

Population Change in Burma: A Comparison of the 1973 and 1983 Censuses

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A comparison of the 1973 and 1983 censuses provides ample evidence of a decline in fertility in Burma. The proportion of children in the population fell substantially in the ten-year period accompanied by a significant increase in the mean age at marriage as indicated by the higher female singulate mean age at marriage. An analysis of the regional variations in population density indicates inter-regional movement of population. While there is marked success in the literacy programmes as indicated by the sharp reduction in the prevalence of illiteracy, especially among the females, changes in the industrial and occupational structure of the labour force suggest worsening economic conditions. Under these circumstances, it is surmised that the fall in fertility, without any concerted government policy for inducing such a decline, may be a first-level and benign response of a more literate and hence more informed population to rising aspirations and the inability of the economy to accommodate these aspirations.

The scarcity of information on Burma is a well-known fact among interested scholars. Publications of up-to-date demographic data were almost non-existent until recently when the Burmese Government published the 1983 census results in English in 1986. The easy access to these publications is evidence of a new-found openness in Burma's policy outlook. In contrast, the 1973 census results were published only in Burmese and only very few organizations outside Burma were able to get access to them. One such organization is Westinghouse Health Systems in the United States, which provided access to the data to Maung who summarizes the major findings of the 1973 census (M. Ismael Khin

Maung 1986). In this paper, we use Maung's analysis of the 1973 census as a basis for comparison with the results of the 1983 census (The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma 1986) with a view to understanding the pattern of ongoing demographic change in Burma. Our analysis is drawn entirely from these two sources, the data referring to 1973 from M. Ismael Khin Maung (1986) and that relating to 1983 from the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma (1986).

Burma in Perspective

Burma is located strategically in mainland Southeast Asia, surrounded on the west by India and Bangladesh, on the north by China, on the east by Thailand and Laos, and on the south and southwest by the Bay of Bengal. Burma attained independence from British colonial rule on 4 January 1948. Since independence, Burma has had five consecutive governments: the democratically elected AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League) government led by U Nu from 1948 to 1958; General Ne Win's caretaker government from 1958 to 1960; the democratically elected "clean" AFPFL (U Nu's faction) government from 1960 to 1962; the Revolutionary Council government led by General Ne Win from 1962 to 1974; and the present constitutional government since 1974. The present government regards Burma as an underpopulated country and in the beginning proscribed any form of family planning and birth control. Today abortion is still illegal except on strict medical considerations. The government's population policy now can be considered *laissez-faire*. It is reported that contraceptives are provided through the large black economy, apparently smuggled across the borders from the neighbouring countries of Thailand, India, and Bangladesh, where strong official family planning programmes have been in existence for some time.

Urbanization in Burma has been somewhat slow, with about 25 per cent of the population being classified as urban in both 1973 and 1983. Immigration into Burma is virtually non-existent and insignificant, and even though emigration is permitted, the volume involved is not considered substantial. As such the population can be treated as being closed for all practical purposes. This being the case, recorded population

growth resulted mostly from natural increase, which is the difference between the number of births and deaths. To this, we now turn our attention.

Population Growth

The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma covers 676,578 sq. km. and consists of seven states and seven divisions. Under these fourteen units of administration, there are 314 townships which comprise 288 towns, 2,190 wards (the lowest administrative unit in urban areas), and 13,756 village tracts (the lowest administrative unit in rural areas). In the 1983 census, all the urban wards were covered, 12,814 out of a total of 13,756 village tracts were completely covered, and 112 tracts were partially covered. A total of 830 village tracts representing 6 per cent of the total number of tracts, however, could not be enumerated because of "security reasons". It is estimated that the total enumerated population represents 96.6 per cent of the total population (Union of Burma 1986).

