

Nagaland's Demographic Somersault

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After two decades of very high growth, Nagaland's population declined between 2001 and 2011 though there were no epidemical diseases, wars, famines, natural calamities, political disturbances, or any significant changes in the state's socio-economic characteristics. This decline is unprecedented in the history of independent India. It has been shown that the census estimates of the state's population for 1981-2001 are internally inconsistent. In the light of this, this paper uses information from the Sample Registration System and National Family Health Surveys to examine the reliability of the census figures in Nagaland between 1971 and 2011. It suggests that the census estimates are inconsistent with these sources of information.

1 Introduction

The unavailability of reliable information impedes social-scientific studies on the smaller states in north-east India. National-level surveys either do not cover the smaller states of the region (for instance, various waves of Rural Economic and Demographic Surveys) or cover them irregularly (for instance, the District Level Household and Facility Survey did not cover Nagaland in 2007-08). Even some of the surveys that cover the region regularly do not have sufficiently representative samples to generate reliable estimates for the smaller states (for instance, National Sample Surveys). The decennial census is, therefore, the most important source of demographic and other related information on the smaller states of the north-east, and its reliability is of utmost importance to policymakers and social scientists.

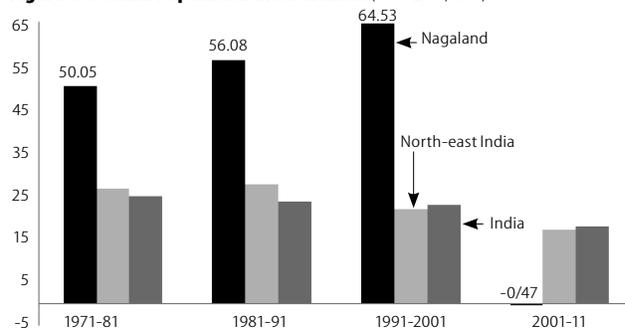
Unfortunately, doubts have emerged over the reliability of census figures on the north-east region. The census has recorded abnormal changes in the population of some states in the region. For instance, Nagaland, the most fecund state in the country between 1981 and 2001, recorded a negative population growth in the 2011 Census (Figure 1). During 1981-91 and 1991-2001, the state registered decadal population growth rates of 56.08% and 64.53%, respectively.¹ However, between 2001 and 2011, Nagaland's population declined. This is the first time in independent India that a state has witnessed an absolute decline in population in the absence of epidemical diseases, wars, famines, natural calamities, political disturbances, and significant changes in the socio-economic correlates of fertility.²

While observers drew attention to Nagaland's high growth rate and its developmental consequences as early as the 1970s (Means 1971), the government seemed to have taken note of it only when it rejected the 2001 Census (GOI 2011b: viii). Despite the government's rejection of the 2001 Census, state and non-state organisations continue to use its flawed population

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Figure 1: Decadal Population Growth Rates (1971-2011, in %)



statistics. For instance, the *Economic Survey of 2010-11* (GOI 2011d: A125) used the wrong population series for Nagaland, which resulted in erroneous estimates of some human development indicators. Similarly, other surveys uncritically refer to the 2001 Census of Nagaland as a benchmark (for instance, CSDS 2008: 3).

Although the dramatic changes in Nagaland's population were discussed extensively in the north-east in the run-up to the 2011 Census (*Nagaland Post* 2009), social scientists largely ignored the issue. Three possible explanations emerged from these discussions. First, migration was invoked to explain the demographic change. It was argued that net outmigration from the state could have caused its population to decline between 2001 and 2011 (Chaurasia 2011; Kundu and Kundu 2011). On the other hand, others argued that net in-migration was responsible for the high population growth rate between 1991 and 2001 (Rio 2010; Singh 2009). Second, HIV/AIDS and drug addiction were invoked to explain the decline in population between 2001 and 2011 (Jeermison 2011). Third, the struggle among tribes for political power and development funds was cited by the chief minister as the reason behind the abnormal growth between 1991 and 2001 (Hazarika 2005). However, a systematic empirical investigation of these and other plausible explanations has not been conducted so far (for exceptions, see Agrawal and Kumar 2012b, d).

