges. Understanding these trends is critical for effective policy planning and implementation.

India's declining birth rate is an important aspect of this demographic transition. Factors contributing to this trend include increasing urbanization, increasing female literacy, and greater access to family planning services [2] [3]. These elements have collectively led to a decline in fertility rates, which has impacted overall population growth dynamics. At the same time, life expectancy in India has increased due to advances in healthcare and living standards. This increase in longevity has contributed to a growing elderly population, which requires consideration for their social and economic support. Projections suggest that by 2050, individuals aged 60 and above will constitute about 19% of India's total population [4].

Urbanization is another important factor influencing India's demographic landscape. Migration from rural to urban areas in search of employment and better living conditions has led to significant changes in family structures and social dynamics [5]. These shifts have implications for housing, infrastructure, and social services in urban centers.

The traditional joint family system in India is gradually being replaced by the nuclear family arrangement, especially in urban areas. This transformation is affecting intergenerational relationships and support systems for the elderly, raising concerns about their well-being in the absence of extended family networks [6].

This study aims to analyze the population aging trends in India, explore changes in family structures and joint living patterns, and identify the social and economic implications of these demographic shifts. By examining these aspects, the study seeks to provide insights that can inform policy decisions and address emerging challenges. Understanding these demographic changes is critical for policymakers, sociologists, and economists. It enables the development of strategies to manage an aging population, adapt social services, and plan for sustainable economic growth. Addressing the challenges posed by these shifts is critical for India's sustainable development and social cohesion.

India's demographic transition presents a complex interplay of declining fertility, rising life expectancy, urbanization, and changing family structures [7]. Comprehensive research into these trends is needed to inform effective policies and ensure the country's readiness to meet future social and economic demands [8].

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework and Related Studies

The Demographic Transition Theory provides a basic framework for understanding population change, explaining how societies shift from high to low birth and death rates as they develop economically and socially [9]. Originally formulated to explain demographic patterns in Western countries, the theory has been applied globally to analyze population trends in diverse socio-economic contexts [10]. The theory emphasizes how industrialization, urbanization, and improvements in public health systems collectively drive this transition, making it a key lens for studying demographic change in India.

Sociological perspectives, particularly family theory, complement the insights of the demographic transition by focusing on the micro-level implications of these shifts. The structural-functional perspective examines how the family, as a social institution, evolves in response to broader demographic changes, such as declining fertility and increasing longevity [11]. This perspective highlights how families adapt their roles, such as shifting from an extended to a nuclear structure, to meet changing economic and social realities.

Aging populations have become a focal point of demographic studies, with research highlighting the increasing proportion of older individuals in many societies due to rising life expectancies and declining fertility rates [12]. This trend presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly for health care systems that must accommodate the unique needs of an aging population. In India, where population aging is accelerating, these challenges are compounded by limited geriatric care infrastructure and unequal access to health services across rural and urban areas.

Sociological studies have also highlighted how cultural norms and values are shifting in response to demographic changes, particularly regarding the role of the family in elder care. Traditionally,

Indian families have operated on an intergenerational care model, but the rise of the nuclear family and urban migration are eroding this system [13]. These shifts are placing greater pressure on public and private institutions to provide elder care, while also creating social and emotional challenges for older individuals and their families.

Modernization theory offers another perspective, linking the demographic transition to industrialization and urbanization. It explains how these processes have contributed to declining fertility rates by reshaping family dynamics, increasing female labor force participation, and encouraging smaller family norms [14]. Modernization also brings about changing values, encouraging individualism, and reducing reliance on traditional kinship networks for support. In India, these trends are most evident in urban areas where economic development has driven significant changes in family structures and behaviors.

The interplay between demographic change and social development is further explored through a life course perspective, which examines how individuals' experiences are shaped by broader historical and social contexts. This framework provides insights into how demographic transitions affect people at different stages of life, from childhood to old age [15]. For example, longer life expectancies in India mean that more individuals are experiencing multigenerational family structures, which can create opportunities for intergenerational support and conflict.