Including the estimated population of 1,183,005 persons for the areas in which enumeration could not be conducted, the 1983 census population total has been estimated to be 35,307,913: 17,518,255 males and 17,789,658 females. According to the census report, this represents an annual intercensal growth rate of 2.02 per cent, which is marginally higher than the 2.0 per cent recorded during the previous decade. Without additional information, it is hard to surmise whether this marginal increase portends an upcoming trend in higher population growth. Because of the uncertainty in the coverage of the population in the 1973 and 1983 censuses, it is not particularly appropriate to make an estimate of the growth rate. While the details of village tracts which could not be enumerated during the 1983 census are available in the census reports, no such information is available in the case of the 1973 census. In the absence of an assessment of the comparability of coverage, we feel that any measure of change in absolute numbers would be inaccurate and one has to interpret such statistics with caution. Therefore a major part of our analysis with the exception of the discussion on population density would depend on a comparison of the relative distributions of population during the two censuses.

Population Density

The density of population for Burma in 1983 was 52 per sq. km. compared with 43 per sq. km. in 1973 (see Table 1). Compared with those of neighbouring countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia, Burma's population density is low. This is a reflection of the ecological make-up of Burma: a significant part of the country is occupied by mountains and tropical forests, which is hardly conducive to an extension of cultivation and human settlements.

The national density of 52 per sq. km. masks considerable variations in the density of its states and divisions. State/division-specific density estimates are given in Table 1. In both censuses, the highest population density recorded was in Rangoon division, with 313.5 per sq. km. in 1973 and 389.9 per sq. km. in 1983. These figures were about seven times

TABLE 1
Population Density by State and Division: Burma, 1973 and 1983

State/Division	Density (persons per sq. km.)		Percentage Change
	1973	1983	
Kachin state	8.3	10.2	22.8
Chin state	9.0	10.2	13.3
Shan state	20.4	23.9	17.1
Karen state	28.3	34.7	22.6
Kayah state	10.8	14.4	33.3
Mon state	106.9	136.6	27.7
Rakhine state	46.6	55.6	19.3
Sagaing division	33.0	40.8	23.6
Tenassarim division	16.6	21.2	27.7
Pegu division	80.7	96.4	19.4
Magwe division	58.8	72.4	23.1
Mandalay division	99.1	123.6	24.7
Rangoon division	313.5	389.9	24.3
Irrawaddy division	118.3	142.1	20.1
Union total	42.7	52.2	22.2

higher than the national averages. Trailing Rangoon division in population density were Irrawaddy division and Mon state. The regions with the lowest population density in the 1983 census were Kachin and Chin states, each with a population density of 10.2 per sq. km. The reasons for such variations may be ecological as well as economic. Sparsely populated states such as Kachin state, Chin state, and Shan state did not show any tendency for a marked increase in their populations in 1983 over 1973. Kayah state is an exception, its intercensal growth rate of 33.3 per cent being the highest among the states and divisions. The lowest increase in density was that of the Chin state, with 13.3 per cent. The population of Tenassarim division, one of the low-density administrative units, also grew at the rate of 27.7 per cent. It can also be seen that the growth rates of the high-density administrative units are higher than the national average of 22.2 per cent and this, assuming insignificant variations in the rate of natural increase, indicates substantial population shifts within the country towards these regions.

Age Structure

The age structure of a population is a storehouse of valuable information on its demographic history. It also provides important insights into potential problems in the health of the economy and society. As such, age distribution data is an important parameter for planners and policy makers. For the first time in the Burmese census history, the definition of age used in two consecutive censuses is comparable. Prior to the 1973 census, age was recorded according to one's age on the nearest birthday. In the 1973 and 1983 censuses, respondents were asked to state their age in completed number of years (Maung 1986; Union of Burma 1986). Data on age collected from developing countries are usually subject to misreporting and under-reporting errors. Misreporting arises from the tendency to round off age to a multiple of five, to exaggerate age among the old, and to misclassify age among the very young and adolescents. Omission of infants during enumeration is a major cause of under-reporting. Age evaluation indexes such as Whipple's index and Myer's index show that age reporting in the 1983 census was fairly accurate. Whipple's and Myer's indexes work out to be 140 and 15 respectively, which indicate reasonably accurate age reporting.