This paper examines Nagaland's demographic somersault – the decline in population after two decades of abnormally high growth. Section 2 draws attention to the discrepancy between the actual and projected populations of Nagaland over the past three decades. It also draws attention to other sources that raised doubts about the reliability of the census of Nagaland. Section 3 examines the plausibility of the census population estimates by comparing them with information from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) and Sample Registration System (SRS). This section also examines a political-geographic explanation of population changes in Nagaland and outlines a political-economic explanation. The final section offers concluding remarks.

2 Growing Concerns about the Census of Nagaland

During the past three decades, Nagaland's population repeatedly defied projections (Table 1). To begin with, the expert committee of 1974 underestimated the 1991 population by about 20%. The underestimation indicated that the dynamics of population growth between 1981 and 1991 were inconsistent with the trends in fertility and mortality prevailing in the 1960s and 1970s, which the committee used for the projections. Similarly, the technical group of 1988, which based its projections on the socio-economic and demographic conditions prevailing in the 1980s and used the 1991 Census as the baseline, underestimated the 2001 population by 14%. Underestimation for 2001 despite an inflated baseline (1991 Census) meant that population growth between 1991 and 2001 was very high. Further, the 2001 Census was conducted by both Assam and Nagaland in 62 villages in the disputed territory along the Assam-Nagaland border and the "population [of the

disputed villages] enumerated by Assam is consistently lower than that enumerated by Nagaland" (GOI 2005: 24).

Interestingly, the leading political figures of the region, including Nagaland's Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio and Manipur's former Chief Minister Radhabinod Kojiam, disputed the 2001 Census estimates. According to the former, the state's population in 2001 was only 1.4 million (Hazarika 2005), whereas the latter estimated it to be 1.6 million (Kojiam 2001). Also, while the census records progressively increased the rate of growth of Nagaland's population until 2001 (Figure 1), studies based on the census data indicated a declining trend in crude birth rate (GOI 1997c; Guilmoto and Rajan 2002). A sample survey conducted in six districts of Nagaland in 2009 added to growing doubts about the 2001 Census. Compared to the 2001 Census, it found fewer people in almost all parts of the state (*Nagaland Post* 2009).

Table 1: Actual and Projected Populations of Nagaland (1981-2011)

Year	Source	Population (in '000)		Error (%)*
		Projected	Actual	
1981	Expert Committee (1974)	714.5	774.9	-7.80
1991	Expert Committee (1974)	957.9	1,209.55	-20.80
2001	Technical Group (1988)	1,721	1,990.0	-13.52
2011	Technical Group (1988)	2,185	1,980.6	10.32
2011	Technical Group (2001)	2,249	1,980.6	13.55
2011	PFI-PRB (2007)	2,426-2,439**	1,980.6	22.49-23.14**

* Error (per cent) is the excess of the projected over actual population as a share of the actual population.

** PFI-PRB (2007: 6, 11) provides two projections, corresponding to low and high fertility scenarios.

Sources: (i) Expert committee (1974): GOI (1978: 158-59), (ii) Technical group (1988): GOI (1996: 64), and (iii) Technical group (2001): GOI (2006: 35).

While the forecasts for 1991 and 2001 happened to be underestimates vis-à-vis the corresponding censuses, the forecasts for 2011 were overestimates (Table 1). The technical groups on population projections constituted in 1988 and 2001 overestimated the 2011 population of Nagaland by 10% and 14% respectively. Still later, in 2007, the Population Reference Bureau and the Population Foundation of India overestimated the 2011 population by 23%.

3 Feasibility of Census Population Estimates

This section examines whether births and deaths and lawful migration can explain the abnormal changes in Nagaland's population. The analysis is restricted to 1971-2011 as the pre- and post-1971 Censuses cannot be compared directly – because of the steady expansion of the area of the Naga Hills until the formation of Nagaland in 1963 (GOI 1975: 4) and also because of the increasing coverage of census operations (GOI 2011b).

3.1 Birth and Death Rates

Demographic data from the NFHS and SRS can be used to validate the census estimates of population growth rates. Table 2 (p 71) compiles estimates of the crude birth rate (CBR) from these sources since 1971. SRS (NFHS) estimates of the CBR for Nagaland are lower (higher) than the estimates for India.

