

# India's Population and Its Economic Implications

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## POINTS TO DEVELOP

Billion- mark in numbers crossed in 2000.

Complexity of Indian demography.

Economic implications include impact of populations growth on economic development in the contexts of (i) agriculture (ii) environment and (iii) quality of life.

Can we turn the numbers to advantage?

Conclusion: Planning necessary to stabilize population level so as not to derail socio- economic development process.

Aastha was born on May 11, 2000. The date a landmark of India, for Aastha was not just another girl child but, officially, the billionth Indian. According to demographic projections, India's population may very soon overtake China's in numbers to gain the distinction – perhaps, a dubious one – of being the country with the largest population in the world. Critics view the prospect of such a large population with horror.

India's population is not just large but it is marked by a diversity not found elsewhere. At least six major religions of the world, besides other sects, have its followers in the country. Over the last several thousand years, Indian ethnic diversity has assumed such a complex intermingled state that it is almost impossible to differentiate various racial strains. The people speak a multiplicity of languages, and each one has a rich cultural history, literature and tradition of its own. This linguistic diversity poses the problem of how to provide education at the primary level and how to develop a national consensus on a link language for the entire country. It also makes it a challenging task to provide information on family planning to every section of the population.

Beyond all these differences, India also shows large economic diversity- in income shares, poverty levels, regional resources. India has three distinct faces – the reasonably well-off middle and upper middle class constituting about 20 per cent of the population; what could be called the lower middle class, people who have received some of the benefits of growth since independence and manage a level of living, if not comfortable, at least not desperate; the bottom 30 per cent or so of the population which lives in considerable poverty. The

economic disparities inevitably being compounded by disparities in education and literacy problems in accelerating social development arise in many regions.

There is little doubt that the levels of growth in India's population put all kind of pressure on the economy. The material quality of life of the vast masses suffer. There may be a steady growth in GDP, but at least a third of that is neutralized by population growth. The net increase in the general quality of life is modest and given the skewed distribution of the benefits of development, the hard-core Malthusian, though the spectre of Malthus does raise its head, malnutrition and even famine. The impact of overpopulation is also felt in areas other than food production. And the diversity of India's population makes the problem of overpopulation all the more complex, as it is difficult to formulate a policy on demography in the circumstances.

One obvious economic implication of population growth is the growing need of food grains. While India has quite disproved the arguments in the international forum of the 1970s that the country could not be saved from large-scale famines and resultant deaths, the problem of feeding the millions remains. Can India cope with the kind of figures projected by demographers? All available data suggest that the average Indian yields are among the lowest in the world.

There are regions – the Indo-Gangetic plains, for example which could be made to yield millions of tonnes more of food grains than they do at present. The amount, according to experts, would easily meet the needs of the projected population levels. If technology and inputs improve, the potential could well increase. So, even if there are occasional food shortages due to erratic monsoons and so on, India's ability for feeding its population does not seem unrealizable. The very fact that agricultural demand and growth will inevitably increase draws attention to the next problem – that of environmental degradation. Agricultural development on a large scale, with its attendant use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, water logging and other forms of soil degradation, is bound to create environmental problems. The pressure of population. Especially in the Himalayan region, has led to destruction of forests. Devastating floods take their toll in the rich Gangetic plains and increasingly so.

There are other environmental problems created by overpopulation. The unplanned urbanization with the concomitant lack of adequate civic infrastructure has already wreaked havoc in many of our cities and towns. Much of this growth has been in the form of slums and shanty towns harboring ecological refugees and those squeezed off the land. The exploding cities could cause social tension and unrest, in turn affecting economic stability. Pollution from automobile emissions and industrial wastes has steadily increased in the cities, such

environmental degradation, in its turn, adversely affects the people and causes health problems.

Poverty, it is said, is the greatest pollutant. It is marked by an apathy that erodes self-esteem and any willingness to live life to the fullest. It is also a major factor in the creation of paradoxical situations: hunger and malnutrition amidst plentiful availability of food; the lack of purchasing power leading to starvation deaths. Poverty is accompanied by lack of health care and nutrition. And when these very basic needs are not met, who cares about education, information and awareness?

The population of a country could easily be turned to advantage if it is highly skilled or trained so that it could be utilized in development. India can hardly boast of such a population. Given the monetary resources it has, it cannot quite meet the condition of making its entire populace literate, let alone highly skilled.

Lack of resources, again, prevents good basic health facilities being provided to every person in the country. If the population were not so large, the resources could be made to meet the situation. The same holds true for other human needs such as housing.

Natural resources – especially water – are being depleted at an alarming rate because of increasing population. Most cities of India are facing acute water shortage; even underground water is being dangerously depleted. The likely population growth in India over the next several years will make it difficult to improve the quality of life of the people.

In the long run, even a large population, if educated properly and given the right skills, will only prove an asset to India. But in the short run, uncontrolled growth of population will have serious repercussions on the country's economic development. It is a kind of vicious circle; with a large population, available resources are either too thinly spread to be of much use or they get concentrated and produce a skewed development; 'trickle down' of growth is a long and slow process, so improvement in the standard of living is strained to an almost irreparable level; all this leads to discontent and social tensions; economic growth slows down, so does development, and the people suffer.

It is necessary that India consciously plans to give a heavier emphasis on social and economic development even as a policy for stabilizing the population level is put in place. Only then can the population be turned into an economic asset.

