

CHAPTER **I**

Demography for Anthropologists: Populations, Castes, and Classes

Christophe Z. Guilmoto

The profusion of data that statistical agencies routinely disseminate about India is expected to conveniently sum up the behaviors and whereabouts of more than a billion people.¹ But this wealth of information may also hide India's diversity behind a long list of national or regional indicators that do not accurately reflect the changing circumstances of individuals and local communities. While survey and data collection processes are notoriously partial, and at times unreliable, the seemingly awkward statistical categories of India's massive datasets – weird caste and tribe nomenclatures, “census villages,” erratic age distributions, elastic administrative units, etc. – offer precious tools by which to describe and explore India's demographic diversity, tools that anthropologists have, much to their detriment, by and large avoided. Despite the prevalence in India of overly positivist narratives based on such statistics (the kind of which most humanistic social scientists are wary), anthropologists have much to learn from demography. Just as demographers are coming to better understand the importance of contextualizing the social conditions under which survey research is conducted, anthropologists may yet find innovative ways of using such research for more elaborate interpretations of contemporary Indian life.

This chapter reviews some of the key sources and monitoring tools available for describing India's population and its rapid demographic and socioeconomic transformations. It starts with two sections devoted to the nature of geographical and social categories, followed by a more detailed examination of the major dimensions of the current revolution in family structures, marriage patterns, and reproduction. The last two sections explore gender and socioeconomic inequality. However, an inventory of statistical

resources documenting social change in India would be incomplete without a brief history of India's population statistics, which accounts for part of their apparent opacity.

In countries with long statistical histories, social groupings tend to coincide with statistical categories. In contrast, India's statistical history is much younger, and many defining sociopolitical concepts such as age or caste membership are still being renegotiated within the statistical realm by actors and institutions. The wide distance that often exists between local categories and official nomenclatures is a legacy of this short history that began only during the colonial era. The establishment of solid and stable relationships between the state and its subjects is indeed relatively recent in India. While the *Arthashastra*, a treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy dating from the Mauryan period (fourth century BCE) clearly encouraged rulers to engage in head counts and other measurements for tax purposes (Boesche 2002), no record has survived of these proto-statistical enquiries, and we are left with no quantitative assessment of India's demographic experience until the period of Mughal rule, during which a few administrative surveys were conducted in North India, such as the sixteenth-century *Ain-i-Akbari*. During this period, pivotal life events in village communities such as births, unions, and deaths often went unrecorded and oral genealogies passed down through the generations, too, have rarely offered the detailed information necessary to reconstruct historical population change.

It is only with the arrival of the Portuguese that some localities started recording baptisms or funerals. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, British forays into India's power structures were gradually accompanied by the introduction of new monitoring tools such as local surveys, head counts and a growing number of thematic reports. In the nineteenth century, Manuals and Gazetteers, for instance, produced long lists of quantitative and qualitative information, incorporating caste distribution, population figures, land areas and revenues, as well as cattle, into the summary of colonial resources. By the end of the nineteenth century, civil registration and modern census-taking (starting from 1871–2) provided the first reliable sets of population statistics. The exhaustive survey of the whole population, including the forgotten poor and the low-status groups, was in itself a breakthrough in India's statistical history. These were later complemented by a growing list of various surveys covering agriculture, famine conditions, socioeconomic behavior, and health practices, which became standard after Independence. The census itself hardly changed after the end of colonial rule, even if data tabulation gave a larger priority to economic circumstances and followed new official categories (new administrative units, "scheduled" groups, etc.). However, the coupling of the 2011 census with the establishment of a centralized national population register, which combines demographic and biometric information for all individuals aged 15 years or more, inaugurates a new biopolitical era in India's bureaucratic history with as yet unpredictable consequences for statistical reliability.

Along with the relatively modest penetration of government apparatuses into people's lives that characterizes India's "soft state" approach, the recent and somewhat exogenous origin of its statistical institutions goes a long way toward explaining why the resulting statistics appear still incomplete and, at times, depressingly unreliable today. Take the central notion of age introduced during the first census rounds of the nineteenth century, which makes age still widely misreported today, or consider

the huge number of unreported births and deaths missing from statistical tables in spite of a civil registration act introduced in 1866.² Similarly, we should not expect a reliable estimate of average income levels from available statistical agencies, nor could we try to guess the number of Brahmans in the country without resorting to now infamous colonial surveys taken more than 70 years ago. The truth is that in the absence of in-depth anthropological studies of survey conditions in India, the process of data gathering still remains something of a mystery. We have no description of the specific social interactions between populations and surveyors that lead to the creation of “statistical data” during a census or a survey, leaving mostly to statisticians the responsibility to assess data quality and to document so-called survey errors or response biases.

These apparent flaws in the dominant statistical narrative stem from both a generous dose of indifference to official questioning and an equally large semantic gap between statistical nomenclatures and relevant social categories. The indifference stems especially from the restricted capacity of government agencies to concretely influence individual circumstances. In addition, the gap between the formal statistical categories and local notions of social coding is a further cause for the statistical infelicities regularly reported by statisticians and demographers. The rumination on alien and supposedly context-free categories by surveyors and surveyees alike has often led to random meaning and unpredictable survey results (Guilmoto 1992). Moreover, sensitive categories such as religion or mother tongue have at times generated their own controversies and disputes (Brass 1979; Jones 1990), forcing statisticians to shed their veil of ignorance to recognize the independent role of social mobilization in the process of information production.