Feminist theories add another dimension by discussing how demographic transitions and family changes disproportionately affect women. As the primary caregivers in most families, women often bear the burden of caring responsibilities for their elders, which can limit their economic opportunities and exacerbate gender inequalities [16]. These theories emphasize the need for policy interventions that not only address demographic challenges but also promote gender equity in caregiving roles.

Ecological systems theory provides a holistic perspective on demographic change, considering the interconnections between individuals, families, communities, and broader societal systems. It highlights how changes in one domain, such as urbanization or economic development, impact other domains, affecting family structures, individual well-being, and social policies [17]. In India, understanding these interconnections is critical to designing interventions that address the complex implications of the demographic transition.

## **2.2. Social Implications of Demographic Change**

The demographic shift in India has profound social implications, particularly in areas such as elder care, gender dynamics, and community support systems. One of the most significant changes is the rise of the nuclear family, which has led to the breakdown of traditional family structures that historically provided support for elderly members. Extended families, which once included several generations living together, have largely been replaced by smaller, more isolated units. This shift has reduced the ability of families to care for their elderly members, leading to increased demand for institutionalized elder care services, such as nursing homes and assisted living facilities [18]. As the elderly population grows, the need for such services will continue to increase, posing challenges in terms of infrastructure and accessibility, particularly in rural areas where institutional care is less developed.

Women in India often bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities in the family, which has significant implications for gender dynamics. Traditionally, women have been the primary caregivers for children, the sick, and the elderly. This role has become increasingly demanding as the elderly population increases, placing increased pressure on women to balance caregiving duties with professional and personal responsibilities. Studies show that women's participation in the workforce is negatively affected by caregiving, as many women are forced to take leave or reduce their working hours to care for elderly relatives [19]. This exacerbates existing gender inequalities, limiting women's economic independence and career advancement opportunities. In addition, the burden of caregiving can cause physical and emotional stress, further complicating women's well-being and social roles.

India's rapid urban migration rate has also contributed to the weakening of traditional kinship networks. As younger generations move to cities in search of better employment opportunities, they often leave behind elderly relatives who have limited access to family support. This geographic separation contributes to feelings of isolation among older people, particularly in rural areas, where community ties used to be stronger. As a result, older people in urban settings are increasingly left without the emotional and practical support they used to receive from close family members. This intergenerational disconnect poses significant challenges to the mental and physical health of older

people, who may experience loneliness and lack of care, further highlighting the need for alternative support and care systems for the aging population [20].

India's aging population also places significant pressure on the public health system. Older adults are more susceptible to chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and arthritis, which require long-term care and specialized healthcare services. However, India's healthcare infrastructure is not equipped to meet the needs of its growing elderly population. Studies show that there are significant gaps in geriatric care services, with many regions lacking trained healthcare workers who specialize in caring for older adults. These gaps in care exacerbate the burden on the healthcare system and increase the need for community-based care models that can better meet the demands of an aging society [21]. The lack of geriatric care training and facilities makes it difficult to meet the unique healthcare needs of older adults, which calls for urgent reforms in India's healthcare policy.

In addition to health care challenges, demographic changes are affecting social values, particularly among the younger generation. As India urbanizes and modernizes, younger generations are increasingly adopting individualistic lifestyles. This shift is contributing to a decline in family cohesion, as young people prioritize career development, personal goals, and individual freedom over traditional family roles. The increased emphasis on individualism may further erode family solidarity, leading to weaker social ties and a reduced sense of responsibility for caring for older adults. This value shift affects not only family structures but also societal expectations, making it increasingly difficult for older adults to rely on their children for support [22]. As societal values continue to evolve, it is important to address the implications of this shift for parenting and intergenerational relationships.

