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The Two Child Policy of Assam

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KEY MESSAGES

- The State Government of Assam has proposed that individuals with more than two children be barred from contesting elections
- In certain districts the Muslim population of Assam is outnumbering the local Hindu population. In order to prevent the Muslim people from contesting elections, the Government is planning to implement this scheme
- Other major population concerns of the State such as maternal mortality rates and infant mortality rates are being neglected
- Two child policy could result in sex selective abortions

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PART I. INTRODUCTION

Following the footsteps of China, India has been planning to implement family planning legislations. While the government of India is yet to launch a national policy for population control, some states in India have implemented restrictive measures to curb population growth. States such as Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Bihar, Gujarat, and Uttarakhand have introduced a norm which restricts individuals with more than three children to contest local elections (Abbamonte, 2017). Drawing from the examples of the above mentioned states, Assam has recently announced that individuals with more than two children cannot have a job with the Assam government (NorthEast Today, 2016). The Assam Minister of Education, Health, and Finance Himanta Biswa Sarma of the BJP led government specifically mentioned that “when the policy comes into effect, those who are in government jobs and already have two children should not go for a third child. If an employee will have more than two children while on job, that particular employee will lose his or her job” (Abbamonte, 2017). The Minister, Mr Sarma further mentioned that in special cases currently working government employees with more than two children will have to take special permission from the government. Apart from restricting government jobs, the policy will also prevent individuals with more than two children from contesting Panchayat elections (NorthEast Today, 2016).

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Focusing on the recently announced two child policy in Assam this brief will understand the reasons and implications of such a policy. The brief will also understand the impact of this norm on the other Indian states which have implemented this policy.

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PART II. IMPLICATIONS

- **Targeting the Muslim Population**

The main aim of the policy is to introduce the population control bill in the assembly to make it a permanent Act. The decision has been taken after Mr Sarma announced that the Muslim population has outnumbered the local Assamese people in eleven districts of the State and this in turn would result in the reduction of the local people. In addition to this policy Mr Sarma had also proposed that the persecuted Bengali Hindus from Bangladesh should be given citizenship of India to strengthen the base of the Hindu population in Assam. In fact the Minister also aims to introduce population control policy in the curriculum of secondary level schools (WebIndia, 2016).

Focusing on the main reason for the policy it could be suggested that Mr Sarma has introduced this norm to target the rights of the Muslim population. In particular the proposal to grant citizenship to persecuted Hindu Bengalis also indicates that the main aim is to increase the total number of Hindus in Assam. In fact, the recent norm of closing the government run madrassas on Friday was also terminated and the government has ordered all madrassas to be open on Fridays and closed on Sundays. This norm was also passed targeting the Muslim population because Fridays are considered to be the holy day of the week in Islam and Muslims offer congregational prayers on Friday. Similar to issues such as introduction of Sanskrit in schools and triple talaq,

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the government of Assam is targeting the Muslim population. Post the victory of the BJP government in Assam in 2016, the Muslim population is being targeted. These policies also highlight that the BJP government instead of focusing on development issues in Assam, is polarizing the State on the basis of religion.

- **Impact on Women**

Assam is not the first State in India to implement the two child policy. In fact, Assam would be the ninth state to implement the two child policy which restricts government employees. Other states such as Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Gujarat, and Uttarakhand bar local representatives from having a third child. Studies have indicated that women opt for abortions or sterilization to prevent pregnancies (Buch, 2005; Anukriti and Chakravarty, 2015). Studies also demonstrate that because of the two child policy men and women either have to give up their posts or abandon their children to be able to retain their posts (Rao, 2003; Buch, 2005; Anukriti and Chakravarty, 2015). Drawing from a detailed investigation conducted by Nirmala Buch (2005) and media reports in this section some of the major incidents of how the two child policy has made an impact in the other states of India has been highlighted.

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- **Madhya Pradesh:** A woman sarpanch (village head) gave up her third child for adoption because having more than two children would disqualify from her post.
- **Andhra Pradesh:** A woman running for a local post in Andhra Pradesh became pregnant with her third child. She underwent abortion during her fifth month. However she lost the elections as well.
- **Rajasthan:** A woman who the sarpanch in a Rajasthan village abandoned her third child and the newborn child died of rickets.
- **Gujarat:** A taluka panchayat member was disqualified because he had become a father for the third time even though his child died within five days of birth.
- **Odisha:** A woman in the village level panchayat gave up her post because the doctors told her she was pregnant with a son. However post the delivery she discovered that the doctors had made an incorrect detection and she had given birth to a girl.

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A closer analysis of the instances of other states indicate that due to the two child policy families have to undergo the trauma of abandonment, women have to undertake late pregnancies and disqualification from posts as well. Additionally the two child policy also will result in increase of sex selective abortions. Given the son preference in India, the emphasis would be to ensure the birth of at least one male child. In fact, in some cases the parents prefer both their children to be males. In particular the two child policy is in direct contradiction with the National Scheme of *Beti Bachao Beti Pado* which stresses on the need to save the girl child. In this backdrop it could be suggested that instead of serving any long term goals, the two child norm is creating more distress.

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PART III: NEGLECT OF MAJOR HEALTH CONCERNS

In the context of Assam, the State government should realize that instead of targeting the Muslim population, it should focus on the other population indicators of Assam. Drawing from the National Family Health Survey (2015-16) the box below highlights the major areas of population concerns in Assam.

- Maternal Mortality rates is 300% in Assam and has surpassed the national average of 167%
- 46% of girls and women between the age 15-49 are anemic
- 9.5% females undergo sterilization as opposed to 0.1 male sterilizations
- 54% is the infant mortality rate in Assam as opposed to the national average of 40%
- Overall sex ratio in urban areas is 996 women per 1,000 men in Assam but for children born in the last 5 years, it is 794

Based on the NFHS data it could be suggested that Assam is performing poorly with respect to health indicators for women. Hence it is important for the State government to focus on schemes which would improve the health of the women in the State.

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PART V: CONCLUSION

An analysis of the two child policy demonstrates that with the implementation of the policy there will be an increase of abortions, abandonment and sex selective abortions. Instead of targeting the Muslim population the State Government of Assam should focus on the other indicators where Assam is performing poorly. For instance the State government should introduce measures to improve the infant and maternal mortality rates. While it is true that the growing population of India is one of the major concerns of the country, nonetheless restricting only village level elected officials is not the solution. It is important for the Central Government to systematically analyze the reasons for population growth and announce schemes accordingly.

The other major concern associated with the two child policy is the rise of sex selective abortions. Recently the Asian Centre for Human Rights in its report (2017) highlighted that female foeticide has increased in the tribal areas. States such as Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh have high rates of female foeticide. The two child policy if implemented in Assam and extended to other North Eastern states could result in increase of female foeticide rates. Adopting a policy perspective it could be suggested that the State Governments of the North Eastern states should focus on improving the overall population indicators instead of targeting minority communities in each of the respective States.

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PART VI. BACKGROUND INFORMATION/REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

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