Two divergent attitudes toward statistical information have developed among scholars, in which we recognize on the one side a somewhat spontaneously positivist orientation that easily degenerates into a blind faith in empirical data, and on the other a *de rigueur* postmodern mistrust fueled by the colonial filiation of the statistical enterprise. For all their respective convenience, these two positions lead to frustrating results. Many data can, in fact, be fruitfully extracted from India’s information bases, but only after a proper filtering. Data bear some of the marks of the complex social interactions that accompanied their production, and what follows is an attempt to listen to their convoluted “voices.” The statistical narrative in India is probably less hegemonic than usually thought. Reports and tabulations resemble, on the contrary, a formidable palimpsest in which the imprints of opinions, norms, and behaviors need to be carefully sorted out.

REGIONS: SOCIOLOGICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE DEFINITIONS

India’s external boundaries are stable, but they also remain contested, and all maps published in India are obliged to include several border areas that have been outside of Indian control for decades and peopled by Chinese or Pakistani nationals. Within India, large inner tracts have also temporarily slipped from full administrative control (Naxalite presence is estimated to affect a quarter of Indian districts). The country is officially divided into 28 states, 6 union territories and 1 national capital territory. These units of various sizes (the largest state, Uttar Pradesh, would be the world’s

fifth most populous country) are further divided into 626 districts (*zila*). Further down the administrative scale, the political grid becomes far more heterogeneous. The 5,463 smaller administrative units of 2001 correspond mostly to *tehsils* and *taluks*, but several states have their own units such as *mandals*—circles— or communes. These units are probably the most appropriate for comparing with data collected during fieldwork.³

Cultural geographers will find it difficult to use administrative toponyms as an indicator of real regions. Almost no state carries the name of a historical Indian region, and most use convenient geographical neologisms or resurrected Sanskrit toponyms introduced since Independence.⁴ Almost no famous cultural region name commonly used by individuals and communities to identify their origin has found its way into the administrative grid. No map would bear mentions of Doab, Kathiawar, Kongu Nadu, Malwa, Konkan, or Malnad. As a result, toponyms that are crucial to regional identities are poorly known outside their region of origin, and people have often adopted the new acronyms (“UP-walla” for inhabitants of the Uttar Pradesh). It is, however, interesting to note that some of these forgotten historical appellations figure prominently among the newly proposed “postlinguistic” divisions such as Vidarbha, Bundelkhand, or Telengana states. This suggests the inception of a new regional assertiveness going beyond the linguistic division fought for during the 1950s and the further adjustments later conceded for political reasons. At a lower level of the administrative structure, local politics has often disrupted the mainly technocratic enterprise of dividing districts into viable administrative units. Tamil Nadu provides an eloquent example, with intense redistricting operations since the 1950s that have seen the emergence of 32 new units out of the original 13 districts. During the 1980s and 1990s, its districts were also often rechristened, using names of persons with specific political connotations, from the little-known politician Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar (Sivaganga district) to the outsider figure of Ambedkar (Vellore district). Uttar Pradesh has recently entered the name game by creating new districts bearing names of distinct dalit flavor, such as Kanshiram Nagar, Gautam Buddha Nagar or Jyotiba Phule Nagar – with some districts being renamed after each election. The huge majority of Indian districts, however, bear the name of their urban headquarters. In itself, this single trait perfectly encapsulates the typical urban bias of the local administration of a predominantly rural country such as India.

Areas are further divided into urban and rural areas, and India’s urbanization level stood at 27.8 percent in 2001. The definition of urban areas is the object of bureaucratic and political considerations, with rural localities regularly being absorbed into town areas and simultaneously some small towns being reclassified as rural units (Ramachandran 1989). Within towns, a process of reclassification has turned traditional urban *mohalla* (neighborhoods) into new statistical wards or renamed *Nagar* (subdivision). This overall urban percentage, rather low by international standards, is a feature common to all of South Asia, where urbanization is still an incomplete process. While labor-intensive agriculture and nonagricultural activities have helped to retain the local workforce in spite of wide land inequalities, the caste-based and regional segmentation of the urban labor market acts as a further brake on migration streams toward cities.⁵ Rural population density in the Indo-Gangetic plains reaches extremely high levels above 1,000 persons per square kilometer, comparable to levels observed elsewhere in deltaic Asia or Western Europe. Moderate urbanization rates

also conceal the existence of the highly densely populated “rural areas” in Punjab and Kerala that have most characteristics of the peri-urban landscape *desakota* observed from Indonesia to East China: density, proximity to towns, intensive agriculture, industrial activities, and strong growth potential. Within cities, the same classificatory problem also plagues the more recent “slum” category, aimed at identifying neighborhoods or tenements lacking basic urban amenities (“poorly built,” “congested,” “unhygienic,” “lacking in proper sanitary and drinking water facilities”), but to which are also added areas “notified” (i.e. registered as slums) by local authorities. While the 2001 census counted more than 40 million people living in urban slums, the official proportions of the slum population ranged in 2001 from a record high 50 percent in Mumbai to less than 10 percent in cities like Patna, Bhopal, and Lucknow, a discrepancy that suggests variations in slum nomenclature that are primarily the result of local administrative decisions.