The erosion of family cohesion also has significant implications for parenting norms. Traditionally, the extended family has played a critical role in childcare, offering additional resources and emotional support to parents. However, as family structures shift toward the nuclear unit, parents are increasingly left to manage childcare alone, without the assistance of extended family members. These changing dynamics of caregiving may result in increased stress for parents, especially for working mothers who are trying to balance their professional responsibilities with raising children. The absence of extended family support may also lead to changes in the way children are raised and the values they are taught, as traditional norms about caregiving and family roles change [23]. These changing norms of caregiving will have long-term social implications, as they influence the next generation's approach to family life and caregiving.

In addition, the demand for institutionalized eldercare services is likely to increase in the coming years as India's population continues to age. These changes will put pressure on the public and private sectors to develop adequate infrastructure to meet the needs of the elderly. Policymakers need to design social welfare programmes that meet the growing demand for eldercare services, ensuring that both urban and rural areas have access to quality care. Furthermore, the increasing reliance on institutional care for the elderly may raise new social challenges, such as concerns about the quality of care and the emotional well-being of those in institutional settings [24]. It is important to monitor the development of these services to ensure that they meet the needs of a diverse and ageing population.

The social implications of India's changing demographics are complex and far-reaching. From the breakdown of traditional family structures and the increasing burden of female caregivers, to the strain on public health systems and shifting social values, these changes are fundamentally reshaping society. Addressing these challenges will require targeted social policies that support older people, protect caregivers, and foster social cohesion. These policies must be flexible and adaptive, taking into account the diverse needs of India's aging population and the rapid changes taking place in Indian society. In particular, the focus should be on improving access to health services, enhancing family support systems, and promoting intergenerational solidarity to ensure that India's demographic transition is managed in a way that benefits all members of society.

### **2.3. Previous Studies in India**

India has undergone a significant demographic transition in recent decades, including declining fertility rates, rapid urban migration, and a shift from joint to nuclear family systems. Studies have shown that fertility rates have fallen below replacement levels in several Indian states, particularly in urban areas, leading to slower population growth [25]. These demographic changes are reshaping the structure of society, with fewer children being born, which could ultimately lead to an aging population. The implications of this shift include potential changes in the composition of the

workforce, with an emphasis on how society will adjust to a shrinking younger population supporting an aging demographic.

In addition to changes in fertility rates, urban migration is another key factor influencing family dynamics in India. Studies have highlighted that internal migration, particularly from rural to urban areas, has led to significant social restructuring. The rise of the nuclear family in urban areas has resulted in the breakdown of the traditional extended family structure, which historically played a major role in intergenerational caregiving and support [26]. As family sizes shrink and geographically dispersed, concerns are emerging about the care and well-being of older adults, who were previously supported by extended family networks. This shift requires new approaches to elder care, particularly in urban settings where institutional care is needed more.

Regional variations in demographic change are quite pronounced, with southern states experiencing a more rapid demographic transition compared to northern states. Studies have found that states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu have seen significant declines in fertility rates and improvements in healthcare, contributing to their more advanced demographic transition [27]. In contrast, northern states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar lag behind in these areas. These regional disparities present challenges for policymakers, as different states will require tailored strategies to meet their unique demographic needs, including workforce planning, skill development, and healthcare delivery. Understanding these regional differences is critical to managing India's demographic dividend and ensuring that economic opportunities are maximized across the country.

### 3. Methodology

The study used two types of data:

- 1) Data analyzed from the Indian demographic census and government reports, focusing on trends related to fertility, life expectancy, and urbanization.
- 2) Data collected through in-depth interviews with families from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and case studies conducted in specific communities to understand the local impacts of demographic shifts.

The study targeted a sample size of 40 individuals, including policymakers, sociologists, urban planners, and older adults from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were selected from urban and rural areas across India, including major cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai, as well as smaller towns and villages. The sample included individuals aged 30 years and above, with a focus on older adults, families, and local government representatives.

Data were collected through surveys, in-depth interviews, and analysis of policy documents. The surveys collected demographic information, while the interviews explored participants' perspectives on aging, family structure, and urbanization. In addition, relevant policy documents were analyzed to understand the government's approach to managing demographic change. The study also includes field observations in selected urban and rural areas to examine the practical implications of this shift.

