

Demographic Disaster In China And Lessons For India

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Introduction

For decades, China has been the world's manufacturing hub, and its demographic dividend has played a significant role in elevating China's status to a global superpower. China has taken advantage of the extensive, low-cost resources of its labour forces and has developed industries that provide more job opportunities such as material manufacturing, sharing economy, the internet economy, logistics, and so on.¹ It was estimated that between 1980 and 2010, the effect of a supportive population age structure accounted for between 15-25 % of per capita GDP growth. But China's unparalleled economic juggernaut might be short-lived. China's National Bureau of Statistics recently published grim numbers, which stated that China's population was 1.411 billion people in December 2022 as opposed to 1.412 billion people in 2021. The country's population had declined by 8,50,000, making it a demographic disaster. A similar population decline took place 60 years back as a consequence of the four-year famine during the 'Great Leap Forward' campaign. The great leap forward was a five-year plan initiated in 1958 that carried out coercive agriculture collectivization and rural industrialization, resulting in 30-45 million deaths by starvation, forced labor, suicide, execution, and torture. This time, the deaths outnumbered the births with a massive increase in death rates to 7.37 deaths per 1000 people in 2022 from 7.18 in 2021, and the birth rate declined to 6.77 births per thousand people. A quarter of its population is estimated to be 60 years of age by 2030 along with a steady decline in the young workforce which currently stood at 62% of the total population coming down from 70% nearly a decade ago. The Chinese government has become extremely desperate to reverse the negative effects of its coercive population control measures. Surprisingly, many Indian leaders believe that India should pursue the same path as China in terms of population control. So the question arises: Is it feasible for India to adopt similar measures?

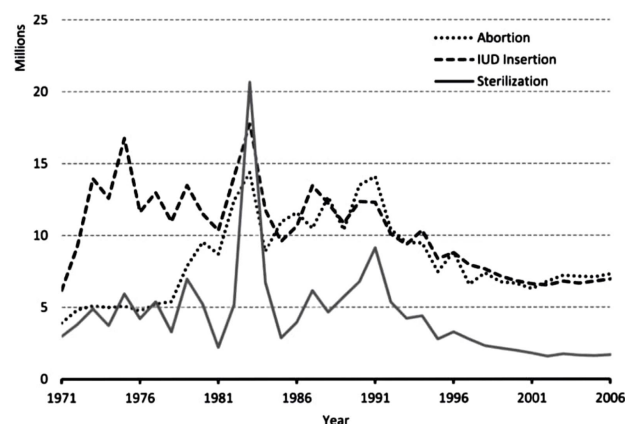
Reasons behind the population decline

There has been a widespread misconception that only after China's rigid one-child policy was implemented in 1980 across the country. The fertility rates began a sharp descent, eventually reaching sub-replacement levels of fertility. The truth is that in 1971, China's State Council set a goal of bringing down the annual rate of population growth from 2.5 per cent in 1970 to 1 per cent in cities and 1.5 per cent in rural areas by 1975 as part of the fourth Five-Year Plan.² This campaign in no way relied simply on persuasion or voluntary compliance. The notorious birth control practices such as forced abortions, massive sterilizations, etc. which became known to the world after the implementation of the one-child policy in the 1980s date back to the 1970s. Therefore,

¹ China: The Economic Miracles and Demographic Dividend in China

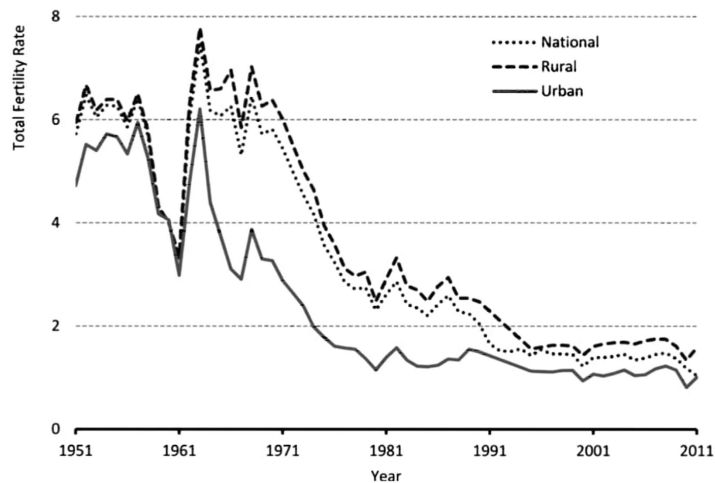
² Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng and Yong Cai, "Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy," *The China Journal*, No. 74 (July 2015)

the fertility rate was already decreased by 70 percent from 1970 onwards up to the present, even before the launch of the one-child policy, and not afterward. Song Jian, China's well-known rocket scientist produced a demographic projection stating that China's ideal population was 700 million and only a total fertility rate of closer to one rather than two or higher would enable China to reach this long-run desirable population. This was the rationale behind the initiation of the one-child policy in 1979. Moreover, the country's population was already approaching 1 billion (the 1982 census counted 1.008 billion Chinese) which made the Chinese government anxious that rapid population growth would strain the country's welfare systems and state-planned economy. As a consequence of which, the policy was enforced with stringent punitive measures such as unauthorised births often couldn't be registered for seeking citizenship status and other benefits.



