

MY VIEW | VOX HETERODOX

# The country's population can be an asset: it is not a liability

Our focus should be on providing education and healthcare to mobilize a large workforce that could drive economic growth



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PRADEEP GAUR/MINT

In his address to the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort on Independence Day last month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that rapid population growth—described as a “population explosion”—posed a formidable challenge to our future. In his view, responsible citizens with small families, who contribute to their own welfare and to the good of the nation, should be seen as role models. And parents should think about their capacity to provide for education and healthcare before extending their families. Small families, the exhortation made clear, are in national interest. He suggested that governments, at the Centre and in states, should bring supportive schemes.

This world-view is reminiscent of a belief system that dominated thinking 50 years ago. Family planning was the buzzword. Governments provided proactive support. The Emergency culminated in the compulsory sterilization programme, which led to widespread resistance and resentment among people. The problem was that such thinking did not recognize the economic or demographic factors underlying rapid population growth. Since then, the thinking has changed. So have India, and the world. Hence, it is important to understand the population issue in a new context.

The traditional belief that India will remain poor because its population is growing too rapidly is based on a simple logic of arithmetic. The larger the population, as a denominator, the smaller is the per capita availability of everything. In other words, the economy would have to run to standstill. This reasoning does not recognize that India's population might be growing too rapidly because it is poor. For the poor, children are a source of supplementing family income when parents are young, and of financial support in old age. High infant mortality rates only strengthen the motivation for more children.

Population growth rates are always high in the early stages of development because of demographic factors. As death rates drop because of improvements in public health systems that eliminate epidemic diseases, birth rates do not because poverty and illiteracy persist. But as income levels rise, poverty is reduced and literacy (particularly among women) spreads, birth rates also come down. The bulge in population growth rates slowly diminishes. As development leads to higher income levels, birth rates decline further to levels that merely replace the existing population. Such demographic transitions are integral to development processes. At later stages, in rich countries, birth rates might drop further so that their population declines.

The demographic transition in India has been much slower than elsewhere in Asia, essentially because poverty and illiteracy persist, while the

public provision of education and healthcare has been grossly inadequate. Even so, the average annual rate of population growth, which was 2.1% in 1951-1971 and 2.2% in 1971-1991, dropped to 1.8% in 1991-2011 and 1.3% in 2011-2016. Birth rates (per 1,000 population) dropped from 37 in 1971 and 29 in 1991 to 22 in 2011 and 19 in 2016, while fertility rates (births per woman) dropped from 5.2 and 3.6 to 2.4 and 2.3, respectively.

Projections in the Economic Survey 2019 suggest that average annual population growth in India will slow progressively to 1.1% during 2011-2021, 0.7% in 2021-2031 and 0.5% in 2031-2041. The fertility rate will drop to 1.8 in 2021 and 1.7 in 2031. It is worth noting that the natural replacement level fertility rate is 2.1, which means that an Indian woman would have to give birth on an average to 2.1 children for the population size to remain constant. In India, given the sex ratio, with more men than women compared to the natural level, the replacement rate would need to be higher.

This future scenario is reason for hope rather than despair. India's population will continue to grow (at progressively slower rates), because of the relatively high proportion of young people in our population. Of course, our population will begin to age significantly in about a decade. The silver lining is that the number of working-age people (20-59 years) and their share in total population

will continue to increase for more than two decades and peak at 59% in 2041.

For low-income countries, where a significant proportion of the population is underemployed, a large population that is expected to increase further is a potential asset rather than a liability, if people, their most abundant yet underutilized resource, can be mobilized for development. The potential is even greater in India. The high proportion of young people in the population will mean an increase in our workforce, more so, if a higher proportion of women enter the workforce. It will also mean an increase in savings rates for some time, as young people save while the old do not. This source of economic growth will not be available to many Asian countries for long, as their workforce contracts, so that they would have to rely on productivity increases to sustain growth. However, we can harness this demographic dividend only through education that creates capabilities among our people.

We should not worry that a population explosion will lead to an uneducated and unhealthy society because the causation runs in the opposite direction. Instead, we should focus on providing education and healthcare. This would make our large population a source of rapid economic growth, which could bring about a profound change in the well-being of people. Our economy could be transformed in the next 25 years.

### QUICK READ

The traditional view that India will remain poor because of its large population does not recognize that our rapid population growth may be a result of poverty, and not its cause.

