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The Most Populous: India's Demographic Journey

K S JAMES

WE ARE AMID TWO major demographic events; the world population reaching a whopping 8 billion and India surpassing China as the world's most populous country. With China and India accounting for nearly 36% of the world's population, the demographic upheavals in these countries have considerable repercussions on the world's demographic position. Undeniably, the demography in these two countries are now entering a new era. China will be experiencing a negative growth of population henceforth and India's growth rate will be at less than one percent per annum with a faster dip hereafter. This is despite the fact that as per the UN projection more than half of the projected increase in population up to 2050 will be concentrated in eight countries which includes India.

There were relentless concerns about the rapidly increasing population in India in the second half of the twentieth century.¹ The population recorded a considerable jump from a mere 358 million in 1951 to around 1.4 billion by 2021, nearly quadrupling the population in a 70-year period. The growth of population was consistently around two per cent per annum for several decades during this period. This improvident rate of population growth raised serious concerns about its impact on economic resources and even questioned the sustainability of the planet. Prime Minister Nehru in his foreword to a book by then famous Indian demographer S. Chandrasekhar remarked: "I think we shall win in both fronts (the economic and demographic) but we shall have to work hard."² This prediction, though delayed, has come true if one examines the data of the first two decades of the 21st century.

India's demography has changed rapidly in recent times. The fertility rate reached replacement level by 2020. Many Indian states are much below replacement level fertility at 2.1 children per woman. The huge demographic heterogeneity observed across states is currently narrowing. In addition to fertility, marked improvements are also observed in bringing down infant and maternal mortality in India. By 2020, the maternal mortality ratio reached around 100 and the infant mortality rate touched 28 per 1000 live births.

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Both are declining at a rate of around 3.5 % per annum in the last twenty years. Thus, the demographic situation can be viewed overall with much more optimism as compared to the serious concerns raised about the sustainability of rapid population growth in the second half of the last century.

The demographic advantage of India in the 21st century rests on the emerging age structure.³ The median age of population in India currently is 28 years – ten years below the level in China. But, by 2050 India's median age will increase by ten years while that of China will be over fifty years. Similarly, the working age population in the age group 15-64 is nearly the same in India and China, currently at around 69 per cent. This proportion will remain nearly constant for India even by 2050. But for China the working age population will come down by nearly ten percentage points to reach 58% by 2050. India will have a demographic opportunity – the so-called demographic dividend – to take advantage of economic benefits in the coming decades.

However, India's ensuing demographic journey is not without challenges. Educational and skill deficit among youths will impact the country more than in other nations due to the very nature of fertility transition. Rapidly increasing numbers of senior citizens without adequate financial security, rapid urbanisation and crowded cities, and skewed sex ratio will be the challenges India must confront even during an optimistic demographic era. While these are undeniably huge challenges, the overall demographic scene currently provides much better hope, optimism, and potential than the period of rapid population growth India encountered in the second half of the last century.

References

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