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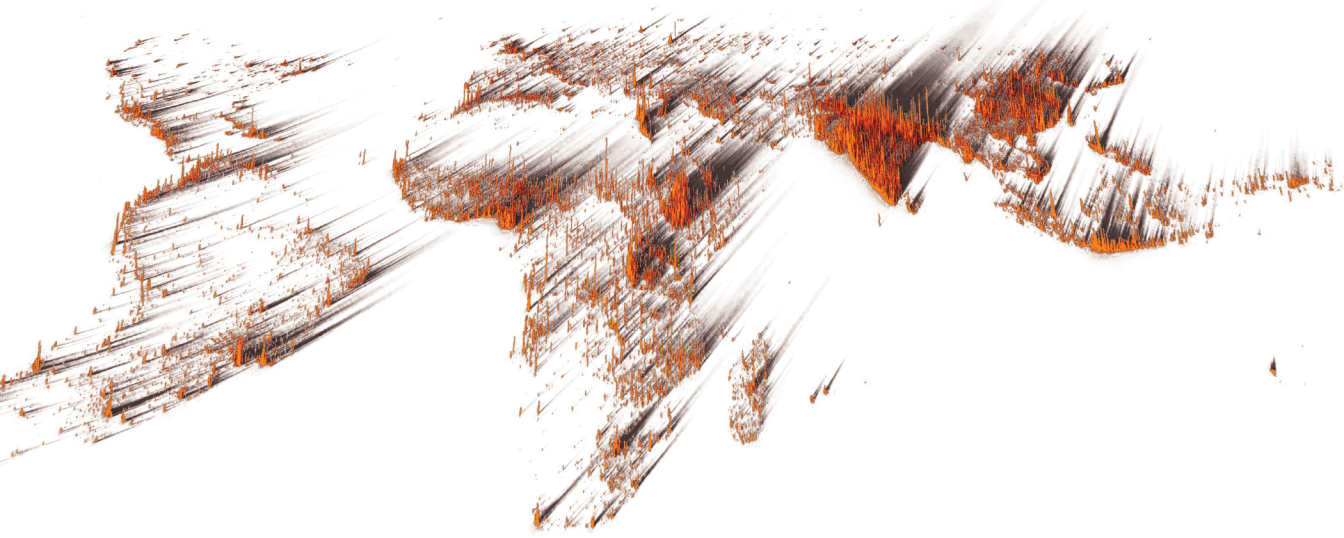

Live Long & Prosper?

Boomers, Babies and the Age of Depopulation

THE ADVANCED STUDY INSTITUTE OF ASIA RESEARCH
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In this Issue

Editor's Note

AURKO CHAKRABARTI,
EDITOR, DECYPHER

It's easy to think of demography as a dull collection of statistics—birth rates, death rates, migration patterns. But behind every dataset is a story, and behind every policy shift is a power struggle. Population numbers are rarely just about numbers. They shape economies, influence elections, justify border policies, and determine who gets counted in the grand calculus of a nation's future. This edition of Decypher explores demography not as a neutral science but as a deeply political and often weaponised force. Who is considered a burden? Who is seen as an asset? And who, conveniently, is left out of the conversation altogether?

On August 5th, Bangladesh saw the abrupt end to Hasina's long-standing and controversial rule as the Prime Minister. Student-led protests which emerged in Dhaka, showcased the disillusionment of the youth as they were fed up with a lack of economic opportunity and growing institutional malaise. Across the world, the same tensions are emerging in different forms. The promise of the so-called "demographic dividend" is proving more fragile than many had hoped. Nations once buoyed by youthful populations are now struggling to provide enough jobs, education, and stability to sustain them.

At the same time, a paradox is unfolding. While some regions grapple with too many young people and too few opportunities, others are facing the opposite crisis: not enough young people at all. Birth rates are plummeting, and with them, the very assumptions that have shaped modern economies. The old equation—more people equals more growth—is no longer holding. Economic stability, social norms, and cultural expectations once dictated family size, but today, individuals and societies make these choices in an era of profound uncertainty. Questions of financial burden, existential risk, and quality of life are all shaping whether people choose to have children—and increasingly, many are opting out.