National Health and Family Planning Commission spokesman Mao Qunan said the agency's work had reduced the number of births in China over the years by "400 million"³, claiming that it helped mitigate global overpopulation (these figures are utterly misleading). The laws also incentivised single-child homes by offering more extended maternity leave, financial benefits, and preferential employment opportunities to such families, forcing the Chinese to believe that one child per couple is the only ideal family. Initially, the one-child policy wasn't that effective to bring a further decline in the fertility rate. Most of the 1980s saw variations in fertility rates; only at the end of the decade did they start to decrease again towards the present below replacement levels.

³<https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3135510/chinas-one-child-policy-what-was-it-and-what-imp-act-did-it>



Barclay Bram of the Asia Society Policy Institute, in his January 2023 paper, drew attention to the changing attitudes towards marriage and family planning among the Chinese youth as another significant reason behind the population decline. Since China is one of the fastest growing and developing economies; the urban, educated, and wealthy people with a significant change in their lifestyle don't prefer large families. The current generation is delaying marriages, having fewer children, or choosing not to have any. Economic factors such as the cost of housing, expensive education, employment, and expenditure concerning childcare have also shaped attitudes towards family planning. Raising a child until adulthood in China is costlier than in countries such as the United States, France, Germany, and Japan.⁴ Also, there has been a subsequent decrease in women of childbearing age (20-34 years).

By 2021, China's total fertility rate (TFR), which means the average number of babies born to a woman during their reproductive years, had fallen to just 1.15, nearly a full child below the replacement rate of 2.1.

Gender Imbalance

The One Child policy, though agonising, has contributed to the economic prosperity of China as it could harness its demographic dividend. However, the people in China didn't voluntarily accept the policy, and the government employed extremely draconian measures such as massive sterilization and abortion campaigns. In 1983 alone, a year with about 21 million births in China, 14.4 million abortions, 20.7 million (predominantly female) sterilizations, and 17.8 million IUD insertions were performed⁵ A strong preference for males over females is highly prevalent in the traditional Chinese culture, similar to other South Asian countries. Therefore, many families indulged in sex-selective abortions to make sure that their one child is a boy. These practices, along with higher infant mortality rates for females, have resulted in China having the most skewed sex ratio at birth (SBR) rate all over the world. The latest data shows China, with around 722 million

⁴<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/four-reasons-why-china-s-population-is-shrinking-64675>

⁵ [The end of China's one-child policy \(brookings.edu\)](https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-end-of-china-s-one-child-policy/)

males, compared to 690 million females.⁶ These men have been facing trouble in finding women to marry, especially in rural areas. The serious gender imbalance in China (with as many as 30 million women “missing”) contributes to, among other things, increased rates of depression among single men, as well as increased rates of kidnapping, trafficking of women for marriage, and commercial sex work, which increases the risk of spreading sexually transmitted diseases.

As China records a plunge in birth rates- it is no longer expanding but aging rapidly. The implementation of coercive population control measures has exacerbated the elder care problem. In 2010, there were 116 million people aged 20 to 24. By 2020, the number fell by 20 percent to 94 million. The size of the young population aged 20-24 will only be 67 million by 2030, less than 50 percent of the figure in 2010. The dependency ratio (the ratio of the number of dependents to the total working-age population in a country or region) will continue to rise in China, putting significant burdens on the younger, working population as taxpayers and family members. This is called the 4-2-1 problem (an upside-down pyramid where single children must support two parents and four grandparents, plus any of their offspring). It is estimated that the tax burden for each working-age individual ought to rise more than 150 percent. There is also a risk of becoming childless in old age. Since there are fewer working adults contributing to the social security system, the government’s expenditure will have to increase in pensions and healthcare. China’s National Working Commission on Aging estimates spending on health care for the elderly will take up 26% of the GDP by 2050.⁷ Moreover, the Chinese Academy of Sciences believes that the country’s urban state pension fund will run out of money by the year 2035, putting the pension system into crisis.