For each decade, Table 2 provides estimates of the natural growth rate (NGR) corresponding to the NFHS and SRS birth rates for two scenarios – one assuming zero death rates, NGR (o),

Table 2: Birth, Death, and Natural Growth Rates

Period	Data Source	Nagaland				India			
		Birth Rate	Death Rate	NGR (0)	NGR (SRS)	Birth Rate	Death Rate	NGR (0)	NGR (SRS)
1971-1981 – Census decadal growth rates: 50.05 (Nagaland) and 24.66 (India)									
1976-1981 (average)	SRS	21.88	6.87	24.16	16.07	33.67	13.67	39.26	21.90
1981-1991 – Census decadal growth rates: 56.08 (Nagaland) and 23.86 (India)									
1983-1991 (average)	SRS	21.41	5.02	23.60	17.65	28.82	10	32.86	20.50
1991-2001 – Census decadal growth rates: 64.53 (Nagaland) and 21.54 (India)									
1991-94 (average)	SRS	19.45	4.02	21.24	16.54	24.65	8.95	27.57	16.86
1990-92	NFHS-1	31.3	NA	36.10	30.88	28.7	NA	32.71	21.60
1996-98	NFHS-2	30.4	NA	34.91	29.74	24.8	NA	27.76	17.03
2001-2011 – Census decadal growth rates: -0.47 (Nagaland) and 17.64 (India)									
2004-09 (average)	SRS	16.61	4.25	17.91	13.07	23.3	7.45	25.90	17.03
2003-05	NFHS-3	28.5	NA	32.45	27.07	23.6	NA	26.27	17.38

(i) Birth rate is the number of live births per 1,000 population and death rate is the number of deaths per 1,000 population; (ii) NGR stands for natural growth rate, NGR (0) denotes the decadal NGR of "closed" (no migration) population assuming a zero death rate and NGR (SRS), assuming the SRS death rate for the corresponding decade. NGR (0) [NGR (SRS)] has been arrived at by calculating compound growth rate using birth rate (birth and death rates); (iii) The figures for 1976–81 for Nagaland are based only on the rural sample, which does not severely affect our estimates because the share of rural population in the state's population was 90% and 85% respectively, in 1971 and 1981; and (iv) NA indicates non-availability of data.

Source: (i) Srivastava (1987), (ii) GOI (1999a and 2011b), (iii) IIPS and MI (2007: 78 and 2009: 36), and (iv) SRS birth and death rates for 2004-09 (average) have been compiled from SRS Bulletins for the respective years.

and another assuming a death rate equal to the SRS death rate, NGR (SRS). The observed population growth of the country as a whole lies within the range spanned by NGR (SRS) and NGR (0), whereas for Nagaland the CBRs cannot support the observed population growth even when the crude death rate is assumed to be zero. Further, neither the NFHS nor SRS reported substantial changes in the birth and death rates between 1991-2001 and 2001-11, which rules out the possibility of explaining the decline in population between 2001 and 2011 by transition to a low birth-and-death rates regime.

The inferences based on the NGR derived from NFHS and SRS birth rates (Table 2) are supported by evidence from other studies. For instance, Bhowmik et al (1971: 74-75) found that in 1961 the CBR among the Zemi Nagas of Benreu village (Peren) was 49.77 per 1,000 population, which compares with the corresponding figure for India as a whole, 41.7 during 1951-60. Similarly, Murry et al (2005) found that the CBR among the Lothas in a village in Wokha was 28.35 per 1,000 population (the survey period is not mentioned though it appears to be sometime during 1991-2001). This figure is close to CBR estimates for Nagaland (30.4 for 1996-98 from NFHS-2 in Table 2) and rural India (29.4 for 1995-97 from the SRS) (GOI 1999b).

Since births and deaths are alone insufficient to explain the decline in Nagaland's population, the decline has to be explained almost entirely by either substantial outmigration during 2001-11 and/or overestimation of the population in earlier censuses. But before discussing these possibilities, we will rule out the HIV/AIDS epidemic-based explanation.