### 4. Finding and Discussion

**Key Findings Growth of the Elderly and Life Expectancy** Data shows a steady increase in the number of elderly in India, driven by increasing life expectancy due to improvements in healthcare. Projections suggest that individuals aged 60 and above will constitute about 19% of the total population by 2050. This finding is consistent with previous studies on demographic trends in India and highlights the urgent need for policies to address the needs of the elderly population.

Table 1. Number of Elderly (60 years and above) in India (2024)

Year	Total Population (in millions)	Elderly Population (60 and above)	Percentage of Elderly Population (%)
2024	1,400	130	9.29
2030	1,460	150	10.27
2050	1,700	320	18.82

Figure 1 shows the increase in the number of elderlies over the years.

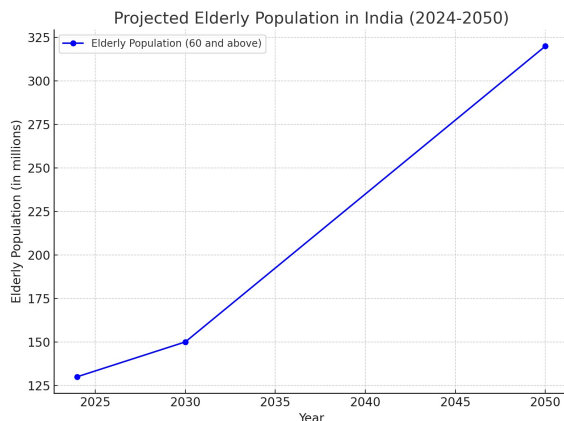


Figure 1. Projected Number of Elderly in India (2024-2050)

**Decline in Extended Families and Increase in Nuclear Families** The study finds a significant shift from joint family systems to nuclear family arrangements, particularly in urban areas. This trend is associated with increasing urbanization, with migration for work leading to smaller family units. Data from urban areas such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai show that the nuclear family structure is now the dominant arrangement, replacing the extended family system in these cities.

Table 2. Family Structure in Urban and Rural India (2024)

Area Type	Joint Families (%)	Nuclear Families (%)
Urban	25	75
Rural	60	40

Figure 2 compares nuclear and joint families in urban and rural areas.

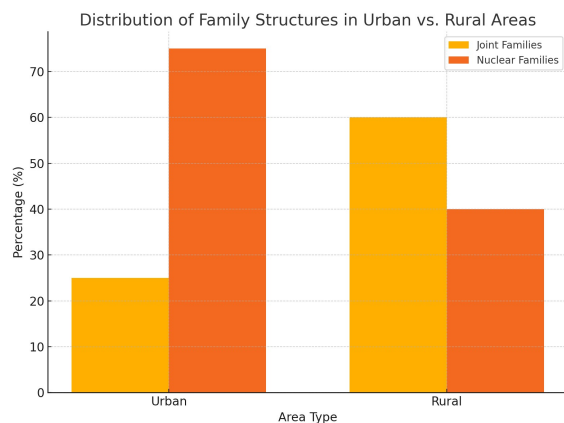


Figure 2. Distribution of Family Structure in Urban vs. Urban-Rural Areas

**Challenges for Elderly Living Alone** The study identifies the challenges faced by elderly living alone, especially in urban areas, due to the decline in the joint family system. Many elderly report feelings of loneliness and lack of social support. There is a growing need for policies that offer support to elderly living independently, especially in metropolitan areas.

Table 3. Social Support for Elderly Living Alone

Type of Support	Percentage of Elderly Reporting Support
Family Support	45%
Government Aid	30%
Community Support	25%

Figure 3 shows different types of social support for elderly living alone.

