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The Big Picture – Population: Boon or Bane?

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According to estimates in a recently released United Nations report, India is expected to add 273 million people by the year 2050. The report stated that in the year 2019, India has an estimated population of 1.37 billion and China, 1.43 billion and by the year 2027, India's population is projected to surpass China's, making India the most populous nation in the world.

30 years down the line, the **global population is projected to increase by another 2 billion people by the year 2050**, (from 7.7 billion in 2019 to 9.7 billion). The report has highlighted higher fertility rates, growing older population and migration as few reasons behind projections of the population growth.

Health economists claim that the major implications of population growth will be for the young population that will face a situation of lack of resources in the future.

Implications of Population Growth

- **India is not growing uniformly.** The latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS) indicates that the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) varies significantly across various wealth quintiles:
 - The poorest wealth quintile has a TFR of 3.2 children per woman.
 - The second lowest wealth quintile has a TFR of 2.5 children per woman.
 - The richest wealth quintile has a TFR of 1.5 children per woman.
 - This shows that **population growth is more concentrated in economically weaker sections of society.**
- Population growth acts as a hurdle in addressing effectively the problem of poverty, hunger and malnutrition and also in providing the better quality of health and education.
- **SDGs 1, 2, 3 and 4** are going to be affected adversely because of India's existing pattern of growth in the population.
- **Presently, India is producing around 25 million job seekers in the country, however, the country is able to provide jobs only to 7 million.** This gap of 18 million is increasing the burden of unemployment and underemployment in the country, turning a demographic dividend into a demographic disaster.
- **India's population growth is not sustainable.** India is only about 35-40% of China's landmass.

In the 19th century, when Europe had a demographic explosion, it had occupied America, Australia etc. India does not have another landmass to occupy and the available landmass cannot take this population growth.

Demographic Dividend

- India has many young people who are unskilled, unemployable, burden on services and facilities with the minimal contribution.
- **In a country, young population is a demographic dividend if the youth is skilled, employable and contributing to the economy.**
- **As per NFHS-4, in 2015-16, India's TFR was 3.2.** It is likely that in the year 2019, India will achieve a replacement level fertility.
 - **Total fertility rate (TFR)** in simple terms refers to the total number of children born or likely to be born to a woman in her lifetime if she were subject to the prevailing rate of age-specific fertility in the population.
 - **TFR of about 2.1 children per woman is called Replacement-level fertility.** This value represents the average number of children a woman would need to have to reproduce herself by bearing a daughter who survives to childbearing age.
 - If replacement level fertility is sustained over a sufficiently long period, each generation will exactly replace itself without any need for the country to balance its population.

Challenges

- The challenge is not about how to contain the population but about **how the government exploits the population growth to its best economic advantages** i.e. how the government trains this large young population to make it productive, effective, competent and contributing to the economic growth.
- The challenge in the next 15 years for the Indian government is **to raise the economic status of India from being a low middle income country to at least a high middle income country.**

For this, the government needs to take necessary steps in creating the economic growth momentum by ensuring that investments are adequately made in key infrastructure areas, particularly social infrastructure like education, water and health so that a demographic dividend does not become a demographic liability or disaster.

- The requirement of creating so many jobs will not be a challenge if the economy starts growing at a faster rate.
- India's real challenge is **Quality of Life**. 21% of 60+ population is suffering from one or other chronic morbidities and India is also the second highest in terms of dementia and Alzheimers. Around 4 million cases are reported in 104 million elderly population. That is why **there is a need of strong social protection schemes**.
 - Recently the government has launched the Ayushman Bharat scheme.
 - The Prime Minister has also set a target of raising the economy's size to 5 trillion dollar by the year 2024. This is necessary to mitigate the negative impact of this kind of population growth where the share of older people is rising pretty rapidly.
 - **The growth for older people is 370% from 2019 to 2050**, whereas the total population is growing only by 56%. Therefore, the burden of older people in the economy needs to be contained.
 - The countries like **China and Japan who have been able to control their population through various measures** are able to manage people in the older age through enough social security provisions for such people, enabling old aged people for managing on their own.
- At the population level, different states are growing at different pace, thus each of them show different signs of population stress. It needs to be seen that why states in the South are better off in containing population than states in the North and east.

Is containing population a solution?

- Containing the population has its own set of problems. **China which had the One Child Policy has witnessed an increase in the population of old aged people.**
 - China went about containing its population growth in a coercive way. India tried to experiment the same during the emergency period.
 - The experiment faced negative reaction and has not been taken up by any government thereafter.
- **There has been an improvement in bringing down the child mortality, infant mortality ratio and in increasing the life expectancy of the people in the country.** On the one hand, if the total fertility ratio does not decrease and on the other hand, there remains improvement in healthcare and other benefits, India will have a population explosion leading to a demographic disaster.
- **Women in India want fewer children so desired fertility rates are much lower than the actual fertility rates.** There is a 13% unwanted fertility in India. Women not having access to family planning services for different reasons including lack of education etc are some of the factors behind this. If India is able to address this 13% unmet need by 2030, it will witness 30 million lesser population growth.

It has been seen that **women have more children than what their bodies can actually bear.**
- It is becoming **very expensive** for the poor and even the middle class to have more than one child or two children.
- India still has a **high maternal mortality rate and child mortality rate** (especially amongst the poorest).
- However, **aspirations of the younger generation have changed**, they want fewer children.

Way Forward

- India needs to invest more in the health sector. India invests only 1.3% of its GDP. The family planning budget is only 4% of the entire health budget and within that India spends only 1.5% on birth spacing methods.

Investments should be made particularly for the old people because by the year 2050, India's population of old people is going to grow almost 10 times more.
- Education is very important, not only for empowering women but for fertility to decline.
 - Education should be made free for women till college-level.
 - Better education will help women in better decision making for family planning.
 - Unless women are part of the workforce, no society can bring down fertility rates with progress. Therefore, policies must look at the whole issue of declining workforce participation by women.

- India needs to focus on some areas which are socially, culturally, economically depressed. **Identification of 140 high focussed districts is the right step by the government** in this direction. However, it needs to work in the whole of Bihar, U.P., Madhya Pradesh and Assam.
- India **needs to give huge stress on declining sex ratios** and the **discrimination towards girls** so that people don't have a high number of children in the hope of having a boy.
- **India can achieve a number of SDGs if it links them with family planning.** Family planning is a promotive and preventive method for bringing down maternal mortality and child mortality.
- It is important to see the issue of population growth not only from the national perspective but also from the state's point of view i.e. different states need to be encouraged to take necessary steps for containing the population.