NEXT IAS

DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

POPULATION CHANGE IN INDIA: MANAGING DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

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Context:

- Concerns over **India's falling fertility rate, ageing population and regional demographic imbalances** have resulted in a need for a cautious balanced approach to adapting to population change and calls for a return to traditional values.

India Population Change

- India is in the **advanced stage of demographic transition** with declining fertility and mortality rates.
- **India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR)** has fallen to 2.0, below the replacement level of 2.1, according to the **Sample Registration System (SRS) 2021** and the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21).**
- India continues to have a demographic dividend with almost **66% of the population in the working age group (15-59 years)**, while population growth is slowing down.
  - However, population decline, ageing, regional differences and changing religious composition have caused concern and created lively public debate.
- There is a need for a balanced, evidence-based approach to avoid unnecessary alarmism.

Will India become a country of depopulation?

- In India, it is not a story of population collapse, but of population stabilisation.
- India's population peaked at **about 1.7 billion in the second half of the century**, then gradually declined back to near today's level by 2100 **(United Nations World Population Prospects, 2022)**
- The projections of the **Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME)** suggest a sharper decline, but these are based on the assumption that higher educational attainment will continue to reduce fertility at current rates.
- But **NFHS-5 data** shows that fertility among highly educated women has stabilised while fertility among less-educated women has declined significantly thereby narrowing the educational fertility gap.
- It means that predictions of extreme depopulation may overestimate future declines.

Regional differences in demographics

- In the southern states like **Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh** the fall in fertility came much earlier than in the northern states.
- Therefore, over time the share of the population of the southern states has decreased. For instance, Tamil Nadu's share in the total population of India has declined from **7.5% (1971) to around 6% (2011 Census).**
- That has revived **fears over delimitation**, as future **demarcation of parliamentary seats** based on only population could reduce the political representation of southern states.
  - But reduced fertility has also allowed greater investments in health, education and human capital.
- As Tamil Nadu's share in population has declined, its share in India's GDP has increased, an indication of productivity-led growth, according to economic estimates.

Key Population Theories

Malthusian Theory of Population (Thomas Robert Malthus, 1798)

- **Core Idea:** The food production increases in a geometric progression while the population increases in an arithmetic progression.
  - Eventually the food supply can not keep up with the population growth and crises happen.
- **Population controls:**
  - **Preventive Checks:** Late marriage, moral restraint, celibacy.
  - **Positive Checks:** famine, disease, war, natural catastrophes.

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- **Criticism**:
  - Food production increased rapidly due to technology (Green Revolution, mechanisation, biotechnology).
  - Not foreseeing progress in health care, trade and productivity.
  - Our experience in India where food production has increased along with population through innovation is instructive.

Demographic Transition Theory (DTT)

- Developed by **Warren Thompson (1929)** and refined by **Frank Notestein**.
- **Stage I (High Stationary):** High birth rate High death rate Low population growth Societies before industrialisation.
- **Stage II (Early Expanding):** Health and sanitation improve, and death rates fall, but birth rates are still high, so population grows rapidly.
- **Stage III (Late Expanding):** Birth rates begin to fall; population still rising but more slowly.
  - For example India in the late twentieth century.
- **Stage IV (Low Stationary):** Birth and death rate both low. Population stable.
  - **For example:** the United States, the United Kingdom, and France
- **Stage V (Forecast):** Birth rate drops below death rate; population ageing and possible decline.
  - For example, South Korea, Japan, and Italy.
- **India's Position:** India is in the late Stage III to early Stage IV with TFR of 2.0 (NFHS-5) which is below replacement level of 2.1.

Theory of Optimum Population (Edwin Cannan)

- Core Idea: For a given level of resources and technology, there is an optimal population size that maximises the per capita income.
- **Implications:**
  - **Underpopulation:** Resources are not being fully used.
  - **Overpopulation:** Resources are over stressed. Living standards fall.
  - **Optimum Population:** It provides maximum productivity and economic welfare.
- **Limitations:**
  - It is difficult to determine optimum population.
  - It ignores environmental sustainability and the social aspects.
  - The ideal level is always changing with technology.

Theory of Demographic Dividends

- **Basic Idea:** Economy grows faster if the **working age population (15-64 years)** is larger than the dependent population.
- **Conditions for Success:** Quality education and skill development Employment generation Women's participation in the workforce Good governance and healthcare.
  - India is currently in a demographic dividend phase, which is expected to continue till about **2040-**

Ageing Population: Challenge or Opportunity?

- The share of those aged 60 and above will increase from **11 per cent (2021)** to nearly **28 per cent in 2051 (**Population Foundation of India).
- Challenges:
  - More spending on health care, pensions.
  - Greater demand for services for the elderly.
  - Rising old-age dependency ratio.

Why It May Not Become a Crisis?

- The increase in the elderly population is offset by much of the decrease in the child population.
- By 2051, India's working age population is expected to be around 64%.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation and digital technologies can greatly improve labour productivity.
- **Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP)** remains low with a vast scope for scaling up the workforce through the greater role of women.
  - So, aging should be considered as a manageable transition, not an economic catastrophe.

Related Efforts: Population Balance

- The Government of India has moved from population control to population stabilisation and reproductive rights.
- **National Population Policy (2000):** Focus on voluntary family planning, reproductive health care and population stabilisation.
- **Mission Parivar Vikas:** Enhances availability of modern contraceptives in high fertility districts.
- **National Health Mission (NHM):** Enhancing Maternal and Child Health Services
- **POSHAN Abhiyaan:** Better nutrition for mother and child
- **Skill India Mission and Digital India:** Boost productivity, equip the workforce for changing technology.
- **National Programme for Health Care of Elderly (NPHCE):** This is a programme to cater to the needs of the ageing population of India.
  - These initiatives recognise that sustainable demographic management is dependent on health care, education, gender equality and employment rather than coercive population policies.

Policy Priorities: Going Forward

- Adopt evidence-based population policies rather than rhetoric inspired by fear of either population explosion or implosion.
- Support childcare, flexible employment and safer workplaces to boost women's labour force participation.
- Invest in education and skills development to maximise dividend from demographic dividend.
- The quality of public education can be improved and the household education expenditure can be reduced, thereby alleviating the financial burden of raising children.
- Build infrastructure for universal healthcare, social security and elderly care to prepare for healthy ageing.
- Ensure delimitation reforms are balanced to protect both democratic representation and federal equity.
- Use of AI and tech innovation to boost productivity and offset slower labour force growth.
- Support reproductive rights by ensuring access to contraception, maternal health care, and voluntary and informed family planning.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] India's demographic transition presents both opportunities and challenges. Discuss the implications of declining fertility, ageing population, and regional demographic disparities for India's socio-economic development.

Source: IE

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