

Pop Goes the Population Weasel



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In his 1798 book, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Thomas Robert Malthus writes, 'The superior power of population cannot be checked without producing misery or vice.' While traces of this proposition still lurk among policymakers in developing countries, historical evidence has raised serious doubts.

Technical change in the supply of food, foreign trade and human adaptation to economic circumstances — the trade-off between quantity and quality of children and a growing preference for small families — have blunted Malthus' deep pessimism. Yet, for seemingly political reasons disguised as economic, the governments of Uttar Pradesh and Assam have raised the spectre of excess population acting as a barrier to economic progress. While it is widely being conjectured that these proposals are targeted at Muslims, whose population is alleged to grow faster than that of Hindus, this presumption is carefully avoided to guard against a political backlash.

Recent surveys show that in most Indian states, the fertility rate has fallen well below the replacement level of 2.1, and the country is fast approaching the replacement level

itself. The total fertility rate of India stood at 2.2 as of 2017. While UP and Assam had fertility rates above the replacement level, both states registered a decline in subsequent years.

The fertility rate of Hindu women fell from 2.6 in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in 2005-06 to 2.1 in the more recent NFHS in 2015-16. The fertility rate of Muslim women fell from 3.4 to 2.6 in 2015-16. Although the fertility rate among Muslim women is higher than the replacement level, it has shown a decline. So, on these indicators, the case for an aggressive population policy with coercive measures is weak and ill-informed.

It is not so much the population size (actual and projected), but its quality that is closely associated with economic growth. Illustrative evidence, based on a detailed quantitative analysis of the 2015 India Human Development Survey (IHDS), the only all-India panel survey, is summarised



Shoulder the facts

below. Our discussion focuses on the associations between growth of per-capita expenditure between 2005 and 2012, and age-structure, schooling, household size, location and religion at the household level, and affluence of a state in 2005. The priority of time in the explanatory variables allows us to circumvent reverse associations between, say, growth of per-capita expenditure and schooling.

One important, but unsurprising, finding is that the higher the proportion of household members in the age group of 31-50 years — typically the most productive and economically rewarding phase in an individual's life — the greater is the growth of per-capita expenditure. Relative to this age group, the higher the proportions of younger and older members, the lower is the growth of expenditure.

As urbanisation is associated with more rapid growth of remunerative employment opportunities, households in urban areas are more likely to experience faster growth of expenditure, relative to those living in rural areas. Schooling is assigned a key role in growth. The higher the proportion of male and female matriculates relative to lower years of schooling, the faster the growth of expenditure.

Religious affiliation distinguishes Hindus, Muslims and Others. As Hindus are the largest category, associations of Muslims and Others are relative to them. Muslims are found to be significantly worse-off, while Others are better-off, pointing to the former's discrimination in housing, schooling and employment.

As there is an inverse association between fertility and income, the

higher fertility among Muslims is due largely to their economic deprivation. So, instead of subjecting them to fertility control through contraception or other coercive measures, emphasis must shift to preventing discrimination against them in various spheres.

The association between expenditure growth and household size is not straightforward. While the two are inversely associated, this relationship weakens among larger households. This is presumably because larger households with more diverse occupations are a shield against economic shocks and other contingencies like serious illnesses, and there are economies of scale in consumption (a given welfare is achievable through lower cost of living).

State affluence measured in terms of state domestic product per capita is positively associated with growth of household expenditure. This is plausible, as greater and more remunerative employment opportunities manifest in state affluence.

So, the aggressive pursuit of Malthusianism — or, more precisely, neo-Malthusianism resting on population control through contraception and other coercive measures such as restrictions on employment of families with more than two children — is both ill-informed and unethical.

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