Table 2 shows the age distribution by three broad age groups for the years 1973 and 1983. For the first time since the 1953 census, the proportion of the young in the population has shown a decline. In 1953, the percentage under fifteen was 33.9, increasing to 41.5 in 1973 (Maung 1986); the 1983 figure of 38.6 thus represents a significant drop in the young segment of the population. Barring some unreported calamity concerning a large number of young people, it is reasonable to assume that survival chances of infants and toddlers have been on the increase. Therefore, the decline in the population of those under fifteen years of age could have resulted only from a decline in fertility. Furthermore, the decline for urban areas was even more dramatic, falling from a level of 40.8 per cent in 1973 to 35.7 per cent in 1983. Therefore Maung's (1986) characterization of the 1973 age distribution as "transitory" seems appropriate as the 1983 age distribution shows that Burma is entering the second stage of its demographic transition in earnest.

TABLE 2
Percentage Distribution of the Population by
Broad Age Groups: Burma, 1973 and 1983

Age Group	1973	1983
0-14	41.5	38.6
15-59	52.5	55.1
60+	6.1	6.3

If indeed this is the beginning of a downward trend in Burmese fertility, then the logical question to ask is: What gave rise to this decline? In the absence of a deliberate population policy aimed at curtailing fertility, and faced with a rather difficult access to various birth control methods, what could have triggered this decline? In the answer to this question lie solutions to certain profound theoretical and policy questions in the field of population studies.

Age distribution data presented in five-year age groups confirm the falling share of the young age groups, and the continued sharp tapering of age distribution indicates that survival chances have probably not increased significantly since 1973 (Table 3).

TABLE 3
Age Distribution and Sex Ratio of the Population:
Burma, 1973 and 1983 (In percentages)

Age Group	Total		Sex Ratio	
	1973	1983	1973	1983
<1	2.6	2.2	100.9	101.4
1-4	12.5	11.1	101.0	101.5
5-9	14.0	11.8	101.1	83.4
10-14	12.4	12.7	102.5	104.3
15-49	10.4	11.1	97.0	97.5
20-24	8.2	9.7	96.8	96.0
25-29	6.4	8.2	97.1	97.4
30-34	5.9	6.4	96.0	98.3
35-39	5.7	4.9	99.3	100.2
40-44	5.2	4.4	98.8	93.9
45-49	4.1	4.2	100.1	96.9
50-54	3.7	3.9	98.3	95.4
55-59	2.8	2.9	98.1	96.9
60-64	2.4	2.5	95.7	92.5
65 +	3.7	4.0	89.1	86.2
All ages	100.0	100.0	98.9	98.6

Sex Ratio

Sex ratio (males per 100 females) for 1983, as can be expected, declined with age (Table 3). In comparison with 1973, the sex ratio at young ages shows a marginal increase as a result possibly of improving child survival chances. Age-specific sex ratios highlight the masculinity and femininity of the young and adult population respectively. The preponderance of females in the older age groups further increased in the ten-year period, indicating an improved mortality situation for women relative to men.

Marital Status

Marriage is not prescribed by religion in Burma. More than 90 per cent of the population practice Buddhism, which "neither endorses nor sanctifies marriage, unlike other major religions" (Maung 1986). Census data on the marital status distribution of the population is the only source of data for studying marriage patterns in Burma. This is because there is no proper marriage registration system in Burma. A study of marriage patterns is an important first step in understanding and explaining the fertility level and trend of a population in view of the strong relationships between fertility and marriage pattern parameters such as mean age at marriage, duration of marriage, and marriage dissolution by death or divorce.

The proportion of the population married for those above fifteen years of age is shown in Table 4 for each gender and age group. A comparison of the 1973 and 1983 data reveals a remarkable consistency in the decline of the proportion married for the 15-40 age groups. This

TABLE 4
Percentage of the Population above Fifteen Years of
Age, Married, by Sex: Burma, 1973 and 1983

Age Group	Males		Females	
	1973	1983	1973	1983
15-19	5.9	4.5	20.7	15.9
20-24	41.7	37.4	60.9	54.9
25-29	72.5	68.8	78.7	74.1
30-34	85.3	83.7	84.5	81.3
35-39	88.7	88.5	85.1	83.1
40-44	89.0	89.3	81.9	81.5
45-49	88.0	88.8	77.4	78.4
50-54	85.4	86.7	68.5	70.8
55-59	82.0	84.4	60.0	63.7
60-64	76.4	79.4	46.9	51.4
65+	61.4	64.9	27.3	30.9
Total	62.6	60.3	61.1	58.5

is true for both males and females which suggests that, in general, both males and females are postponing marriage to a later age. This is further confirmed by the increase in an already high value for the singulate mean age at marriage which rose from 23.8 to 24.5 for males and from 21.2 to 22.4 for females (Union of Burma 1986). The increase for females is more than one year and it is likely that this may have reached its peak. Further, a substantial portion of the decline in fertility indicated by the age distribution of the population could be accounted for by this increase in female age at marriage. Precise quantification of the decline in fertility and the contribution of the changing marriage pattern to the decline would shed more light on this interesting demographic change which is under way in Burma.