The variety of rural settlements across the country is not easy to classify, given the differing political histories and ecological characteristics of those zones. The classification of villages as political units, used for tax purposes by local rulers and by the colonial administration, was recently reinforced by the local devolution of power (*Panchayati Raj*) introduced during the 1990s. However, census villages are more numerous and heterogeneous units than political units (*gram panchayat*). The sizes and shapes of villages vary greatly across the country, ranging from dense and spread-out populations in lowland Kerala to sparse and isolated settlements in Western Rajasthan. As a result, the average size of 593,643 populated “census villages” recorded in 2001 – India’s administrative structure also includes a large number of “uninhabited villages” – ranges from fewer than 400 inhabitants in Uttarakhand to more than 10,000 in Kerala.⁶ Villages are usually multicaste, but often with one socially or numerically dominant *jati* (subcaste). In fact, the caste composition of neighboring villages often appears rather heterogeneous. Moreover, the intense geographical segregation within the village means that castes and groups at the top and the bottom of the local hierarchy are clearly demarcated in space. Lower status groups are at times relegated to a distant satellite hamlet such as the Tamil “cheri”, and they therefore share very little of the central village’s amenities and infrastructures such as schools, drinking water facilities, or places of worship. Consequently, an individual village rarely reflects accurately the actual diversity of its cultural micro-regions, making it difficult for anthropologists to claim that one given locality is representative of its region in some statistical sense.

SOCIAL BOUNDARIES: PLURALITY, FLUIDITY, AND AMBIGUITY

Ever since the colonial period, statistics in India have been replete with social and cultural markers that help to define and classify subpopulations.⁷ No country in the world, in fact, can pride itself on a similar multilayer classification of its population into language groups, castes and tribal groups, and religion – not to mention region and country of birth – which also serve as indirect markers of social identity. These data are duly collected by census and other statistical organizations and tabulated in scores of official publications. However, they rarely fail to cause academic frustration and perplexity. This section cannot pretend to render justice to the serpentine history of these classificatory systems. Categories old and new were gradually introduced

from the nineteenth century onward, starting with relatively straightforward nomenclatures already tested in British surveys such as language and confession. More vernacular (*desi*) categories, such as the elaborate taxonomy of religious sects and of individual caste and tribal groups, appeared simultaneously and were hybrid constructs that underwent repeated rounds of statistical and political fine-tuning.

These original categories largely failed to provide robust tools for social classification because of the menacing fluidity in social identification and group membership that may threaten the statistical project at its very foundations. Over the years, census agents learned to their dismay that rumors, deliberate social mobilizations about the way census questions should be answered, or the mere impact of social change were enough to significantly alter previously clear-cut boundaries. The elasticity of language, religious, or caste boundaries often seemed to negate the entire classificatory enterprise by forcing statisticians to redraw the list of their categories at each survey.

Even if some categories from the original nomenclature did not survive the end of colonial rule, many other concepts had a life of their own over the years. Some “sociocultural” identifiers frequently used in survey questionnaires, such as mother tongues and religious affiliations, are the source of interesting statistical tables. However, they owe their complex sociological status to their mixed colonial and *desi* origins. It is only after several decades after its inception that religious and linguistic definitions took stronger contours in the census, and social mobilization was a crucial element in this process – Punjab may be considered as a test case, since its spatial boundaries, official language and script, and religious communities were subjected to decades of refashioning after the late nineteenth century, from the founding of the reform Hindu sect Arya Samaj, in 1875, to the more recent Akali or Sikh movement in the early twenties of the twentieth century (Jones 1990). Bihar languages such as Maithili or Bhojpuri provide yet another case of late recognition.

Caste classification has long been the most complex statistical enterprise in India. In particular, the boundaries of endogamous caste groups have been deeply reshaped by numerous episodes of caste redefinition, and as a result, the size of some of the caste groupings has increased through the gradual absorption of groups of similar status.⁸ An obvious example of caste redefinition concerns the scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST), which are policy-oriented categories that feature prominently in statistical tables. Similarly, linguistic and religious categorizing has been simplified over the years, but it has gradually allowed a vast majority of the population to fall into stable classificatory units. The outer boundaries of many groups are still a matter of contention, and new language groups or caste affiliations are bound to slightly disrupt the stability of the usual nomenclature. Firmer ethnic definitions have also led to demands for separate states, such as those put forward by Bodos or Gorkhas in Northeast India.

The strong statistical “robustness” of the SC/ST categories vis-à-vis almost any measurable dimension of India’s society (from its spatial distribution to its socioeconomic disparities) suggests that the apparently extreme internal heterogeneity of these bureaucratic constructs matters less than their profound differences with the rest of the population. That low-caste Sikh Mazhabi could be meaningfully lumped together with Bengali Namasudra and Malayali Pulayar in the single all-comprehensive list of SC (or dalit) communities is, in itself, an anthropological wonder, given these groups’ widely differing practices, beliefs, and so forth. Other unlikely sociological collages include the “Muslims,” whose members are recruited from Kashmiri Shaikh to

Mappilas in Kerala, and the “tribal populations” dispersed all over the country in often very isolated settings. Apart from being politically loaded – an erroneous estimate of Muslim population growth led, for example, to the 2004 dismissal of an otherwise accomplished census commissioner – these categories do, however, display distinct predictive capacities when it comes to socioeconomic features and demographic behavior. An anthropological critique of these categories leading to their repudiation would run the risk of losing invaluable tools by which to assess the extent of social inequity in India.

