

## The Needle's Eye

As India grows rapidly towards becoming the most populous nation by 2050, population growth should become poll issue

# Polls? Economy? Hygiene? No, It's the Population!



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I was chatting with my barber in Gurgaon when I realised that Narendra Modi and the hundreds of other politicians campaigning in the Haryana and Maharashtra assembly elections were not uttering the P word.

Salman, the young hair-cutter, said he was the second of nine children of a sepo in the Indian Army – the lowest rank. There was so little money, the young man said, that his family could not even afford the ten or twenty rupees it cost to send a child to a government school. Everyday existence was a struggle; the biggest challenge was to get the five daughters married off. An older brother managed to attend college; the girls did not even go to school. A younger brother was a layabout, so he was married off early so he would sober up: he already had one child. "At least we won't have as many kids as my parents did," the barber said. He was single at 27 and sent most of his salary home.

Ajamma Pujari is a 40 year old gardener in Mumbai, our financial capital where over half the population lives in slums. She was married off at 12. Her first three children died at birth. Four daughters survived; the oldest already has three children of her own and has sent one of them to live with Ajamma. Nine people live in the 15 by 15 square foot tenement in Mumbai's Prem Nagar, spitting distance from the huge bungalows of Bollywood's stars. Ajamma is illiterate and had to memorise the elevator button that takes her to her employer's home.

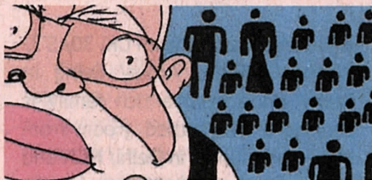
So have you heard the words 'population control' or 'family planning' in the April-May general election campaign, or this week in the run-up to the Haryana and Maharashtra elections?

Eight years ago, Modi tried something daring when he was chief minister of Gujarat. He launched an AIDS awareness and family planning programme called Kalyan Chhap. Pictures of Modi and Gujarat's then health minister Ashok Bhatt appeared on boxes of free condoms and contraceptive pills that were kept open in ration shops so people could help themselves. Both shopkeepers and customers were squeamish, though, and

not much is heard of the programme now. After Clean India, this is one more people's movement Modi would do well to launch. It does not help however that the health minister he picked for the nation, Harsh Vardhan, said soon after taking charge in June that Indians do not need condoms, they need better morals.

Neither Haryana nor Maharashtra are as overcrowded as some other Indian states, but now that he has been in the saddle for four and a half months the prime minister ought to have had a much better idea of trends among the 125 crore Indians whom he frequently reminds us he represents. He has made plain he hopes to be leading us a decade from now, so he should have spent more time reminding Indians that the demographic dividend will soon turn into a population time-bomb if we do not control our urge to procreate.

India's infant mortality rate of 53 per 1,000 live births (2012 data, World Bank) is higher than most of its South Asian



## MASS MOVEMENT NEEDED

**After Clean India campaign, population control is one more people's movement Modi would like to launch**

neighbours – Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal – and lower only than Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite these dismal healthcare numbers, our population canters along because India's total fertility rate or the number of children per mother has dropped a bit to 2.5, but needs to go below 2.1 before our population starts to shrink. At the moment, India seems set to be neck and neck with China in 2025 with over 1.4 billion people, and the world's most populous nation by 2050 with 1.6 billion people.

That should be giving our politicians pause. But you would not believe it if you looked at Maharashtra, where five prize-fighters are slugging it out in the elections. The Congress-Nationalist Congress Party divorce is certain to spell the end for 15 years of joint rule. Prithviraj Chavan, who told me soon after taking over in 2010 that only three of Mah-



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## POPULATION TIME BOMB

**The demographic dividend will soon turn into a population time-bomb if we do not control population growth**

arashtra's 35 districts were pulling along the others in India's richest state, may be personally clean but comes after a string of less than savoury chief ministers who have dimmed the state's lustre. Voters are likely to be equally repulsed by Ajit Pawar, the man who offered to urinate on a drought-dry dam when confronted by hungry villagers. That means the Bharatiya Janata Party may win the most seats but not a clear majority, which is why the Shiv Sena is keeping the door open for a possible patch-up after the elections. Modi must be missing Gopinath Munde, the savvy BJP power-broker who died in early June. The prime minister has been ill-served by Nitin Gadkari, who was forced to step down as BJP president last year over allegations of improprieties in his sugar-paper-agriculture empire and put his foot in his mouth this week when he urged voters and journalists to gorge themselves on campaign freebies.

The parade is not much prettier in Haryana, where nearly a decade of Bhupinder Singh Hooda's rule has not endeared the Congress party to voters. Like Maharashtra, there is a venal smell in the air, most noticeably in Gurgaon, the much-ballyhooed city of tomorrow that looks now like the armpit of India, ravaged by developers who do not care a whit about lack of infrastructure, groundwater, sewage or adequate electricity and continue to throw up tall buildings in one of the country's most earthquake-prone zones.

One young farmer who had sold his land to the most rapacious of the builders lamented at an investors' education meeting last week that he did not understand how markets worked. Why, he said, the land he sold was now worth 100 times what he got, and the shares he bought in the same developer were now worth about a tenth of what he had paid. The ex-farmer is sure to be queueing up to vote on October 15.

9/10/14

OCT 09 2014