In low-income countries, where a significant proportion of the population is usually underemployed, a large population can be an asset rather than a liability.

GLOBAL VOICES



## Move against vapes might do teens a good turn

The number of e-cigarette users, many of them teenagers, who have been stricken by a mysterious and acute lung illness has more than doubled around the country in just the last week. More than 450 people have been hospitalized with serious respiratory distress and six people have died, including a 55-year-old man in Los Angeles County. Public health officials still don't know what it is causing the ailment. That's the bad news. The silver lining is that this mystery illness has lit a fire under the Food and Drug Administration, which had been moving at a glacial pace in deciding whether and how to regulate electronic cigarettes, even as their popularity exploded among teenagers. Last year, the annual National Youth Tobacco Survey reported a 78% increase in vaping among high school students. The growth this year is expected to be equally high.

Investigators are looking at whether the use of vitamin E oil in the after-market modification of e-cigarette pods by people vaping THC might be the culprit. Inhaling oil is extremely damaging to the lungs. To be safe, public health officials are cautioning people against vaping anything until they know for sure... But even if flavoured nicotine isn't the villain of this epidemic, it's still doing considerable harm by attracting kids to these products, and then offering something other than the harsh and unappetizing taste of straight tobacco to keep them coming back.

Los Angeles Times

## Japan's budget could worsen its debt troubles

Many of the ministry requests for their piece of the fiscal 2020 budget submitted at the end of August are all-time highs. The Finance Ministry on Thursday announced that general account budget requests from government agencies and ministries came to a record-setting ¥104.99 trillion. Behind this figure are mounting social security costs and increased spending on defense. It was also the sixth straight year that the budget requests have topped ¥100 trillion... as revenue in fiscal 2018 came in at a record ¥60.4 trillion, slightly higher than the ¥60.1 trillion marked in fiscal 1990 when Japan was enjoying the “bubble economy.” Though this is a good sign, the reality is that the amount accounted for only 60 percent of government expenditures, and the rest had to be covered by government debt.

Data from the International Monetary Fund show that Japan's rate of government debt stands at 237.5 percent of GDP in 2019, which ranks as the worst among the Group of Seven industrialized nations... Given that Japan's debt was only 64.3 percent of GDP back in 1990, the pace of debt increase has been outrageously fast... And the situation will even be worse in the near future. Japan's social welfare costs are expected to surge, especially starting in 2022 when many postwar baby-boomers will turn 75 years old or older... The budget is an investment for the future, but at the same time it can leave a heavy burden on future generations.

The Japan Times

## The transition at Alibaba shows the way

The joint celebration of the 20th anniversary of mainland e-commerce giant Alibaba and the 55th birthday of co-founder Jack Ma may have been remarkable in its own right. But what really set it apart is that Ma is stepping aside now to head in another direction. The media has long foreshadowed the planned early retirement of China's richest man. That did not stop speculation about the reason. It is a case of a high-profile Chinese tycoon who has worked out a succession plan for an innovative multinational with 100,000 employees and stepped down while still in his prime.

On a broader scale Ma's description of his retirement as the “beginning of a succession system” is important to China... In China, a new generation of private entrepreneurs only started to appear in the 1980s and 1990s and the first generation often remains entrenched... With the economy facing headwinds, the government has become supportive of the private sector... Ma has in a sense rendered greater service to the economy in engineering timely transition, rather than carrying on. Far from suggesting retirees have nothing further to contribute, he says he feels young and ready for other challenges in education and the environment.

The South China Morning Post

## South Korea and Asean have shared concerns

The third summit between South Korea and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) is still two months away in November, but it is already being promoted in the media. The summit promises to be a major event, with economic relations on top of the agenda. But even as diplomats work on growing that relationship, there is a shadow cast by North Korea that threatens peace and prosperity in the peninsula and in this region. We raise this point because of economic and security concerns. On the economic front, South Korea is the fifth-largest trading partner of the Asean, a regional bloc that includes the Philippines...

For the Philippines, South Korea is also the fifth-biggest trading partner, with \$13.7 billion worth of goods flowing both ways. Asean, as well as the Philippines, clearly [have] an economic stake in South Korea. That is why the aggressive posturing of North Korea is noticed here and elsewhere in Southeast Asia... Recently, North Korea has resumed testing short-range missiles, and there have been reports suggesting that it now also has a submarine. But what people really worry about is its nuclear arsenal. Those weapons of mass destruction are at the core of peace talks between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump... Looking ahead, we hope that the upcoming summit between South Korea and Asean will be successful in further boosting trade and economic linkages.