Apart from scheduled castes and tribes (almost a quarter of India’s population), the rest of the “Hindu population” represents a large group of people (probably more than 60 percent of the population) that has been statistically indistinct ever since the last caste tabulations were published in the 1931 census. Ever since the 1989 protest around the report of the Mandal Commission on backward groups, the new category of “other backward classes” (OBC) has slowly crept into the statistical machinery (Chalam 2007). It is a composite category intended to bring together low-caste communities that are not scheduled castes and its local definition led to a lot of political bargaining in view of the many potential benefits of OBC membership. Nevertheless, the recent emergence of this new grouping indicates two important dimensions of India’s social categorizing paradigm. The first one is that criteria used to delineate OBCs have been to a large extent socioeconomic and based on the poverty, education, and occupation profiles of each concerned *jati*. The additional and more sociological yardstick used to define OBCs (viz. “social backwardness,” manual labor, and early age at marriage) is no doubt far more blurred than the original definition of dalit communities as outcastes (or untouchables), and several rural “dominant castes” such as the Jats in Haryana have, as a matter of fact, even found their way into the list of backward classes. A second aspect that needs to be underlined is that social backwardness has remained an inherited collective attribute rather than an individual or household-level acquired characteristic. Bureaucratic classification has retained caste membership as a primary definition for socioeconomic vulnerability, in spite of the increasing heterogeneity between caste members (often illustrated by the counterexamples of the “creamy layer” and the “poor Brahman family”). While socioeconomic position does to a significant extent coincide with caste membership, the system clearly reifies caste divisions and posits economic upward mobility as a threat to the political stability of the classificatory system.

Keeping in mind the numerous difficulties in matching statistical concepts with sociological categories, we will now turn to the examination of what available demographic information can tell us about social arrangements, starting with family structures and marriage patterns.

CHANGES IN FAMILY AND POPULATION STRUCTURES

The family structure is one institution that social scientists have monitored with great attention since Independence (Shah 1998; Uberoi 2005). The joint family and its definition (common residence, commensality, joint ownership, ritual bonds, etc.) constitute an area in which anthropologists and demographers tend to differ because of the gap between the extended family network and the actual household registered

in surveys. In fact, surveys and censuses have repeatedly shown that nuclear arrangements have always predominated over joint family arrangements in India. When they exist, the life span of joint families tends to be short because of the risk of partition following widowhood, family dispute, marriage, and migration. But the rather slow change observed across India in complex family patterns – 18 percent of Indian households included two or more married couples in 2001 against 20 percent in 1981 – is often regarded as a demonstration of the resilience of long-established family institutions and kinship systems. Moreover, a large number of nuclear families also include members of three different generations (J. Singh 2005).

Seen from inside, family structures have, however, been completely reshaped by demographic change. Households – usually defined by the use of a common residence and kitchen – are today smaller (4.8 persons per household) and older than at any time in the past. Apart from the specific effects of migration, India's changing demographic structure, as shown by mortality and fertility declines, has played a key role in these transformations. The household population has aged because of lower mortality risks and also because of the gradually declining number of children (Rajan and Aliyar 2008). The proportion of parents and grandparents is consequently rising, and this is directly reflected in the average composition of households. The probability of having surviving grandparents or great-grandparents has increased significantly, while in contrast, the average number of grandchildren has declined. The number of siblings people have, a direct function of the average number of children born to women, has reduced to one brother and one sister on average – as opposed to four in the past. Single-child families are also common in many settings, including rural areas of Kerala or Tamil Nadu, and their proportion is bound to rise with fertility continuously going down.

The average number of kin, when we enlarge this definition to incorporate paternal branches, has also diminished. Thus, with three children per woman on average, everybody has on average eight paternal first cousins and siblings. However, this number reduces to three in smaller families (with two children per woman on average). Some 50 years ago, the average number of siblings and first paternal cousins was no less than 35. The reduction in the number of kin would appear even more drastic if we were to include second-degree cousins on the paternal side, giving an idea of the dramatic reduction in family size entailed by fertility decline. The institution of the family as an almost inexhaustible resource pool for support, connections, and other “weak links” has been eroded by new reproductive choices and the rise of the small family norm.

However, a vector of new forces is now influencing family structures. The positive impact on household size of the increased longevity of adults and the elderly has canceled out other factors, including the declining number of sons, the elevation in the age at marriage, the increasing frequency of divorce, and the impact of migration. The combination of slowly declining numbers of multigenerational households and the reduction in the average number of children is resulting in a rapid reduction in the number of close family members, and it is not yet clear how this will impact current modes of sociability and their potential extension toward other family members (including affines), caste fellows, neighbors, friends and colleagues.

Age is the most fundamental information on India's population structures, yet it is probably one of the most poorly estimated in surveys and censuses, since only a minority of people in the population know their exact age. Age is also at the core of the demographic change, which primarily entails, as we have seen, a rapid reduction

in the youth population and an increase in the average age of a household member. It can also be translated into the four *ashrama* stages of the classical tradition, with men passing successively through the stages of *brahmacharya* (student), *grhastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (retirement), and *sannyasa* (renunciation). In the ancient demographic regime characterized by low survivorship rates, reaching the last two stages was reserved for only a tiny proportion of the population. But today, adulthood in India is now a period characterized by the largest possible access to new resources, in view of both changing economic opportunities and a unique feature of demographic recomposition. The population factor at play in contemporary India is what East Asia specialists have referred to as the “demographic dividends” – the rapid rise of the working age population in areas where proportions of children are fast declining, and where the elderly still constitute a small proportion of the population. As a result, the share of working adults and their ratio to “dependents” (children and the elderly) is reaching a historic high in the current period, and this singular age transition has been associated with a massive “demographic bonus” comprised of higher saving rates and higher investment in human capital (education, training, healthcare, etc.). Low-fertility India will enjoy several decades during which the share of the unproductive population will be at its lowest in the overall population, and this will give working adults a considerable leverage on household matters and on the economy as a whole. One of the consequences of this situation is that investments in children’s education have become a primary concern for parents, especially given the declining value of inherited status and assets, and the severe competition on the job market. The shift from the inheritance of traditional features of social capital to extensive investments in human capital represents one more example of changing family strategies.