For the first time in modern history, depopulation is becoming a defining reality rather than a hypothetical future. This is not an aberration—it is a structural shift. Governments are scrambling to incentivise childbirth, offering financial incentives, paid parental leave, and even direct cash transfers, but the data suggests that once fertility declines, it is exceedingly difficult to reverse. This has profound implications for everything from pension systems to military recruitment to national identity itself. If birth rates do not recover, the global order as we know it—one built on perpetual economic expansion—may need to be entirely reimagined.

Yet depopulation is not the only crisis at hand. Population movements, driven by climate change, economic instability, and political turmoil, are creating new fractures in the global landscape. Migration has always been a demographic reality, but the scale and urgency of movement today present new dilemmas. Where will people go when their homes are no longer habitable? How will societies absorb—or resist—these new populations? And who gets to decide who

belongs and who does not?

The answers to these questions will not be determined by demography alone, but by how societies choose to respond to its pressures. In this issue, we explore the forces shaping these choices—not just in terms of statistics and policy, but in the lived realities of individuals, families, and nations navigating an uncertain future.

At the heart of this transformation is a fundamental reckoning with how societies perceive work, ageing, and economic security. The social contract that underpinned the last century—the idea that people work for a set number of years, contribute to a pension system, and eventually retire with financial stability—is eroding. In an era of declining birth rates, shrinking workforces, and rising life expectancies, pension systems are faltering. Many governments, rather than reforming social security structures to accommodate these shifts, are pushing retirement ages further, forcing individuals to work longer, often without the promise of financial security in old age. Work, once a means to a stable life, is becoming an indefinite obligation.

This is not just an economic challenge—it is a political one. The gap between those who can afford to stop working and those who cannot is growing, deepening class divides within ageing populations. As wealthier nations struggle to sustain social welfare programmes, they increasingly rely on migrant labour to fill workforce gaps. Yet the very societies that need migration to stabilise their economies are also experiencing a surge in anti-immigration sentiment. This contradiction—an economic reliance on migrants alongside a cultural and political resistance to them—highlights the deep anxieties surrounding demographic change.

Demographic pressures are not limited to economic policy; they extend to governance itself. Historically, periods of population stress—whether from overpopulation, resource scarcity, or economic decline—have often coincided with political upheaval. In many cases, it is not merely demographic shifts that destabilise societies but how governments respond to them. As inequality widens and economic opportunities become more elusive, social unrest follows. The growing disillusionment of younger generations—who find themselves priced out of housing markets, burdened with debt, and unable to secure stable employment—poses a direct challenge to political stability. Societies that fail to address these frustrations risk deeper fractures, or worse, collapse.

History provides ample warning of what happens when elites fail to adapt to changing demographic realities. When a population's grievances are ignored, when economic and political systems refuse to bend to new demographic pressures, instability follows. Across history, whether in the form of peasant revolts, industrial strikes, or mass protests, political upheavals have often been fuelled by demographic and economic distress. Today, as rising inequality and demographic stagnation converge, we see echoes of these past crises in modern movements: from the unrest in Bangladesh to generational divides in the West, where younger populations increasingly challenge the political and economic order.

In some ways, demographic change is not just about numbers—it is about control. Governments have long sought to shape populations to fit their economic and political goals, whether through family planning policies, social engineering, or outright coercion. From forced sterilisation campaigns in the past to today's government incentives for childbirth, state interventions into reproduction and migration reflect deeper anxieties about national identity, economic stability, and power. Yet despite these efforts, the most fundamental choices—whether to have children, whether to migrate, whether to keep working—remain individual ones. And increasingly, people are making decisions that run counter to government expectations.

