

A PATHWAY FOR THE MOST POPULOUS NATION

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(Social Issues)

The world population is expected to touch 8.5 billion by the end of this decade. While Asia is expected to be overpopulated, Europe, it is said, will be underpopulated. Due to falling fertility levels and rising longevity, the future population could have a higher number and share of older people. Thus, the two significant transformations are expected to be an imbalanced distribution of the population across regions and a skewed age structure.

The population today is more centred in urban areas. By 2030, it is estimated that two-third of the people will inhabit urban spaces, which will put a strain on infrastructure and amenities. This, in turn, could compromise the quality of life of urban citizens.

Women's health and rights

The theme of this world population day is 'women's sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights', marking the 30th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This gives us an opportunity to accelerate efforts to realise the ICPD's programme of action. While there has been reasonable progress in three decades — women have greater access to modern contraceptives today and maternal deaths have declined considerably since 2000 — there are still unequal results across regions. It is unacceptable that each day, 800 women die globally from preventable causes relating to pregnancy and child birth. A disproportionate share of these deaths occur in developing countries. Reduced maternal mortality levels need to be associated with reduced fertility levels because lower fertility reduces exposure to maternity. However, decline in fertility levels is also associated with delayed childbearing among women.

World population day has obvious significance for India. The most populated country in the world with a median age of 28 years could help balance the population-deficit regions. Lowering fertility levels and rising longevity also transforms the size and composition of households. There will soon be an uneven distribution of children and the elderly within households, which will have implications for inequality, an important concern for India. For instance, the Kerala Migration Survey 2023 reports that 42% of households have no elderly people whereas 37% of households have one elderly person, 20% have two, and 1% have three elderly people.

The accommodation of elderly people and children is uneven across rich and poor households. This gives rise to a lower dependency burden (the ratio of dependent young and old to the population of working age) in rich households compared with poorer ones. In addition, the care burden in households is also shaped by the presence of children and the elderly. Due to societal stereotypes, the burden of care falls on women. This leaves women with less time to participate in paid work.

Migration trends:

The distribution of the population in the future will continue to be shaped by migration. In recent decades, we have seen greater mobility of people. People often migrate due to poor development and infrastructure in their regions. A study estimates that 60 crore Indians migrate within the country annually, and 2 crore migrate abroad. Given the potential of India's future urbanisation, it is important to encourage the emergence of new cities in order to release pressure on existing mega cities. These need to have the same kinds of infrastructure and public amenities as the mega cities. We talk about smart cities, but are Indian cities 'smart'?