Changes in age structures have rather different implications in terms of support for the elderly (Cohen 1999). The extended family has always been the major, if not the only, site for long-term support (Rajan 2008). Recent socioeconomic progress, however, has not been accompanied by a parallel development in old age support systems. Pension benefits are available for only a limited part of the mostly urban workforce, and no more than 33 percent of the elderly were reported in 2004 to be economically independent. The growing number of elderly adults has created a new type of intergenerational pressure on married couples, forcing them to divert a larger portion of their resources (housing, income, time, etc.) toward their aging parents. Combined with this, the smaller average number of children results in a rapidly increasing probability among adults that they will have to take care of a surviving elderly parent – a trend bound to exacerbate potential generational conflicts and the perception of the elderly as a “burden” to the family. This is a clear case of the failure of traditional institutions – from local family arrangements to widow-receiving religious places such as Vrindhavan in Uttar Pradesh – to cope with changing demographic structures, and of the slow and inadequate response by the market or government forces to the growing need for old age support (see Lamb, chapter 27 in this volume).

NUPTIALITY AND MARRIAGE PATTERNS

Despite the near total absence of marriage statistics – marriage in India being a private ceremony which is rarely officially registered – demographic surveys document in detail several traits of the marriage system. We can monitor for instance the gradual

increase in the average age at first marriage among Indian women, standing at 13 years in the 1930s, when the government implemented the Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sarda Act) and reaching 18 years today. The age gap between spouses remains pronounced today (five years). Unsurprisingly, higher female age at marriage is closely associated with other developmental variables such as urban residence, higher education, and higher income group. The regional patterning of these variations indicates that women marry significantly later in Kerala or in Goa than in Bihar or Rajasthan. However, in spite of these transformations, the female age at first marriage appears rather low in India. Marriage is, moreover, almost universal – less than 2 percent of men and women do not marry – and divorce and remarriage are relatively rare, even if there are large variations across castes and communities. In fact, the pressure to marry and to bear children early remains a very distinctive feature of India's demographic regime that has barely been affected by the forces of social change.

Details on many other important facets of nuptiality patterns are missing from statistical sources. Nonnormative or less frequent features such as divorce, remarriage, levirate, concubinage, polygamy, and same-sex unions are almost absent from available statistics. Another key dimension of nuptial arrangements left out of surveys relates to the dowry and other marital transfers. The top-down diffusion of the dowry model from the higher castes to the rest of the population is as well known as it is poorly attested by survey measurements. The same can be said of the regional diffusion of dowry practices toward parts of East or South India where the bride price system had earlier prevailed (Srinivasan 2005). What nevertheless appears obvious is that this longstanding regional dimension of kinship patterns (Karve 1953) has been eroded by a rapid process of regional and social homogenization. Dowry exchange has almost everywhere become a crucial tool in avoiding the perils of a hypogamic misalliance, or a marriage in which the bride is of higher status than her husband. It may be noted that a heightening of the investment in dowry for women parallels that of the educational investments in children mentioned earlier, and corresponds to a structural shift in family strategies.

A dimension of Indian nuptiality patterns that is reflected in demographic data is the prevalence of village exogamy (Singh 2005). As a result, women's migration patterns in India appear to be more intense than men's – a feature that seems at odds with the severe restrictions that are otherwise placed on female mobility. Caste endogamy is, however, another characteristic of marriage systems that surveys can rarely document, even while genetic studies of the biological makeup of caste groups in India and the extent of "mixture between ancestral populations" are gradually getting more precise (Reich et al. 2009).

If we were to assume that the boundaries of the caste groups have roughly remained the same over the years, demographic change would have few consequences for strict endogamy as long as the population did not diminish, as among the Parsis. It is rather the increasing economic differentiation within endogamous groups that may jeopardize the system: parents are less and less likely to find "suitable" (economically compatible) brides or grooms within their close circles, and have to resort to more anonymous search procedures, such as matrimonial advertisements. An obvious casualty of this growing need for economic isogamy is the declining prevalence of cross-cousin and other intrafamily marriages in South India, which still account for a third of the unions in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. Fertility reduction

and economic heterogeneity have induced a steady decline in the practice of consanguine unions (Caldwell et al. 1988). While arranged marriages widely predominate, the rise in the incidence of marriages by personal choice (so-called “love marriage”) in both urban and rural areas of the country remains unfortunately a matter of statistical uncertainty (see Clark-Decès, chapter 28 in this volume).

REPRODUCTION AND FERTILITY TRANSITION

Most observations on changing family structures refer to the central component of demographic change that has affected Indian society since the 1960s, viz. the gradual decline in the number of children born to Indian women.⁹ Before this period, women in India had an average of six births, of which a significant proportion of the children died before adulthood. This fertility level in the past was on the whole rather moderate in view of the early marriage patterns and the absence of contraception. Early widowhood was the only visible check on fertility, although lesser-known factors – such as overly low fecundity, deliberate abstinence, or lower frequency of intercourse along with abortion – account for the relatively low levels obtained in the past (Mandelbaum 1974; Patel 1994). The ancient demographic regime, characterized by both early and high fertility, but also by high death rates and short length of life, underwent a first transitional phase after 1920 when mortality levels started declining.