China’s economy is already witnessing the impact of demographic disasters. China added as many as 90 million individuals to its workforce from 2005 to 2015. In the decade from 2015, it will, at present, trends add only 5 million. China’s economy has relied heavily on industries such as manufacturing that require large amounts of cheap labor. With a shrinking workforce and a more aging and dependent population, it is not going to be easy for China to remain the world’s factory. Already, the Chinese economy has been suffering from the recent rigorous ‘Zero Covid policy’ as a consequence of which it has recorded the slowest growth in decades expanding just 2.9 per cent in 2022.

What has China done to mitigate the demographic disaster?

In 2015, the Chinese government repealed the disastrous one-child policy and replaced it with a two-child policy to tackle the declining birth rates, skewed sex ratio, and increasing elderly population. However, the policy should’ve ended much earlier because its implementation for over three and a half decades conditioned the Chinese people to have one child only. Despite the change

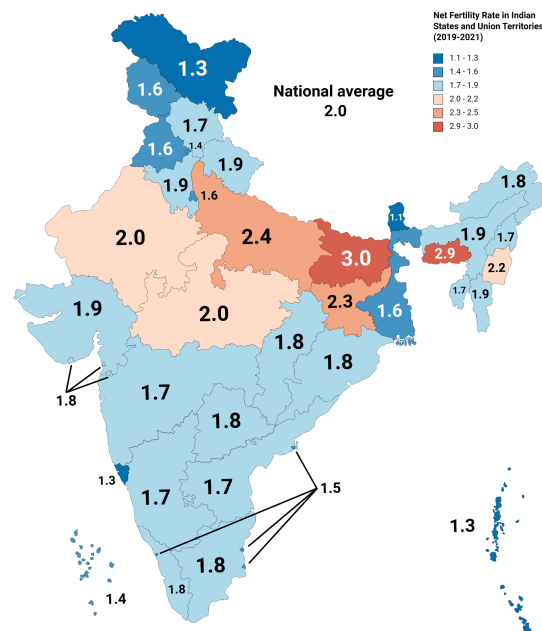
⁶[China’s first population drop in 6 decades sounds alarmed on demographic crisis - World - DAWN.COM](#)

⁷[Elderly to take up one-third of Chinese population by 2050 - Xinhua | English.news.cn](#)

of allowing families to have two children, the birth rate dropped for a fourth-straight year in 2020 and fell by 15% to 10 million, according to the analysis of a public security report. The policy was further relaxed in 2021 to allow three children per couple. China has also given financial incentives to couples to have more children, but the Chinese have refused to comply. The Chinese women blame the government for ‘using female bodies as a tool’, earlier forcing them to have abortions to regulate the population and in the present, they are denied abortions because the population is no longer growing. This leaves Chinese women with no bodily autonomy.

India is all set to overtake China in terms of population: A sign of worry?

The current population of India in 2023 is 1,428,627,663, a 0.81% increase from 2022.⁸ India may have already surpassed China as the world’s most populous country. Now, this may seem as if India’s population will explode in the coming future, but surprisingly that’s not the case. The National Family Health Survey-5, which is the latest survey that has been conducted for 2019-21, revealed that for the first time in India, the birth rate has fallen below the replacement ratio of 2.1. According to the survey, the country’s fertility rate has come down to just 2 from 2.2 in the NFHS-4 (2015-2016) and 2.7 in the NFHS-3 (2005-2006). Poonam Muttreja, the executive director of the Population Foundation of India (PFI) said that notwithstanding the low fertility rate, India’s overall population size will not shrink immediately as the country is going through a ‘population momentum’ due to its large young population (about 30.9% of the 10-24 years age group, according to the 2011 census).⁹



If we look at the TFR of all the states of India, we find that most of the states have TFR below the replacement level except for a few Northern states. There could be several reasons behind the low fertility rate, such as the use of various contraceptives, increasing education among females, and

⁸ <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IND/india/population>

⁹ <https://m.thewire.in/article/government/india-china-population-control>

perhaps people have finally started adopting family planning programs. The use of family-planning methods jumped to 66.7% in 2019-21 from 53.5% in 2015-16.¹⁰ Hence, India's population has been already stabilising itself, without any coercive policies that give us no reason to pursue draconian measures for 'population control' in the future. The Ministry of Child Welfare and Health should pay special attention to states with high TFR such as Bihar (3), Uttar Pradesh (2.4), Jharkhand (2.3) Manipur (2.2), and Meghalaya (2.9) so that they can have better access to health, education and awareness about family planning. This will elevate them to the level of southern states, which have successfully achieved a stable population by rendering efficient socio-economic services to their citizens.