There are strong grounds for rejecting the HIV/AIDS epidemic-based explanation for the decline in population growth rate during 2001-11. While Nagaland is among the six worst HIV/AIDS affected states in India (Government of Nagaland 2010: 121), the resultant deaths (564 deaths between 1994 and July 2011) are too few to explain the dramatic changes in the state's population (Nagaland State AIDS Control Society 2011). Three additional reasons rule out this explanation. First, with

HIV/AIDS prevalence rates comparable to Nagaland (0.78%), the populations of Manipur (1.4%) and Andhra Pradesh (0.90%) did not shrink (NACO and NIMS nd; GOI 2010). Second, Nagaland registered spectacular population growth during the 1990s despite a comparable prevalence of HIV/AIDS. Third, population growth was positive in districts with high HIV/AIDS prevalence – Dimapur and Tuensang, for instance, where the population grew by 23.13% and 5.81% respectively – and negative in districts with low HIV/AIDS prevalence Mon, for instance, which registered a 4% decline in population (Bachani et al 2011; GOI 2011b, c).

3.2 Migration

Migration has long been a contentious issue in Nagaland, where the majority community, the Nagas, are committed to the maintenance of the Inner Line system that bars outsiders from entering large parts of the state without official permission. We will begin the probe on migration by noting that if in-migration was the dominant cause of population growth between 1981 and 2001, then the subsequent absolute decline in population will require substantial net outmigration from the state. Chaurasia (2011: 15), implicitly assuming that there is no abnormality in the 2001 Census estimate and using SRS (2004-09) birth and death rates, overestimates the 2011 population of Nagaland by 14% and attributes the discrepancy to "a very heavy outmigration (almost 14%) between 2001 and 2011". While the migration data of the 2011 Census are not yet available, any outmigration based explanation of the absolute decline in Nagaland's population after abnormal growth would be implausible because the number of outmigrants during 2001-11 needed to account for the population decline would far exceed 83,083, the number of outmigrants during the entire 1971-2001 period (GOI 1977: 84-85, 1988: 318-19, nd1, nd2).

Though ad hoc invocation of migration as the root cause of Nagaland's population change can be rejected straightaway, a political-geographic explanation – people migrating to cope with arbitrary colonial and postcolonial boundaries, leading to unexpected shifts in population dynamics – would bear closer scrutiny. It has often been argued that postcolonial international as well as intra-national boundaries have on the one hand divided many seamless communities and their homelands, and on the other corralled unwilling partners within rigid boundaries.³ While claims about ethno-cultural and political unity of the Naga tribes spread across the hilly border between India and Myanmar and their political isolation from the outside world do not stand scrutiny (Sema 1986, for instance), it is true that a number of Naga and other related tribes are distributed across Myanmar and different north-eastern states like Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. We need to check if conflicts rooted in colonial (between Myanmar and India) and postcolonial (between north-eastern states) boundaries have generated demographic gradients pushing people, say, into Nagaland from neighbouring states and countries.

One could argue that ethnic conflict and/or economic hardship are pushing Nagas from other jurisdictions into Nagaland. (Even other tribes could be fleeing from conflict hotspots in Nagaland's neighbourhood.) But in the 1980s and 1990s, the level of conflict and economic development did not vary substantially across Nagaland's neighbourhood to support an influx into the state on a scale that can explain the dramatic increase in population. Exceptions such as the Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur's hill districts during the 1990s pushed Kukis away from rather than towards Naga-dominated areas. Even if it is assumed that an influx can explain the abnormal increase in population, the complementary assumption that there was a reverse flow in the following decade is highly implausible because in the latest census decade Nagaland did not witness any significant increase in conflict relative to its neighbourhood. On the contrary, if anything, in-migration to Nagaland should have increased during 2001-11 because of the ceasefire between various insurgent groups and the government, which created an unprecedentedly peaceful environment in the state.

So far we have argued that (lawful) migration recorded in the census cannot alone explain both very high population growth rates in Nagaland for three decades (1971-2001) and the negative growth in the subsequent decade (2001-11). But migration could arguably explain high growth rates during 1971-2001 if there was massive in-migration from other states and countries. Statistics on migration indicate that even this restricted explanation is implausible for four reasons. First, migrants constituted about 5% of Nagaland's population in both 1991 and 2001 and only 40% of these migrants were from outside the state (Table 3).⁴ Therefore, migrants from outside Nagaland constituted nearly 2% of its population in both years.

