

RISING POPULATION: DISASTROUS DIVIDEND

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In a dubious first, India is set to become the most populous nation in 2027, surpassing China, according to an estimation by the United Nation's Department of Economic and Social Affairs. India's population has been growing at a much faster rate than China's, with the poorer regions contributing the most to that growth. India's population has ballooned from 555.2 million in 1970 to 1,366.4 million now, a 146 per cent expansion. In comparison, China's population grew at about half that pace (73 per cent) from 827.6 million to 1,433.7 million, during the same period, largely on account of undemocratic decisions such as one-child policy. China saw its total fertility rate (average number of children per woman) decline from 6.30 in 1965-70 to 5.41 in 1970-75 after the two-child policy was introduced and fell further after the one-child policy was implemented. The country's fertility rate is currently at 1.69. In contrast, in India, the total fertility rate declined from 5.7 in 1965-70 to 4.85 in 1970-75, the initial years of the "*hum do, hamare do*" population control campaign. India's fertility rate is currently at about 2.24, with wide variations across States — it stands at 1.6 in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal and at 3.3 in Bihar and 3.1 in Uttar Pradesh. The fertility rate in the rural areas is much higher than in the urban areas. The silver lining here is that the median age of India's population will be 28.43 years in 2020 compared to 38.4 years in China.

India's growing population poses more challenges than opportunities. To begin with, the country will need to invest in augmenting its education and healthcare system, grow more food, provide more housing, sharply increase its drinking water supply and add capacity to basic infrastructure, such as roads, transport, electricity and sewage to provide a minimum quality of life to every citizen. To fund all that expansion, the nation needs to raise resources through taxation and other means. Even if less than five million people are entering the workforce every year (and not 12 million as claimed by some), employing them at a decent wage is a tall order. Given this scenario, it makes sense to implement a 'universal basic income' as a social safety valve, for which tax compliance needs to improve. Managing forest and water resources for future generations must assume centrestage in policy-making, calling for a paradigm shift in the notion of development.

The nation needs to find ways to contain growth of population without use of coercion. The poor, populous northern States must make concerted advances in women's literacy, health and participation in the workforce, emulating the achievements of the southern States. This calls for a socio-cultural challenge to patriarchal mores.

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