Lifestyle change

There has been a significant shift in the attitude of millennials towards marriage and childbirth. The proportion of unmarried persons within the age bracket of 15-29 years has increased to 23 percent in 2019 from 17.2 percent in 2011, according to a government survey.¹¹ There may be several causes for this, including the increased focus on career development in modern society, becoming educationally qualified, and seeking financial independence, which is prevalent among women, too. There is also an alteration of socioeconomic needs and a rising cost of living, which discourages millennials from having a family. However, if this continues to happen, India will find itself in a similar situation as Japan. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida says, "If we go on like this, the country will disappear." The deaths have outnumbered the births, and there has been a significant decline in marriages in Japan, making it one of the oldest societies in the world with a median age of 48.4. The impact of these demographic changes is visible in the nation's healthcare, labor market, and financial systems.

Lessons for India

The UN World Population Prospects report of 2022 has created so much anxiety because India was expected to take over China's mantle as the world's most populous nation in 2023. There has been a huge demand to introduce measures of population control in India, just like China did. However, China has made an about-turn on the one-child policy due to the problem of rapid ageing and it is giving financial inducements to couples to encourage them to have more children should be a cautionary sign for us before implementing any population control measures. Hence, there are numerous lessons for India from the demographic disaster in China.

1. As Barry Commoner, an American Biologist, very nicely puts it "nature knows best (i.e., any major human intervention in a natural system is likely to be detrimental to that system)." Artificially controlling the birth rates with coercive measures and making nature and biological principles subservient to their agenda has made the matter worse for China.

¹⁰ [India's population growth slows as world reaches 8 billion | Reuters](#)

¹¹ [Are India's youth giving up on marriage? | Mint](#)

Coercion is never going to work in a country like India, and even if it did for some time, it is more likely to backfire in the form of more adverse sex ratios, high dependency ratios, etc. And not to forget that this has happened in the past. In **Rajasthan**, according to the Rajasthan Panchayati Raj Act of 1994, over two children make people ineligible to contest panchayat elections. In such a scenario, several disqualified representatives had resorted to induced abortions and many representatives, with the help of power politics, circumvented the norms.

The large-scale, **forceful sterilisation program** carried out during the 1976 Emergency was a failure at every level whose scars are still with us. Men used to be involved in family planning initiatives, but after 6.8 forced sterilisations were carried out, they continued to remain completely aloof from family planning programmes even today.

The Uttar Pradesh Population (control, stabilisation and welfare) Bill, 2021 is another example of how coercive population control measures could possibly lead to a demographic disaster.

2. The National Health Survey of 2015-16 stated that the number of children per woman declines as her level of education increases. On the other hand, women with no schooling have an average of 3.1 children, compared with 1.7 children for women with 12 or more years of schooling. Also, the poor tend to have more children because child survival is low, son preference remains high, and children lend a helping hand in economic activity for poorer households and so support the economy as well as the emotional needs of the family. This reveals the depth of the connections between health, education, and inequality. People having little access to health, education, and contraceptives caught in a cycle of poverty tend to have more children. Hence, our focus should not be on controlling the fertility rate but on providing good quality education, healthcare, and easy access to contraceptives so that men and women can make informed choices about their fertility, well-being and health. The need of the hour is support and not coercion.
3. As per the United Nations Population Fund, India's population growth appears to be stabilising since the total fertility rate has declined from 2.2 to 2.0 at the national level. Our population will stabilise by 2050, having few young people and a more elderly population. So, the future of India lies in the young population living in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Manipur, etc. Any attempt to regulate the population when it is already stabilising will only make matters worse instead of improving.
4. An article written by E. Wesley F. Peterson says, "In low-income countries, rapid population growth is likely to be detrimental in the short and medium term because it leads to large numbers of dependent children. In the longer run, there is likely to be a demographic dividend in these countries as these young people become productive

adults.”¹² This is completely applicable in the case of India. According to the Economic Survey of 2018-19, India’s demographic dividend will peak around 2041, when the share of working age, i.e., 20-59 years, the population is expected to hit 59%, which offers great potential for India’s economic growth. But this will only happen if our youth is skilled and educated. Therefore, the policy that we need currently is not for population control but for enabling us to harness our demographic dividend along with investing in health and literacy just like China did. China established robust education, infrastructure, and healthcare systems because it was able to reap its demographic dividend. And we must do this quickly as this window of opportunity perhaps will close after a few decades.

Conclusion

It is high time now that we get rid of the notion of blaming the growing population behind our failures in tackling problems such as unemployment, poverty, low literacy rate etc. India has large numbers of individuals who are in their prime working age. But, this large number will not automatically translate into demographic dividend. It is crucial for us to make strategic investments in our physical infrastructure, skill training, and education.

¹² E. Wesley F. Peterson, “The Role of Population in Economic Growth,” Sage Open, (October-December 2017)