The family planning campaigns launched by the government beginning in the 1960s, as well as the pressure felt by expanding families because of the increase in the number of surviving children, are the sources of the gradual fertility decline observed since 1970. At the same time, changing social and economic conditions have reduced the value of child labor while swelling the cost of care and education, first in urban areas and other socioeconomically more advanced regions such as South India, and later on in Punjab. Today, 40 years of fertility transition have brought several regions to fertility levels lower than those observed in many Western countries, but the decline is far from over. In several areas, especially in the Hindi Belt, the average family size remains above 3.5 children per woman. Education, urban residence and socioeconomic uplift did facilitate the gradual diffusion of the small family norm. However, interestingly enough, economic growth per se has played but a secondary role in this, and it may be observed that educated and well-off women in Uttar Pradesh have today more offspring than illiterate Tamil women: the cultural patterning of fertility disparities has now been recognized as a central trait of India’s demographic system (Dyson and Moore 1983), in which regions with a higher status for women and more bilateral kinship systems have acted as pioneers of the Malthusian revolution. A recent illustration of this cultural nexus is the abrupt fall in fertility rates observed in Andhra Pradesh, a region otherwise characterized by a rather mediocre overall level of human and economic development.

These comments suggest that the much publicized government intervention in family planning had a favorable impact only in areas where social change – fueled by urbanization and off-farm employment, the rising returns on educational investments in children, and a more open political space – had already reshaped gender arrangements and family structures. Increases in age at marriage and the gradual spread of contraception are additional expressions of these transformations, not their causes.

The crux of demographic change is probably found at the junction of endogenous forces of social change and exogenous government initiatives, during historical moments in which empowered women and couples are in a position to withstand the formidable inertia of traditional institutions. Survey data provide accurate summaries of demographic outcomes and their immediate determinants. But in order to understand changes in reproductive strategies themselves, the processes are rarely better captured than by contextual field studies focusing on the locus of demographic choices: women's lives, family cycles, local traditional institutions, and in the backdrop, government infrastructure (Säävälä 2001; Jeffery and Jeffery 1997).

GENDER IMBALANCES

In a society whose gender order is at the core of processes of social differentiation, day-to-day discrimination and violence against women lie hidden beneath most measurable outcomes or recordable behaviors and attitudes, and cannot be exhaustively captured by statistical indicators.¹⁰ Nevertheless, standard population statistics have long provided detailed imprints of India's most remarkable singularity in enforcing a demographic gender order: women's survival depends on larger household priorities in which their lives are systematically undervalued. While India is not the only country in Asia where the courses of women's lives are partly determined by patriarchal bias, it displays several unique features in the way gender discrimination is demographically implemented.¹¹

From the nineteenth century onward, foreign visitors observed local gender practices that had a potential bearing on demographic structures such as widow immolation, unhealthy delivery practices, and selective infanticide. But colonial censuses at the end of the century gave statistical flesh to these often superficial insights by demonstrating that India's population had an unexpectedly large male majority. This elevated sex ratio (ratio of males per females) was the source of endless discussion among statisticians, who often tended to attribute it to selective underenumeration. It was in the late 1960s that the apparent female deficit was clearly demonstrated to be the consequence of unusually high female mortality. From early childhood until late in adult life, women in India experience lower survival rates than men: as newborn victims of infanticide, as children suffering from parental discrimination, as pregnant women dying during delivery, or as adult or elderly women deprived of family care. Recent studies have also shown how mortality risks are higher among widows without filial support and without private property – a cruel indication of the intimate relationship between survival chances and economic worth (Chen 2000).

Yet sex differentials in mortality have shrunk over the last two decades, and female life expectancy is now higher than that of men. But this evolution toward greater gender equity in health and care has been accompanied by a most striking deterioration of female life chances *before* birth. In the past, the male bias was first expressed among children by preferential treatments toward boys, resulting in higher mortality risks among girls due to poorer nutrition intake and lack of adequate care, with female infanticide restricted to small regions in Gujarat or Punjab. These traits of the old discriminatory regime have partly vanished and the recent process of demographic masculinization corresponds mostly to a rapid modernization of the discriminatory system since the 1980s, a change fostered by the emergence of prenatal sex selection.

The combination of rather liberal abortion laws introduced in 1971 with the introduction of prenatal diagnosis techniques based on amniocentesis or ultrasonography has caused a large number of women to resort to sex-selective abortions in order to avoid the birth of unwanted daughters.

The resulting sex ratio at birth has therefore gradually increased from a biological level of 104–106 to values above 110 in the country as a whole since 2000, with extreme values well above 120 registered in Punjab, Haryana, or Delhi. Such levels presuppose a high level of preference for a son, backed by a dense healthcare structure, consisting in particular of private clinics where cheap ultrasound and abortion services are offered, and a rather low fertility level, which tends to exacerbate the perceived need for prenatal sex selection (by raising the probability of remaining sonless among small families). From a sociological viewpoint, it has further been shown that excessively wide sex ratios are associated with three factors: regional patterns, with clear hotspots of birth masculinity emerging from the regional maps, anthropological features associating specific communities such as Sikhs, Jains or Jats with elevated sex ratios, and household prosperity related to both dowry inflation and lower fertility.