Ethnic Composition

Burma is marked by considerable ethnic diversity. There are three broad groups of "races": the "indigenous races", the "non-indigenous or foreign races", and "mixed Burmese with foreign races". The Burmese, the largest of the ethnic groups, constitute 69.0 per cent of the total population in 1983, an increase of one percentage point from the 1973 level of 68.0 per cent (Table 5). The proportion of indigenous ethnic groups other than Burmese is 25.7 per cent, which marks a decline in the share of the total population from 26.6 per cent in 1973. Among these are the Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Kayah, Chin, Kachin, and Mon. Each of them has a state of its own. Among the non-indigenous ethnic groups, the proportion of Indians and Pakistanis also fell from 1.9 to 1.4 per cent. The decline in groups other than the Burmese and a concomitant increase in the percentage of Burmese, suggests the possibility that an assimilation process is under way. It is also possible that some of the minority groups may have chosen to report their ethnic group as Burmese. It is to be noted here that "race" has been defined subjectively (as reported by the respondents) rather than by certain specific characteristics such as language, religion, and dress. This is further confirmed by the data on sex ratio of the population given in Table 5. It can be seen that the sex ratio for almost all the groups declined in 1983. This suggests the possibility of males from non-indigenous groups

TABLE 5
Percentage Distribution and Sex Ratio of
Racial Groups: Burma, 1973 and 1983

Group	Percentage Distribution		Sex Ratio	
	1973	1983	1973	1983
Burmese	68.0	69.0	98.0	98.3
Shan	8.9	8.5	100.1	98.2
Karen	6.6	6.2	97.9	98.4
Rakhine	4.4	4.5	100.1	99.4
Other indigenous races	6.7	6.5	99.1	98.3
Mixed Burmese and foreign races	1.5	1.3	102.7	101.8
Chinese	0.8	0.7	113.5	106.8
Indians and Pakistanis	1.9	1.4	113.1	104.5
Other foreign races	1.2	1.9	105.1	106.1
Total	100.0	100.0	98.9	96.2

marrying into Burmese families and declaring themselves as Burmese which, while resulting in a decreased sex ratio for groups other than the Burmese, has marginally increased the sex ratio of the Burmese. A more careful analysis of the data on marriage patterns would furnish further insights into this phenomenon.

Literacy and Education

The present government has initiated far-reaching reforms in the country's educational system since 1965. This has opened up educational opportunities to children from all classes in the society. Furthermore, intensive efforts were made to increase literacy in rural areas. The nationwide literacy campaign which started in 1969 had by 1986 encompassed 1.9 million people in 233 townships (*Botahtaung Daily*, 27 April 1986). The effects of these programmes are reflected in the data in Table 6. The table shows the percentage of illiterates for age groups from ten years and above. The decline in the prevalence of illiteracy is across the

TABLE 6
Illiterate Persons as a Percentage of the Total Population
Ten Years Old and Older, by Sex: Burma, 1973 and 1983

Age Group	Total		Males		Females	
	1973	1983	1973	1983	1973	1983
10-14	22.4	14.6	18.3	12.4	26.7	16.8
15-19	18.7	15.1	12.7	11.8	24.5	18.4
20-24	20.2	15.1	11.9	11.1	28.1	18.9
25-29	23.3	16.5	13.2	11.9	33.1	21.1
30-34	29.2	18.6	16.2	12.8	41.8	24.2
35-39	31.3	20.7	15.5	13.5	46.9	27.8
40-44	35.0	25.2	18.7	15.5	51.1	34.4
45-49	34.0	27.2	17.7	16.0	50.2	37.9
50+	40.9	31.9	20.9	20.1	59.9	45.4
All ages	27.8	20.3	16.3	13.9	39.1	28.8