The Manila Times

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

# The frequency illusion that tags India as rape central

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At a Bangkok gathering, a young, blonde traveller was telling me how much she wanted to visit India one day. What's holding you back? I asked her. She hesitated and then replied: “I don't know—I guess I'm a little scared by all the rape stories. Will I be safe?”

I couldn't find words to reassure her. The blunt truth is that, like the rest of the world, I now think of India as a place where horrific rape happens. The part of me that doesn't want to minimize rape also wants to know how bad it is. Does India have a “rape crisis” as a BBC report headlined it last year?

One way to dig deeper is by interrogating the numbers we use to talk about rape.

For those who believe everything they read, here's a number to consider: 38,947. It's the number of rape cases reported in 2016, sourced by the ministry of women and child development. It probably got the numbers from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), which counts first informa-

tion reports (FIRs) filed in police stations. You could look prematurely relieved here: India's 2016 population was estimated to be 1.32 billion, of which about 340 million were women between 15 and 49. You might think: 38,947 rapes means about 1 rape per 8,729 women. Not as bad I'd feared.

But there's something subversive about sheltering behind numbers; they mask the sheer bestiality of a woman being raped repeatedly, having herself assaulted by an iron rod and disembowelled aboard a bus on a winter night by five savage young men. That happened to Nirbhaya in 2012. There can be no “acceptable” number of rapes—but if the world says we have a “rape crisis”, then the truth is hidden in the numbers.

More than 40% of South Africa's women will be raped within their lifetime; only one in nine will report it to the police. In Sweden, one in four women is raped. In the US, 65,668 college-age women are raped annually on average. In the UK and Wales, one in five women are raped every year.

By the numbers, then, South Africa, Sweden, the US, UK and Wales top India on reported rapes. India comes fifth.

Should we pop out the champagne? Actually, no, because most rapes go unreported.

Worldwide, it's about nine in 10.

Next question: How many Indian rapes go unreported?

Not a doozy. How do you count the number of times something didn't happen? Fortunately, the unit-level data of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) of 2015-16 lets us compare data on actual experiences of crime victims with the NCRB's record of FIRs. The NFHS estimates that 99.1% of sexual violence cases, including rape, are not reported. If 38,947 is 0.9% of all rapes in India that year, the number of rapes would stand near 4,327,444.

How many of them might have been false reports? Let's do some simple math and assume that only one in 10 women will report being raped, and that men are 10 times more likely to rape a woman than a woman is likely to make a false accusation. That is, for every woman making a false accusation, one woman will be

reporting a real rape: Only half the cases coming to a police station would be real rapes. But that yields a still frightening total of 2,163,722—more than any other country in the world.

The hidden numbers show that India has a giant crisis of unreported rapes, but curiously, the numbers are not why people think of India as rape central. In reality, more Indian women have been reporting rapes since 2012—and their stories have been receiving more airtime. Rape seems to be continuously in the news, even when it is not.

### QUICK READ

Not only does the international media seem oversold on rape reports from India, a lot of people suffer from what cognitive sciences call the frequency illusion.

But the truth is that the entire world has a rape crisis, not just India, and some of the most monstrous assaults that take place in other countries go largely unnoticed.

crisis, not just India. Is it common knowledge that the US has the world's third highest number of reported rapes?

Here is a good example of how the media selectively highlights stories of rape in India, thus possibly minimizing the crisis elsewhere.

At about midnight, in August 2012, four well-built footballers left a party with a young woman, slightly tipsy from a few drinks, and headed to a friend's house. During the car ride, the girl's shirt was removed, while one of the men molested her. The others filmed and photographed the episode.

In the house, the girl was orally raped and sexually assaulted repeatedly by an unknown number of young men. Unconscious now, she was stripped naked, penetrated digitally and urinated upon. A photograph of her, unresponsive, being carried by two boys holding her wrists and ankles from room to room made the rounds the next day.

This monstrous assault took place in Steubenville, Ohio, almost exactly four months before Nirbhaya's brutal rape made world headlines.

Of course you never heard of it. Most of the world didn't. They were busy reading about Nirbhaya's rape.