Second, the share of in-migrants from other states and countries in Nagaland's population has been falling over time, making in-migration an unlikely cause of increasing population growth rate during 1981-2001 (Table 3). Third, if only intra-national boundaries are considered, the number of potential settlers belonging to Naga and related tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam are too few to account for the massive changes in Nagaland's population (GOI nd4, nd5). Migration of north Manipur's large tribal population related to the Naga tribes of Nagaland cannot explain the higher growth rate because during the period under consideration the relevant districts of Manipur – Ukhrul and Senapati – recorded very high growth rates (GOI nd4, nd5) despite outmigration of Kuki tribes to other districts due to ethnic conflict. Fourth, we have not come across media or official sources referring to large-scale movement of Naga and related tribes from other north-eastern

Table 3: Share of Migrants in Nagaland's Population (1971-2001, in %)

Type of migration	1971	1981	1991	2001
All in-migrants*	12.64	15.33	5.74	4.36
Intrastate**	48.29	62.38	61.96	59.24
Interstate**	42.16	34.00	35.31	38.74
International**	9.56	3.62	2.73	2.02
In-migrants from outside the state*	6.54	5.77	2.20	1.78

* As proportion of state's total population.

** As proportion of in-migrants.

Source: Computations based on GOI (1976: 28, 24; 1977: 84-85; 1985: 34, 48, 50; 1988: 318-19; 1997a: 52-53; 1997b: 6, 40, 52; nd1, nd2).

states into Nagaland. But note that while the census clearly suggests that lawful migration cannot help explain the abnormal demographic changes in Nagaland, it cannot help us examine if illegal migration from Myanmar and Bangladesh can explain it.

We also carry out an analysis using the population balancing equation by combining the information on births, deaths, and migration for 1971-2011 (see Agrawal and Kumar 2012b, d for details). These internal consistency checks suggest that three successive censuses between 1981 and 2001 seem to have overestimated Nagaland's population by about 4%, 11% and 17% respectively.

3.3 Discussion

Demographic factors alone are insufficient to explain the changes in Nagaland's population. The analysis also suggests that the political-geographic hypothesis – people migrating to cope with arbitrary colonial and postcolonial boundaries, leading to unexpected shifts in population dynamics – cannot explain the changes in the state's population if only lawful migration is considered. While there is no reliable data on illegal international immigration, the available evidence does not fully support the corresponding political-geographic hypothesis (Agrawal and Kumar 2012d). Illegal international immigration can, if at all, partly explain abnormal growth between 1981 and 2001 without being able to explain the subsequent steep decline in growth. Hence, other factors like political-economic factors need to be examined in future work.

Our preliminary analysis partly supports a political-economic explanation – competing subgroups of population inflated their numbers to seek greater political representation and, by implication, a greater share in the state's resources – of the changes in Nagaland's population between 1991 and 2011 (Agrawal and Kumar 2012c, d). Different Naga tribes seem to have inflated their numbers in the census of 2001 to avoid loss of political representation to competing tribes and non-tribal plainsmen due to the impending delimitation of constituencies. Ultimately, inter-tribal conflict and litigation forced deferment of delimitation in Nagaland to the first census after 2026 (GOI 2008). So, there was no incentive in 2011 to inflate the population. Preliminary analysis indicates that the inflation of population across Kohima, Mokokchung, and Tuensang – the three broad geographic and ethnic divisions of Nagaland – in the 2001 Census was related to the expected loss of political representation due to delimitation, whereas deflation of population in the census of 2011 is related to the inflation in the preceding decade (Agrawal and Kumar 2012c, d). But a definitive conclusion on this can be arrived at only after an analysis of abnormalities in the census at the level of assembly constituencies and circles.