board and is more pronounced in the case of females (Table 6). It can be seen that in the younger age groups, most of the decline in the prevalence of overall illiteracy has been accounted for by the dramatic decline registered for females. The trend is a harbinger of still better things to come, at least demographically speaking, as female literacy is considered to be an important catalyst for fertility decline in developing countries. It is highly likely that the marked decline observed for female illiteracy would have first pushed up the age at marriage (noted earlier) and later pulled down fertility levels as well. Another outstanding feature in Table 6 is the clear-cut inverse relationship between age and literacy which is consistent with the situation in several other developing countries.

The data presented in Table 7 further corroborate the improvement in literacy and great strides made in providing schools for all sections of the population.

Labour Force Structure

Both the 1973 and 1983 censuses collected extensive data on the labour

TABLE 7
Percentage Distribution of the Population Ten Years Old and Older,
by Sex and Educational Level: Burma, 1973 and 1983

Educational Level Attained	Total		Males		Females	
	1973	1983	1973	1983	1973	1983
None	64.3	44.0	60.2	41.3	68.3	48.0
Standards 1-4	23.0	37.2	22.7	36.7	23.4	38.9
Standard 5 and above	12.7	19.8	17.1	22.0	8.3	13.1

force, and also resulted in elaborate tabulations of the data collected where "The labour force was defined as the non-institutional, or household, population of ages 10 and over that was either working or seeking work during the reference period of fourteen days prior to the enumeration date" (Maung 1986).

Of the population ten years of age and above, 12,199,979 persons participated in the labour force. Total labour force participation rates in 1983 for both sexes, and for males and females separately were 35.8, 46.1, and 25.6 per cent respectively, showing a rise compared with the corresponding 1973 rates of 33.7, 45.8, and 22.0 per cent (Union of Burma 1986). Persons not in the labour force included all persons ten years of age and above except those who were employed or seeking work. Of the total number of persons not in the labour force, the 32.2 per cent who did housework constituted the largest proportion, followed by students with 27.8 per cent. Unemployed seasonal workers made up 11.7 per cent of those not in the labour force.

Table 8 presents the industrial structure of Burma's labour force and is a clear indication of its low level of industrialization both in 1973 and 1983. During that ten-year interval, the share of the labour force employed in primary production increased while that in manufacturing declined. The share of the labour force in construction, transport, and communications, however, remained more or less stable. In fact the only sector that registered a larger share of the labour force in 1983 than in 1973 was the services sector, which rose from 5.7 to 6.7 per cent. Therefore the industrial picture that emerges from Table 8 is one of

TABLE 8
 Percentage Distribution of the Employed Population Ten Years
 Old and Older, by Industry and Sex: Burma, 1973 and 1983

Industry	Total		Males		Females	
	1973	1983	1973	1983	1973	1983
Agriculture, hunting, forestry, and fishing	63.8	64.6	66.6	66.1	58.2	62.1
Mining	0.8	0.6	1.0	0.7	0.4	0.4
Manufacturing	10.4	9.2	7.5	7.3	16.3	12.5
Construction	1.6	1.3	2.3	1.9	0.4	0.3
Electricity, gas, and related industries	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.0
Wholesale and retail trade	11.2	11.4	7.4	7.8	18.5	17.5
Transport and communication	3.0	2.9	4.4	4.4	0.2	0.2
Services	5.7	6.7	7.0	8.2	3.1	4.2
Unclassified	3.4	3.1	3.7	3.3	2.9	2.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

decline and distress in an economy in which the inefficient and unproductive services sector started to expand at the expense of other sectors. Most of the work-force was in agriculture, forestry, and fishing, in 1983 (64.6 per cent) as it was in 1973 (63.8 per cent). One notable point that can be seen from the table is the large proportion of females engaged in trade (18.5 and 17.5 per cent for 1973 and 1983 respectively). The decline of women's participation in the trade and manufacturing sectors had been absorbed into the agricultural sector. All these changes, however marginal they may seem to be, signal at best an economic stagnation, and at worst a difficult-to-reverse economic downturn.

