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End of the Two-Child Rule — Telangana and India's Demographic Policy Shift

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End of the Two-Child Rule — Telangana and India's Demographic Policy Shift

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WHY IN NEWS

The Telangana Legislative Assembly unanimously passed the Telangana Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill 2026, abolishing the two-child norm that had barred individuals with more than two children from contesting Panchayati Raj elections — joining a growing list of states abandoning a policy that has outlived its demographic purpose as India's fertility rates fall well below replacement levels.

THE TWO-CHILD NORM — ORIGIN AND INTENT

The **two-child norm in Panchayati Raj** refers to a disqualification provision that bars any person with more than two living children from contesting elections to panchayats and other local bodies. Several Indian states enacted such provisions in the 1990s and early 2000s, during a period when population growth was the dominant concern of public health and development policy.

Constitutional and legal basis: Article 243F of the Constitution (inserted by the 73rd Amendment, 1992) allows states to make laws regarding disqualifications for membership of Panchayats. Several states used this provision to add the two-child norm as a disqualification.

The policy logic at the time (1990s):

India's total fertility rate (TFR) was ~3.5 children per woman in 1990

Population growth was seen as a direct impediment to poverty reduction and development

States like Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Telangana adopted the norm as a way to signal population control as a priority

The Supreme Court's position: In **Javed v. State of Haryana (2003)**, the Supreme Court upheld the two-child norm disqualification as constitutional — holding that it did not violate Articles 14, 19, or 21, and that population control was a legitimate state interest. This judgment provided legal cover for the proliferation of such norms.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC REALITY THAT MADE THE NORM OBSOLETE

The two-child norm was always controversial — and demographic change has made it structurally indefensible:

India's fertility decline:

Year	Total Fertility Rate (India)
1990	3.5
2000	2.9
2010	2.5
2020	2.0
2024 (est.)	1.9

India's **national TFR** is now below the **replacement level of 2.1**. For Telangana specifically:

Rural TFR: 1.7 (as of latest NFHS-5 state data)

Urban TFR: 1.5

This means Telangana's population is already on a trajectory to decline if fertility patterns persist

The states leading the abolition wave:

Rajasthan (2022): Abolished the two-child norm for Panchayat elections

Andhra Pradesh (2024): Abolished the norm

Telangana (2026): Latest to abolish

States retaining the norm (as of early 2026): Haryana, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra (for local bodies in some contexts) — though enforcement is increasingly perfunctory

THE EQUITY CRITIQUE — WHY THE NORM WAS ALWAYS PROBLEMATIC

The two-child norm attracted sustained criticism from women's rights groups, public health experts, and constitutional scholars:

Disproportionate impact on women: The norm effectively penalised women (especially in patriarchal households where women have less control over reproductive decisions) for having more than two children. Women who had children before the norm was enacted, or who were in polygamous marriages, were disproportionately disqualified.

Religious and community discrimination: Critics argued the norm was applied in ways that disproportionately disqualified Muslim candidates (where family sizes were, on average, larger in some states), raising concerns about selective enforcement.

Paradox: discourages female children: In states with sex-selective practices, the two-child norm combined with strong son preference could incentivise sex-selective abortions to ensure the two children were male. The norm thus potentially worsened the child sex ratio problem it was ostensibly indifferent to.

Excludes grassroots leaders: Panchayati Raj was envisioned by the 73rd Amendment as genuine democratic grassroots governance. Excluding individuals based on family size — often determined before the law was enacted — undermines this democratic intent.

THE BROADER DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND DEBATE

Telangana’s abolition of the two-child norm must be understood in the context of India’s shifting demographic challenge:

From population explosion to demographic dividend:

India’s demographic dividend (large working-age population relative to dependents) peaks around **2020–2040** per most estimates

After this peak, India faces the same “ageing population” challenge that Japan and Korea face today

India’s **old-age dependency ratio** (those 65+ per 100 working-age persons) is projected to rise from 10.9 (2021) to 22.7 by 2051

State-level differentiation:

Region	TFR (NFHS-5)	Status
Bihar	3.0	Still high fertility
UP	2.4	Declining but above replacement
Tamil Nadu	1.8	Below replacement
Kerala	1.8	Below replacement
Telangana	1.8	Below replacement
Goa	1.4	Well below replacement

The population policy challenge in India is no longer national — it is regional. South and West India have fertility rates comparable to Western Europe, while UP and Bihar remain relatively high. A uniform national two-child norm makes no demographic sense in this context.

The National Population Policy 2000 explicitly rejected coercive measures and emphasised the target-free approach following the excesses of the Emergency era (1975-77, when forced sterilisations led to political backlash). The two-child norm in Panchayati Raj elections is a soft coercive measure that contradicts this approach.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Telangana Panchayat Raj Amendment Bill 2026; TFR Telangana 1.7; replacement TFR 2.1; Article 243F (73rd Amendment); Javed v. State of Haryana (2003 SC); National Population Policy 2000; NFHS-5.

Mains GS-1: India's demographic transition — regional divergence, implications for development and welfare.

Mains GS-2: 73rd Amendment and Panchayati Raj disqualifications — constitutional provisions and policy evolution | Two-child norm — equity, gender, and democratic implications | India's population policy — from coercion to choice.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA
TELANGANA TWO-CHILD NORM ABOLITION:

Bill: Telangana Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill 2026 (unanimous)

Two-child norm introduced: 1994

Telangana rural TFR: 1.7; urban TFR: 1.5

Replacement TFR: 2.1 (population stable if TFR = 2.1)

Minister: Anasuya Seethakka (Panchayat Raj, Telangana)

KEY DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (NFHS-5, 2019-21):

India national TFR: 2.0 (first time at or below replacement level nationally)

States below replacement: Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Goa, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu & Kashmir

States above replacement: Bihar (3.0), Meghalaya (2.9), UP (2.4), Jharkhand (2.3), Rajasthan (2.0 just at replacement)

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK:

73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992): inserted Part IX (Articles 243-243O); mandated Panchayati Raj at three tiers

Article 243F: Parliament/Legislature may make laws providing for disqualifications from Panchayat membership

Javed v. State of Haryana (2003): SC (3-judge bench) upheld two-child norm as constitutional; not violative of Articles 14, 19, 21

NATIONAL POPULATION POLICY 2000:

Goal: Achieve TFR of 2.1 by 2010 (achieved ~2020 nationally)

Approach: Target-free, voluntary, no coercion

Replaced the Emergency-era family planning programme (1975-77)

NFHS-5 KEY FINDINGS (2019-21):

India TFR: 2.0 (Rural: 2.1; Urban: 1.6)

Under-5 mortality: 41.9 per 1,000 live births

Institutional deliveries: 88.6%

Female literacy (15+): 71.5%

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

India's demographic dividend window: ~2020–2040 (working-age population 15-64 = ~65% of total)

India overtook China as world's most populous country: April 2023 (UN estimate)

India population (2024 estimate): ~1.44 billion

Old-age dependency ratio projection: 10.9 (2021) → 22.7 (2051) — aging challenge ahead

States that have abolished two-child norm: Rajasthan (2022), Andhra Pradesh (2024), Telangana (2026)

Sources: AffairsCloud, PIB, NFHS-5, Ministry of Health

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