Today's inordinate proportions of male births will automatically translate into rising male surpluses among adults in the future, and the associated phenomenon of marriage squeeze has already been observed in Northwest India. Ironically, the preference for sons and the resulting numerical gender imbalances will undermine some of the foundations of the patriarchal ideologies and practices. The mounting risk of male nonmarriage and of failure to perpetuate the patrilineage will force families to relax their endogamous rules, probably putting a brake on dowry inflation for the same reason. In fact, while the potential macro-impact of future surpluses of unmarried males is still widely debated, anthropologists should soon observe within families and communities a vast array of transformations in gender arrangements (dowry, inheritance, rituals, caste endogamy, etc.) to accommodate the changing position of marriageable daughters in a predominantly male society.

SOCIOECONOMIC INEQUALITY

The definition of India's socioeconomic structure has long been a cause of disagreement between economists, sociologists, and historians. Some difficulties encountered when trying to use a fixed socioeconomic scale result from the transitional nature of an occupational structure that has combined remnants of feudalism with transnational capitalistic formations and also from the lingering debate on the respective importance of status hierarchy and economic stratification (the Marx versus Weber dilemma) in determining the nature of inequality in India (Gupta 1993). A long tradition associated with "the mode of production debate" has also existed in Indian scholarship focusing primarily on the specific nature of the agrarian class structures. The census classification of peasant communities into "agricultural laborers" and "cultivators" is a reflection of this concern, even if in-depth surveys have to incorporate many more indicators – such as tenure arrangements, or cultivated and irrigated areas – to capture the significant dimensions of rural inequality. The rapid but as yet incomplete shift from rural feudalism toward a more typical class system has further complicated the picture, and categories used to classify the nonagricultural workforce are often inadequate to capture

the class stratification. Data on occupational structures are often of limited use in characterizing local economic levels, and other indirect socioeconomic indicators – such as literacy and infant mortality derived from a wider social development perspective – are often preferable for defining local socioeconomic profiles.

This statistical inadequacy has in particular fueled the never-ending debate on the size and boundaries of the new Indian middle class that epitomizes the country's recent economic surge. The interest in India's expanding middle classes proceeds, however, less from a sociological interest in rapidly changing political and class structures than in the rise in disposable income and the resulting expansion in the consumption market with its peculiar Indian flavor. A more strictly economic definition of the middle class itself is made difficult by the large number of workers from the rural and urban informal sectors who rely on multiple and irregular sources of income, in a country where the quality of income estimates is remarkably poor.

The appreciation of socioeconomic disparities in India across regions or social groups requires, therefore, resorting to various proxies that go far beyond the standard definition of income groups or occupational structures (Cassen and McNay 2004). Consumption indicators are often the most effective substitutes for lack of direct economic measurements: for instance, the statistical figures indicating that India's poverty rates have almost halved during the last two decades – contradicting the more pessimistic scenarios pointing to the slight rise in overall inequality – are, for instance, determined by household expenditure estimates rather than by real income series. Regional consumption expenditures are therefore among the most reliable sources to assess average economic conditions. While these poverty indices are of crucial importance at the national and international levels to monitor the progress of India's economy, they can also be used locally to identify households that are eligible for specific economic schemes. Estimates of nutritional status provide yet another proxy of social and economic development.

Consumption and nutrition patterns remain, however, difficult and expensive to ascertain in the course of surveys. As a result, we often rely on basic indicators such as housing quality or household goods and amenities (toilet facilities, color TV, bank account, etc.). Educational characteristics are also useful indicators of disparities in human development levels across communities or regions, especially as they also reflect local dysfunctional infrastructures. Several official categories based on social and spatial definitions (scheduled castes, notified slums, etc.) may also be used to identify vulnerable populations. Definitions such as these are based on group membership and would thus appear inadequate to capture individual family circumstances. However, the convergence between India's social, spatial and economic dimensions ensures that collective social characteristics often turn out to be reliable predictors of the economic status of individual households.

Along with caste, gender is the other central axis of stratification and accounts for a large share of the interindividual variations in employment and earnings even after controlling for lower female education levels (Das 2006). Social norms that discourage women from seeking jobs are reinforced by a segmented labor market that discriminates against them. In fact, the porosity between income stratification and labor segmentation, on the one hand, and caste and gender arrangements, on the other, is an additional testimony to the strong embeddedness of economic structures in society, calling for a joint anthropological and socioeconomic approach in understanding the underpinnings

of inequity and poverty in India. But adequate field-level studies of economic deprivation and social exclusion remain in short supply (Kumar 2000; Krishna 2004).

CONCLUSION

The information base appears scattered in India, and its categorical foundations suffer from serious defects that tend to discourage use by social analysts. These deficiencies, however, should not prevent anthropologists from appropriating available data. Despite their Byzantine format inherited from decades of statistical and political transactions, statistical agencies provide a mass of often underutilized data that shed indispensable light on changing sociodemographic conditions.

On the face of aggregated statistics, the forces of social change and the impact of the exploding market economy seem to have only marginally blurred local and regional heterogeneities. Socioeconomic change has indeed hardly displaced the deep structures of Indian society described by the first field studies of the 1950s, in spite of the decades of economic growth, migration, urbanization, and demographic transition. As elsewhere, the inertia of social structures acts as a brake on spatial and social mobility, and India's new geography so far has only weakened its entrenched cultural patterning.

