

HAVING THE LAST WORD ON 'POPULATION CONTROL'

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Indian Demography including Tribes

On July 11, World Population Day, a Union Minister expressed alarm, in a Tweet, over what he called the “population explosion” in the country, wanting all political parties to enact population control laws and annulling the voting rights of those having more than two children. Just a month earlier, a prominent businessman-yoga guru wanted the government to enact a law where “the third child should not be allowed to vote and enjoy facilities provided by the government”. This, according to him, would ensure that people would not give birth to more children.

Both these demands are wayward and represent a warped thinking which has been rebutted rather well in the Economic Survey 2018-19. The Survey notes that India is set to witness a “sharp slowdown in population growth in the next two decades”. The fact is that by the 2030s, some States will start transitioning to an ageing society as part of a well-studied process of “demographic transition” which sees nations slowly move toward a stable population as fertility rates fall with an improvement in social and economic development indices over time.

The demand for state controls on the number of children a couple can have is not a new one. It feeds on the perception that a large and growing population is at the root of a nation's problems as more and more people chase fewer and fewer resources. This image is so ingrained in the minds of people that it does not take much to whip up public sentiment which in turn can quickly degenerate into a deep class or religious conflict that pits the poor, the weak, the downtrodden and the minorities against the more privileged sections. From this point to naming, targeting and attacking is a dangerous and short slide. The implications of such an approach are deep and wide but not easily understood because the argument is couched in sterile numbers and a rule that, it would seem, applies to all sections equally. On the contrary, what is suggested is the ugliest kind of discrimination, worse than physical attacks or social prejudice because it breaks the poor and the weak bit by bit, and in a very insidious way.

The fig leaf of population control allows for the outrageous argument to be made that a family will be virtually ostracised and a citizen will be denied his or her basic rights if he or she is born as the third child. This has of course never been public policy in India.

In fact, a far-sighted and forward-looking National Population Policy (NPP) was introduced in 2000 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister. The essence of the policy was the government's commitment to “voluntary and informed choice and consent of citizens while availing of reproductive health care services” along with a “target free approach in administering family planning services”. This is a position reiterated by various governments, including the present government on the floor of both Houses of Parliament. For example, in March 2017, the then Minister of State (Health and Family Welfare), Anupriya Patel, in a written reply in the Lok Sabha noted that the “family Planning programme in India is target free and voluntary in nature and it is the prerogative of the clients to choose a family planning method best suited to them as per their reproductive right”.

The then Health Minister, J.P. Nadda, has said pretty much the same thing. About a year ago, he articulated the “lifecycle framework” which looks to the health and nutrition needs of mother and child not merely during pregnancy and child birth but “right from the time of conception till the child grows... carrying on till the adolescent stage and further”. This argument is not about denying services but about offering choices and a range of services to mother and child on the

clear understanding that the demographic dividend can work to support growth and drive opportunity for ordinary people only when the population is healthy.

Thus, family health, child survival and the number of children a woman has are closely tied to the levels of health and education of the parents, and in particular the woman; so the poorer the couple, the more the children they tend to have. This is a relation that has little to do with religion and everything to do with opportunities, choices and services that are available to the people. The poor tend to have more children because child survival is low, son preference remains high, children lend a helping hand in economic activity for poorer households and so support the economic as well as emotional needs of the family. This is well known, well understood and well established.

As the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) notes, women in the lowest wealth quintile have an average of 1.6 more children than women in the highest wealth quintile, translating to a total fertility rate of 3.2 children versus 1.5 children moving from the wealthiest to the poorest. Similarly, the number of children per woman declines with a woman's level of schooling. Women with no schooling have an average 3.1 children, compared with 1.7 children for women with 12 or more years of schooling. This reveals the depth of the connections between health, education and inequality, with those having little access to health and education being caught in a cycle of poverty, leading to more and more children, and the burden that state control on number of children could impose on the weakest. As the latest Economic Survey points out, States with high population growth are also the ones with the lowest per capita availability of hospital beds.

In fact, demographers are careful not to use the word "population control" or "excess population". The NPP 2000 uses the word "control" just thrice: in references to the National AIDS Control Organisation; to prevent and control communicable diseases, and control of childhood diarrhoea. This is the spirit in which India has looked at population so that it truly becomes a thriving resource; the life blood of a growing economy. Turning this into a problem that needs to be controlled is exactly the kind of phraseology, mindset and possibly action that will spell doom for the nation. It will undo all the good work that has been done and set the stage for a weaker and poorer health delivery system — exactly the opposite of what a scheme such as Ayushman Bharat seeks to achieve. Today, as many as 23 States and Union Territories, including all the States in the south region, already have fertility below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. So, support rather than control works.

The damage done when mishandling issues of population growth is long lasting. Let us not forget that the scars of the Emergency are still with us. Men used to be part of the family planning initiatives then but after the excesses of forced sterilisations, they continue to remain completely out of family planning programmes even today. The government now mostly works with woman and child health programmes. Mistakes of the Emergency-kind are not what a new government with a robust electoral mandate might like to repeat. So it is time to ask some of the prejudiced voices within the government and ruling party not to venture into terrain they may not fully understand.

Jagdish Rattanani, a journalist, is a faculty member at SPJIMR and co-author of the advocacy book, 'Population: Questions That Should Be More Frequently Asked' (Through The Billion Press)

Support quality journalism - [Subscribe to The Hindu Digital](#)

Please enter a valid email address.

Already a user? [Sign In](#)

To know more about Ad free news reading experience and subscription [Click Here](#)

or Please whitelist our website on your Adblocker

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com