4 Concluding Remarks

Developing states such as India need information on the socio-economic division of their populations to design redistributive policies. But the official statistics of India are not free of errors (Agrawal and Kumar 2012a).⁵ The census, which occupies

pride of place in India's official statistics and is viewed as integral to nation-building (GOI nd3), is a case in point. We examined a largely ignored surprise thrown up by the 2011 Census – after two decades of abnormally high growth, Nagaland's population declined in absolute terms during 2001-11.

Using four different sources (past projections, statements of political leaders, sample surveys, and overlapping censuses), we argued that Nagaland's census has been plagued by problems since at least the early 1990s. In earlier work, we have shown that the census population estimates are internally inconsistent (Agrawal and Kumar 2012b, d). Here we showed that the aforesaid estimates are also inconsistent with other sources of demographic information and argued that demographic explanations alone are insufficient to explain the dramatic

changes in Nagaland's population. We then outlined potential alternatives to demographic explanations, one of which – a political-geographic explanation – was discussed alongside the demographic explanation. But our discussion of the political-geographic explanation is incomplete because of lack of reliable data on the scale of international illegal immigration. We also briefly outlined a political-economic explanation that needs to be examined in future work.

We conclude by noting that the inconsistencies in successive censuses – the most important source of information about smaller states such as Nagaland – and the uncritical use of questionable statistics by government agencies raise questions about the Indian state's institutional capacity to design empirically-informed policies.

NOTES

1 During this period, Nagaland was among the fastest growing regions in the world. The number of countries whose population grew faster than that of Nagaland decreased from six in 1980-90 to two in 1990-2000, and then increased to more than 150 in 2010 (United Nations 2011). A comparison of Nagaland's growth rate with growth rates of provinces in other countries, which would have been more appropriate, could not be carried out for want of data.

2 The population of Punjab decreased between 1941 and 1951 (GOI 2011a). The 1941 Census over-enumerated the population of Punjab due to competition between Hindus and Muslims, and the same was corrected in the 1951 Census (Natrajan 1972: vii; GOI 1954: 5). Other factors that contributed to the decrease included population transfer and unprecedented bloodshed following the partition. There was also a decrease in the population of two union territories, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (during 1941-1951) and Daman and Diu (during 1951-1961) (GOI 2011a), most likely due to out-migration triggered by the reorganisation of India's territories.

Epidemics: For instance, the 1921 Census was carried out after an influenza epidemic. "In some areas where the epidemic was exceptionally severe, some increase in omission [relative to other colonial censuses] was suspected (GOI 1954: 4).

Famines: The drop in growth rate of Bengal between 1941 and 1951 was attributed to both over-enumeration in 1941 as well as the 1943 famine (Natrajan 1972: vii).

Socio-economic correlates: The key socio-economic correlates of fertility are income, literacy, level of urbanisation, female work participation, and access to public health services (Barro and Sala-i-Martin 2004: 407-8). In Nagaland, fertility has been shown to be inversely related to female literacy and the standard of living and directly related to child mortality (Dey and Goswami 2009; Narendra Singh 2005). There was no change in the above correlates that could support an abrupt decline in population through a decline in fertility. In fact, Nagaland's human development rank has improved steadily over the last four decades (see Agrawal and Kumar 2012d for details).

3 The debate has mostly focused on Africa, where a number of national and sub-national boundaries are straight lines, and is polarised between those who are appalled at the artificiality of these boundaries (Alesina et al 2006) and those who argue that the discourse of artificiality betrays ignorance of ground realities (Herbst 2000; Nugent and Asiwaju 1996).

4 We have taken into account "migration by place of last residence" with a reference period of 0-9 years so that only those individuals who changed residence between inter-census periods are considered.

5 India's official statistics in other fields have also been questioned in the past few years. In July 2011, the governor of the Reserve Bank of India expressed concern over the quality of statistics collected by government agencies (Subbarao 2011). A few months later, the commerce secretary admitted that India's export figures for April-October were inflated by \$9.4 billion due to a misclassification of certain items and data entry errors (*Business Line* 2011). Not long afterward, the chief statistician conceded that the accuracy of the Index of Industrial Production was questionable (*Financial Express* 2011). More recently, the Planning Commission's deputy chairman argued that National Sample Surveys systematically underestimate household consumption (*Economic Times* 2012).

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