This almost inert macro-picture does, however, obscure the crucial transformations that are already affecting localities, villages, families and individuals documented by field studies. Within families, mortality and fertility declines have directly affected both individual life courses and household reproductive cycles, and are irreversibly altering the demographic base of social organization in India, while economic development has profoundly altered the set of available opportunities. New individual and household strategies as well as economic mobility are a further source of inflection affecting the structure of households and communities. This should constitute an avenue for richer exchanges between demographers and anthropologists. Aggregated or averaged indicators are seldom sufficient indicators to evaluate the local impact of the forces of change, especially as transformations tend to be heavily clustered in specific regions, localities or social groups. Only micro-perspectives can render justice to the pace of change and their articulation with local social structures. Both the factors and the implications of demographic change on individuals, households and communities are usually missing from standard demographic analyses and their interpretation is only possible by close observations typical of local qualitative surveys. This appears especially true for India where traditional institutions – compared to market forces and government interventions – continue to play a major role in shaping demographic behaviors.

At the same time, statistical indicators provide a necessary backdrop to assess the intricacies of family and community dynamics and point to some of the most significant implications of current changes in age and gender compositions. No anthropologist should therefore venture into the analysis of local change without a preliminary understanding of regional trends and differentials that is today made possible by accessible sociodemographic data, trying to focus on disaggregated figures whenever possible to avoid the local fallacy of national averages. Long-term transformations in the demographic regime over the last 50 years such as fertility decline or increased spatial mobility have manifestly affected anthropological systems and deeply reshaped families and communities. Moreover, several well-established demographic trends at play today – such as

shrinking family networks, population aging, demographic masculinization, migratory pressure or delayed marriage to name a few – clearly point to some of the inevitable structural dimensions of future social change that will impact the contours of Indian society at every scale. No one should be surprised, for instance, to learn that difficulties in marrying one's sons in Punjab, spending years abroad among Malayalis or caring for one's elders in Tamil Nadu will force a rapid transformation in India's family patterns. However, only anthropologists can tell us the ingenuity and flexibility through which social systems will cope with these changing circumstances.

APPENDIX: GOING FURTHER

Basic data on the distribution of the population and its main characteristics are found in decennial censuses, the next round of which is scheduled for March 2011. The census office (Office of the Registrar General) remains the major source of data and maps for population totals and socioeconomic characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, occupation, religion, mother tongue, educational level, or household amenities. Special tabulations are also available for states and rural/urban areas along with scheduled castes and tribes. Additional village statistics on infrastructures and amenities are also collected every 10 years.

An annual series of measurements of demographic trends is collected by the Sample Registration System, which compensates for the inadequacy of the civil registration system. However, the most elaborate information on reproductive patterns (nuptiality, childbearing, mother and child health, nutritional status, sexual activity) is located in the results of the regular National Family and Health Surveys, the last round of which was conducted in 2005–6. These surveys include also valuable information on domestic violence and AIDS. Additional demographic surveys such as the District Level Household Survey provide further information on nutritional status, health behaviors and health facilities, while HIV/AIDS statistics fall mostly under the purview of the National AIDS Control Organisation. Nonnormative arrangements such as divorce and remarriage, abortion, homosexual relationships, polygamy, nonmarital childbearing and caste exogamy tend often to be downplayed in official statistics and are only described in recent innovative qualitative surveys (Koenig et al. 2008).

More information on economic characteristics of Indian regions and social groups is available from the regular survey rounds of the National Sample Survey Organisation. While these surveys focus mostly on employment, income, consumption patterns, and landholdings, they also document various aspects of social life such as housing, health behavior, migration patterns, education, and nutrition. In-depth and more innovative studies are also published by the National Council of Applied Economic Research. Its recent India Human Development Survey explores, in particular, issues of caste membership, gender relations, and social capital.

The Anthropological Survey of India has limited recent publications in social anthropology since its somewhat unfashionable People of India series published in the 1990s. While many language data are found in census tables, in-depth linguistic studies are also conducted by the Central Institute of Indian Languages.

NOTES

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- 1 India's population will be 1.21 billion inhabitants in 2010, according to United Nations estimates. According to the same set of estimates, India will have the world's largest population by 2030, thereby outstripping China.

- 2 A large proportion of the population tends to report age in round numbers such as 50 or 60. Similarly, the frequency with which births and deaths remain unreported renders the use of civil registration statistics often impossible.
- 3 Studies of India's demographic history include Davis 1951; Guha 2001; Visaria and Visaria 1983. See Dyson et al. 2003 for a survey of current issues. Sopher 1980 and Ahmad 1999 provide elaborate interpretations of India's social and cultural geography.
- 4 English names of towns and cities have increasingly reverted to their *desi* (vernacular) equivalent, from Shimla to Thiruvananthapuram.
- 5 On migration, see in particular Chari et al. 2003; Breman 1996; Deshingkar and Farrington 2009; Racine 1997. On nomadism, see Rao and Casimir 2003.
- 6 Mencher 1966 provides the example of a masterly study of the social and ecological configuration of rural settlements in South India.
- 7 On population statistics in India and related issues, see Appadurai 1994; Cohn 1987; Brass 1979. For a recent restatement of colonial knowledge, see Roy 2005.
- 8 In its valiant attempt to update colonial surveys, the Anthropological Survey of India identified no fewer than 4,635 distinct caste groups in the early 1990s (K. Singh 1992).
- 9 On nuptiality and fertility changes in India, see Caldwell et al. 1988; Guilmoto and Rajan 2005; Visaria 2005.
- 10 A typical finding of surveys on violence reflecting prevailing patriarchal norms is the high level of acceptance of wife battering in India.
- 11 The discussion in this section borrows from Guilmoto 2009. See also Miller 1981; John et al. 2008; Patel 2006.

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