

ASIA 2020 - Malthusian meltdown? The odds are even.

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NEW DELHI, Nov 27 (Reuters) - "May you be the mother of a hundred sons."

That benediction has been called down upon generations of Hindu brides in India, but the country's junior health minister Renuka Chowdhury has a new mantra: "One is fun."

Some demographers sniff at Chowdhury's slogan, splashed in advertisements beside a girl child's picture, as too simplistic.

"It's a bad pun and shows amazing ignorance of social reality. They're becoming flippant now," said Ashish Bose, president of the Population Monitoring Centre.

FRIGHTENING REALITY

The reality is scary. The World Bank estimates India's population will reach 1.2 billion by the year 2010, 1.39 billion in 2025 -- slightly below China's 1.47 billion -- and reach zero growth only towards the end of the 21st century, when there will be 1.88 billion Indians -- double today's figure.

Bose says the issue in the 21st century will not be food, or population. "It will be social environment -- religious, caste and language conflict."

Ved Marwah, now a professor at New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research after a 36-year career in the police, says Indian cities will be hit by more organised crime. "Kidnapping for ransom, drugs, the criminal-politician nexus -- all these will grow."

Experts believe about half of India's population will live in urban areas by the year 2020, in contrast with 30 percent today.

Infrastructure is already under severe stress in most Indian cities, with water supply, sanitation, transport systems and electricity frequently breaking down.

"If we cannot look after 250 million urban population in 1996, how are we going to manage 700 million in 2025 and perhaps one billion in 2050?" wrote population expert V.A. Pai Panandikar in a 1996 paper.

EARTH'S "CARRYING CAPACITY" UNDER STRESS

The same Indian scriptures that placed emphasis on many sons in an agrarian society also refer to "bhubhaar" -- the weight of population on Planet Earth.

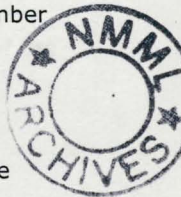
"Humanity has already overshot Earth's carrying capacity by a simple measure: no nation is supporting its present population on income -- that is, the sustainable flow of renewable resources," Paul Ehrlich wrote in "Betrayal of Science and Reason".

The Asian Development Bank (ADB), in a study titled "Emerging Asia", notes that 1.5 billion people lived in Asia in 1950. This grew to 2.5 billion in 1975, and to 3.5 billion in 1995.

"Thus in roughly two generations, the region's population has grown by two billion -- about the same number of people that currently live in all the industrial countries combined."

But the ADB is surprisingly optimistic about the future.

As Asia moved dramatically from high fertility and mortality rates to low fertility and mortality rates in the



post-World War Two period, the bank says, a "population bulge" of young people worked its way through age distribution.

First East Asia, and then Southeast Asia, experienced a bulge in working-age populations, contributing to spectacular economic growth, the ADB study says -- and South Asia too will receive this demographic "gift", though with some delay.

THE GIFT AND BURDEN OF THE DEMOGRAPHIC BULGE

But the gift becomes a burden as the bulge moves towards the old-age group, adding to the cost of looking after an ageing population -- a dilemma that will soon confront Japan.

Last June Japan's government announced that elderly citizens now outnumber children for the first time in the nation's history. By the year 2025, the number of Japanese aged over 65 is expected to be double the number of children under 15.

Ironically, experts say increasing urbanisation could be the best brake on runaway populations in Asia's poorer countries.

Bose said family planning experts touted the IUD -- intra-uterine device -- as a favoured birth control method. "But the real IUD that will act on middle-class families will be inflation, unemployment and deprivation," he said.

Bose is not pessimistic about the food situation, either. The Food and Agriculture Organisation said in a 1982 study that even with existing technology India could feed a population of 2.6 billion with high inputs.

PLAIN TALES FROM THE GANGES

Pai Panandikar estimates that by the year 3000 India will require between 450 and 500 million tonnes of foodgrains annually -- compared with 1996/97 output of 198 million tonnes.

"This is not physically or technologically impossible," he wrote in his 1996 paper. "India has vast underutilised food potential especially in the Gangetic plain of north India."

It is precisely the fertile soil of the Gangetic plain that nurtures India's biggest nightmare.

Bose says the four states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan account for 40 percent of India's population, 42 percent of the growth rate, and 48 percent of the illiterate population.

In contrast, the southern state of Kerala, which has concentrated on education and health services, has a better birth rate -- 13 per 1,000 -- than even China's 30 per 1,000.

PEOPLE POWER THE ANSWER

"I am sick and tired of the phrase 'political will'. There will be no political will. Population by definition is a long-term phenomenon, and politicians have at best a five-year perspective," Bose said. "Politicians should be kept out of the picture."

He was a member of an expert group headed by eminent agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan that drafted a National Population Policy in 1994. The report has been gathering dust after it was presented to parliament, but with one difference.

From April 1, 1996 India -- which built family planning into its very first five-year plan after independence from Britain in 1947 -- finally abolished birth-control targets for its army of health workers.

Bose said he believed that the "panchayats", India's village councils, were the best means of generating awareness.

"My plan is to concentrate on girls in the 12-18 age group. Leave it to the professionals in a partnership of the government, the private sector and the people. But start with the people."

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