

Our demographic dividend – How long will it last?

“India has the advantage of demographic dividend. Our youth, the aspirational people that we have in India is the biggest opportunity and each one of them is connected to the world with access to the Internet.” Union Minister Piyush Goyal at the business community of Southern California^[1]

Dear Editor,

Mishra and Paul analyze the Population Control Bill of Uttar Pradesh (two-child norm) and wonder if it is an answer to the population explosion or the birth of a new social problem. In the Commentary piece studded with data and figures, the authors underscore a brief history of two-child policy around the world, its salient features and then discuss the pros and cons of its implementation.^[2] The authors dissect changing dynamics of the population in our times and the way our priorities and policies are altered to remain in sync with the evolving scenario.

In the beginning, the authors put data about the population of our country and its growth rate. Here I want to emphasize that neither we conducted our decadal exercise of Census in 2021, nor have it in sight.^[3] Therefore, all such data derived from the 2011 Census is conjecture and surmise. We need to have the raw data and should realize that one collected from survey and sampling have their limitations. The fact of the matter is that in a country as diverse as India, during times when rapid changes are occurring in all walks of life, one can't overemphasize how important job our field enumerators do.

Under the heading of 'Pros', the Commentary makers cite data related to various facts of China. Here I want to underline that data originating in China has its own limitations. Its authoritarian regimen is blamed for hiding certain facts and even altering reality.^[4] Under these circumstances how much importance should we provide to its data, I wonder. Still, we have little information about China's great famine of 1959 to 61 and there is a need for open discussion about it.^[5] There are speculations that the country is hiding something about the COVID-19 pandemic too.

Then under the heading of 'Cons', the authors write in point number 3 that population aging in the long run puts us at a disadvantage if we adopt the policy. But I want to highlight

that that is not a long-term risk anymore. During the last winter session of Parliament, the Minister of State, Health and Family Welfare, Government of India made a statement that India was on its way to achieving population stabilization.^[6] Then during a recently conducted monsoon session of the highest discussion -forum (Parliament), she reiterated, “India has achieved replacement level fertility”.^[7]

Our Union Government conducts its annual exercise of Economic Survey and publishes its findings. Its observations for the year 2018-19 made a picture of India's Demography in 2040 while they made Planning Public Good Provision for the 21st Century.^[8] Figure 4 shows the Total Fertility rate (TFR) in India and that shows a continuous decline. Table 1 at page number 5 depicts TFR for India and major States, 2001-2041. There one can visualize that at a national level we have already achieved replacement level fertility rate (2.1) and are on our way towards a decline.

On page number 11 of the report, there is Table 4 which tabulates population by age structure (percent share of population or India and major States, 2011 -2041. Here one can make an observation that according to this projection population up to teen years (0-19) is likely to shrink, thereafter in the 20-59 age group is likely to remain stable and in the 60 and above age group is likely to increase. In Table 5 with the heading 'Population by age structure (in millions) or India and major States, 2011-2041, one can again draw the same conclusion. Table 6 shows that the population for 5-14 years is likely to decrease everywhere, even in UP. What this prediction should make our plan is that we need to start increasing our infrastructure for the care of the elderly. We need to draw a roadmap for the ways in which to support them, how to best utilize their skills and how to manage such change of demography.

If that is the case at present, two- child policy and its likes are there only to divert our attention from real challenges to imagined ones; to appease a group; to give priority to politics over science and to construct imagined enemies instead of solving the problems staring at our face. When we don't know where we are going, we may miss the goal and land up at the wrong place. What we can deduce is that it's not in the long run when population aging will occur but is happening right now. Only we need to realize the reality.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us when science lags behind fiction and falsehood speeds ahead of truth; all of us are losers. Let us not repeat the mistake!

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