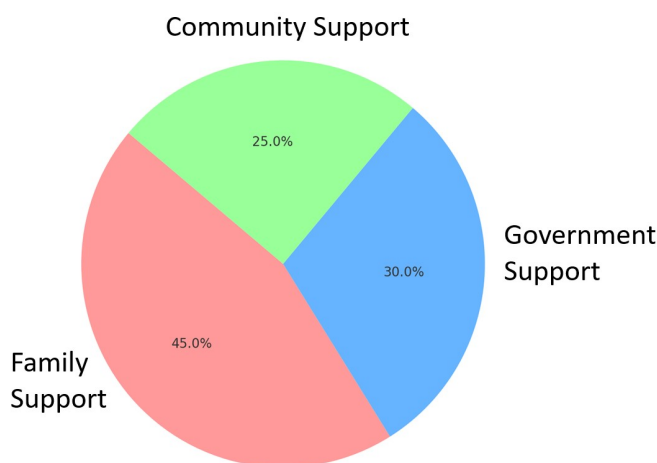


Figure 3: Types of Social Support for Elderly Living Alone

#### 4.2. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant demographic shifts taking place in India, particularly an aging population, decline in the extended family system, and the growing need for comprehensive social support structures. With increasing life expectancy, India faces a dual challenge: providing adequate health and social services to an older population while sustaining its economic growth. As the elderly population is expected to grow rapidly over the coming decades, it becomes imperative to develop policies that effectively address their needs. These policies should include health care, financial assistance, and the creation of elderly-friendly urban spaces, all of which are essential to ensure that older people can live independently and with dignity.

The steady increase in the elderly population is an indication of the country's success in improving health care standards and living conditions. However, this increase in longevity also presents challenges that require immediate attention. The health care system, especially the one serving the elderly, needs to be expanded and made more accessible. This includes increasing specialized geriatric care, making home health care services available, and improving emergency medical services for the elderly. Furthermore, the rapid increase in the elderly population could overwhelm current health care resources unless infrastructure and human resources are strategically expanded.

In line with this trend is the rise of nuclear families, especially in urban areas. The shift from the traditional joint family model to smaller, more independent households has been facilitated by

increasing urbanization. Economic pressures, lifestyle changes, and migration to urban centers in search of better jobs and living conditions have all contributed to the erosion of extended family support networks. While these changes have benefits, such as greater individual autonomy and economic independence, they have also made many older adults more vulnerable, especially in cities where isolation and loneliness can be more acute.

The trend toward nuclear families has created significant gaps in the caregiving system. Older adults who were once supported by multiple generations living under one roof now face the challenges of living alone or being cared for by a small number of family members. This shift highlights the growing reliance on institutional care or government-provided services. However, the availability and quality of these services in India are often inadequate to meet the needs of the aging population. For example, nursing homes and assisted living facilities are still underdeveloped in many parts of the country, leaving significant gaps in long-term care options for older adults.

In addition, the decline in extended families and the rise of nuclear family structures contribute to a broader social problem: the increasing vulnerability of older adults to loneliness and social isolation. This phenomenon has been linked to a range of physical and mental health problems, including depression, cognitive decline, and higher mortality rates. The isolation experienced by many older adults in urban areas underscores the need for stronger community engagement programs. Encouraging intergenerational interactions and creating elder-friendly community spaces can help mitigate these issues, providing opportunities for older adults to stay socially connected and actively involved in their communities.

The findings also underscore the need for policies that strengthen social welfare programs aimed at the elderly. With fewer family members available to provide financial support and caregiving, the elderly are increasingly dependent on government assistance. Social pension schemes, health care subsidies, and tax benefits are critical to providing a safety net for those who may not have access to adequate income or family support. As life expectancy increases, the question of financial sustainability becomes more pressing. Ensuring that the elderly are not left behind economically requires significant investment in social security programs, which can be funded through a combination of public and private sector contributions.

Another key consideration is the role of health care in meeting the needs of an aging population. Because older people tend to have multiple chronic conditions, their health care needs become more complex. India's health care system must evolve to meet these demands, particularly by increasing the availability of geriatric care and training health care professionals in the specialized medical needs of the elderly. In addition, developing health insurance schemes that cater specifically to the elderly, including coverage for long-term care, is critical to reducing the financial burden on the elderly and their families.

