

RECENT PROJECTIONS HAVE REVIVED POPULATION CONTROL TALK. POLICY MUST STEER CLEAR OF THIS

# Don't get old before getting rich

**SRINIVAS GOLI & CHETAN CHOITHANI**

Respectively, associate professor, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, and assistant professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru



**A** PROJECTION FROM the 2022 Revision of United Nations' World Population Prospects that has grabbed everyone's attention and media headlines globally is that India will overtake China to become the most populous country in the world in 2023. This change in the demographic-rank order will occur four years earlier than the previous prediction of 2027. This has triggered a range of discussions on the future of India.

Although the debate on population growth in India is not new, the current discussions appear to be occurring outside the realm of evidence. In particular, there are alarmist views that see this 'population explosion' as resulting in a dystopian future for India. Population control, therefore, has been forwarded as a panacea by some quarters. The more moderate cynicism in these debates sees this as presenting a bigger obstacle (than so far estimated) for India's quest to eliminate poverty, provide decent work, and improve human development outcomes.

Before the UN report, some Indian states, such as Uttar Pradesh and Assam, had already stated an intent to introduce incentives and measures to control birth rates. We try to clarify some of these misconceptions by giving an evidence-based demographic perspective on the challenges and opportunities ahead for India.

India and China both adopted official family planning programmes some decades ago. Although India is the first major country to officially adopt a national family planning programme, it has been politically different from China. China's political environment allowed it to implement one of the sternest population control programmes in the form of the one-child policy. This resulted in China experiencing the fastest fertility decline among major countries. England and United States, for instance, took 225 years and 140 years, respectively, to complete their fertility transition and achieve

replacement level fertility (2 children per couple). In contrast, for China, this process took a mere 20 years. But the state's intrusion into the people's intimate lives also resulted in a drastic decline in birth rates and a growing share of the ageing in the country's population. Consequently, its government recently reversed the one-child policy and now allows couples to have up to three children.

India, too, completed its fertility transition relatively quick, in 45 years—one of the fastest in the world. And the rapid fertility decline in India has occurred largely without coercive population control measures (barring forced sterilisations during the Emergency, which perhaps set the fertility transition back by a few years). Thus, India did quite well in population control without coercion. India has now achieved replacement level fertility. But it continues to add significant numbers due to its young population. India's population is growing but at a slower speed.

National Family Health Survey-5 sug-

gests that most Indian states have reached replacement level fertility. Also, the number of children per woman is fast converging across the socio-economic spectrum, especially the reported number of desired births. Today, the average number of desired children in India is 1.6. And women from across different religions and castes want no more than 1.8 children. Education is the single most important driver of fertility, and only women with no schooling desire more than two children. But many, especially women, still do not have adequate access to family planning services, which results in more children than desired. But the important point is that India's fertility levels have declined significantly, and birth rate will fall further when couples are provided the reproductive health services they need.

Alarmists have historically labelled population growth as the sole obstacle to human wellbeing. These arguments have resurfaced with the recent UN report's

finding on India becoming the most populous country next year. But these arguments also overlook inequalities in income, consumption, education, and health between and within countries, which have a bearing on birth rates. In India, the recent Oxfam report shows that wealth of country's richest 1% is more than four times that of the poorest 70%.

This brings us to another question: Does India (or some of its states) need population control policies? Given that the average number of children wanted by Indian women is only 1.6, which may decline further with improving education among girls, there is no need for such a policy. What is needed is better schooling and health services, particularly reproductive health services, to enable couples to attain their desired fertility.

India is currently passing through the 'demographic window of opportunity' where the country's young age-structure provides a huge army of working-age people that, if properly managed, can accelerate economic growth. But tough population control measures can lead to forced greying of the population, leading to the country 'getting old before getting rich'.

Moreover, China's invasive one-child policy also resulted in a sex-ratio imbalance due to a son preference. India already has a highly skewed sex ratio. It is also important to note that once fertility declines, it is tough to reverse the trend.

Over 80 countries worldwide are suffering from shrinking population size due to very low fertility, and 55 of them have introduced pro-natalist measures to increase birth rates. These measures have proven largely ineffective. China serves as an example, now finding it difficult to encourage couples to have more children.

Forced population control may lead to a similar situation in India. What India needs is policies to promote human development through better health and education programmes, particularly women's education, which will also enable the country to reap the demographic dividend and achieve faster economic growth.