The picture that is portrayed by Table 9, which shows the occupational structure of the labour force, is equally discouraging. The comparison of the situation between 1973 and 1983 makes one wonder whether in Burma time has stood still. The only sector that registered a change during the ten-year interval is the sales sector, which increased its share from 8.5 to 9.4 per cent, which again is an indicator of nar-

TABLE 9
Percentage Distribution of the Employed Population Ten Years
Old and Older, by Occupation and Sex: Burma, 1973 and 1983

Occupation	Total		Males		Females	
	1973	1983	1973	1983	1973	1983
Professional and technical	2.2	2.5	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.8
Administrative and managerial	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.1
Clerical	2.3	2.2	2.9	2.7	1.1	1.5
Sales	8.5	9.4	5.0	6.1	15.4	15.2
Services	1.7	1.7	2.2	2.1	0.7	0.9
Agriculture, hunting, forestry, and fishing	63.3	64.2	65.9	65.5	58.0	62.0
Production and related work	20.7	17.9	19.8	18.3	22.5	17.2
Unclassified	0.9	1.7	1.4	2.6	0.6	0.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

rowing differentiation. It should be pointed out that the enlarging occupational differentiation is a prerequisite for economic development. Furthermore, in order for economic development to proceed, according to at least one theory, it is necessary that capital and labour be transferred from agriculture to manufacturing and then on to services. Between 1973 and 1983, an entirely uncommon and unique process was under way in Burma, where there was an occupational shift away from an already small manufacturing sector into agriculture. More elaborate and detailed analysis is required to understand this perplexing development in Burma.

Summary and Conclusions

A comparison of the results of the 1973 and 1983 censuses of Burma has been presented in the foregoing pages. The intercensal population growth rate showed a marginal increase over the earlier figure of 2.0

per cent. The urban-rural distribution of the population in 1983 remained unaltered from the 1973 situation, with the urban population constituting about 24 per cent of the population. Changes in population density, age and sex structure, ethnic composition, marriage patterns, literacy and education, and industrial and occupational structure of the labour force were also examined.

The analysis of changes in population density suggests a pattern of internal population movements, with the fertile plains and seaboard states showing an above-average increase in population in the intercensal period. Similarly, low-density areas such as Kayah state and Tenassarim division also increased in population at a rate well above the national average which could not be accounted for by natural increase alone.

The age structure of the population has undergone what can be called "transitional change", possibly ushering Burma into a period of sustained fertility decline. The proportion of the population under the age of fifteen dropped from 41.5 per cent in 1973 to 38.6 per cent in 1983. As the fall could not have resulted from an increase in infant and child mortality, it therefore reflects a genuine decline in fertility level. One possible factor behind this fall is the increase in female age at marriage — the singulate mean age at marriage for females which was already high at 21.2 years increased by more than one year during the ten-year hiatus. As a result, the proportion married fell in the 15–40 age groups for both males and females. A further study on the fertility, mortality, and nuptiality trends is required to confirm the conclusions.

Significant strides were made in improving the literacy level of the population as the proportion of the illiterate population was whittled down to 20.3 per cent from 27.8 per cent. As literacy among males was already high in 1973, the improvements were due largely to the dramatic increase in literacy among the female population. Such an impressive change in social development stands in sharp contrast to the stagnant, if not deteriorating, economic situation: the occupational and industrial structure of the labour force remained almost stationary, while the fall in the share of manufacturing from 10.4 to 9.2 per cent was absorbed by the agricultural sector. This trend is a tell-tale sign of a declining economy. If the Burmese economy is indeed declining, then is it possible that changes in demographic behaviour in terms of postponement of marriage and control of fertility, in the absence of a deliberate

government policy, are responses to the shrinking and difficult economy? On the other hand, some people believe that demographic change is the result of an interacting influence of increased literacy levels in the context of a shrivelling economy. It is said that improved literacy levels enhance the mobility aspirations of the population and changes in demographic behaviour are the first-level adjustment strategy of the population to deal with the failure of the economy to satisfy escalating aspirations. These conjectures can only be satisfactorily answered by a detailed micro-level study of family formation patterns and mobility and consumption aspirations of the population.

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