A related aspect is the need for urban planning to accommodate an aging population. Many cities in India, especially rapidly growing urban centers, lack infrastructure that supports mobility and independence for older adults. Ensuring that public transportation is easily accessible, buildings are age-friendly, and public spaces are safe for older adults will help mitigate the challenges posed by aging. Creating age-friendly cities should be a priority for city planners to ensure that older adults can continue to live independently and actively participate in society.

As family structures change and the population ages, it is important to rethink the role of families in caregiving. Policymakers should look for ways to support families who face the challenges of caregiving while balancing work and personal life. One solution is policies that encourage more family-friendly workplaces, such as flexible work hours, remote work opportunities, and paid family leave. This will enable younger generations to provide care and support to older family members without compromising their careers.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of intergenerational solidarity in India's aging society. Older adults, who were once caregivers, often need care in return. To strengthen these family ties, communities need to promote intergenerational connections through cultural programs and public initiatives. By fostering intergenerational understanding and empathy, the gaps caused by urbanization and changing family structures can be bridged.

The need for social integration and inclusion of older adults is also an area that requires attention. While the nuclear family model can limit internal support, it also provides an opportunity to enhance the role of older adults in society. Older adults can still make significant contributions to community life by participating in volunteering, education, and mentoring programs. By fostering a culture of

active aging, India can tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience that older adults possess, transforming them from passive care recipients to active contributors to society.

India's evolving demographic landscape also opens up new opportunities for the development of industries catering to the elderly, such as health and wellness products, senior housing, and technology solutions. Innovations such as telemedicine, wearable health monitors, and smart homes designed for the elderly can significantly improve the quality of life for the elderly. However, these technologies must be affordable and accessible, especially in rural areas where the elderly population may be less tech-savvy and have limited access to such innovations.

Changing family structures and demographic shifts also raise important questions about the sustainability of India's pension system. As the dependency ratio increases with an aging population, it is critical to ensure that future generations contribute fully to the pension system. This could involve raising the retirement age or expanding pension schemes to include self-employed individuals, who often do not have access to formal pension plans.

From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach to address the challenges posed by demographic shifts. Policymakers should not just focus on healthcare and social security, but also invest in infrastructure, urban planning, and community development initiatives that facilitate the integration of older people into society. Such initiatives should aim to ensure that older people are not marginalized, but instead fully supported in leading independent and fulfilling lives.

The study also suggests that community-based models of elder care can be more effective than institutional models, especially in a country like India, where family ties remain strong despite changing dynamics. Community care initiatives, where local organizations and volunteers provide support to older people, can offer a more sustainable and culturally appropriate solution to elder care than large-scale institutionalization.

In conclusion, India's demographic transition presents a unique set of challenges that require innovative solutions. By promoting family-friendly policies, investing in geriatric care, and fostering intergenerational solidarity, India can better manage the social and economic demands of an aging population. This will not only improve the lives of older people, but also ensure that the country can sustain its growth and development in the years to come.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reveals significant demographic changes in India, particularly the growing elderly population and the shift from extended to nuclear family structures. By 2050, individuals aged 60 years and above are projected to comprise nearly 19% of the total population, posing major social and healthcare challenges. The shrinking presence of family networks, particularly in urban areas, increases the vulnerability of older adults, who often experience social isolation and limited care support. To mitigate these issues, comprehensive policies are urgently needed. These should include expanded geriatric healthcare services, age-friendly urban infrastructure, and strengthened financial safety nets through pensions and healthcare subsidies. Promoting intergenerational cohesion and implementing family-friendly workplace policies can help maintain caregiving responsibilities within the family.

However, the findings of this study are limited by its small and regionally focused sample, which may not capture the full diversity of demographic experiences across India. Future longitudinal studies with broader geographical coverage are recommended to better understand the impact of demographic changes over time.

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