This issue does not merely examine these demographic shifts; it interrogates them. It asks what happens when the old assumptions

about population growth, economic security, and political stability no longer hold. It challenges the notion that demographic crises are inevitable and instead explores the ways in which societies can adapt, resist, or transform in response to these pressures. The era ahead will not be defined by static populations or predictable patterns, but by how people and governments respond to the challenges of an ever-changing demographic landscape.

The demographic realities that shaped the past century—rapid population growth, expanding workforces, and the assumption that economic progress would follow—are being replaced by a more fractured and uncertain landscape. The question is not simply whether populations are growing or shrinking, but how societies are adapting to these shifts.

One of the most pressing demographic transformations is the shifting balance between youth and ageing populations. For much of the 20th century, youth bulges were seen as engines of economic dynamism, but in reality, they are double-edged swords. In countries where young people find opportunities—where education, employment, and governance work in tandem—youth populations can drive innovation, productivity, and stability. But where those opportunities do not exist, where aspirations are met with economic stagnation and political dysfunction, youth bulges become a source of unrest. The anger spilling onto the streets in parts of South Asia and the Middle East is not simply a reaction to political failures; it is a direct consequence of economic structures that have failed to absorb a growing, educated workforce.

Conversely, the opposite crisis is unfolding in ageing societies. In parts of East Asia and Europe, birth rates have declined to such an extent that entire economies are beginning to contract. The traditional economic model—where younger workers support older retirees—is breaking down, leaving governments scrambling to patch failing pension systems while delaying retirement ages. The question is no longer whether societies can afford to support their ageing populations, but whether they can function at all without a steady influx of new workers. Some governments are turning to immigration as a solution, but even this approach faces limits, as political resistance to migration intensifies. Others are experimenting with technological solutions, from AI-driven automation to robotics, to fill the labour gaps left by shrinking workforces. Yet none of these fixes address the deeper challenge: how to build societies that are economically viable when populations are no longer growing.

This tension—between the demographic surplus of some regions and the deficits of others—is also reshaping global politics. Migration, once seen as a natural demographic response to economic disparities, has become one of the most contested political issues of our time. The movement of people is no longer just about economic opportunity; it has become entangled with questions of national identity, security, and social cohesion. As borders tighten and migration policies become more restrictive, the pressure does not disappear—it builds. The consequence is a growing population of stateless, displaced, and undocumented individuals caught in political limbo. Climate change is set to accelerate this crisis, forcing millions to leave uninhabitable regions in search of stability elsewhere. The question is not whether mass migration will occur, but how—and whether societies will find ways to absorb these demographic shifts without descending into further polarisation.

Demographic change is also fundamentally altering the very meaning of work. As populations decline and automation advances, the structure of employment itself is being reshaped. Traditional career paths are disappearing, replaced by a labour market where stability is elusive, and lifelong employment is an outdated ideal. The promise of retirement is slipping away, as governments push for longer working lives, while the gig economy offers flexibility but little security.

For younger generations, the idea of a stable job leading to a comfortable retirement is no longer a given—it is increasingly a privilege. This is not just an economic shift; it is a social and psychological one. What happens when entire generations are unable to achieve the financial security their parents took for granted?

At its core, the demographic challenge is about more than just numbers. It is about how societies define security, stability, and the future itself. In an era where the old demographic assumptions no longer apply, the choices made now—about work, migration, ageing, and economic policy—will shape the world for decades to come. The future will not be dictated by demographic inevitabilities, but by the willingness of societies to confront these shifts with adaptability, rather than resistance.

The demographic future is not set in stone, but it is shaped by choices—some made by individuals, others by governments, and many dictated by forces beyond anyone's control. The most fundamental of these choices is whether to have children. Across much of the world, birth rates are declining not because people cannot have children, but because they are choosing not to. This is not just about economics, though financial insecurity plays a major role. It is also about the way modern life is structured. In societies where work is precarious, where the cost of living is rising, and where state support for families is minimal, the decision to forgo children is rational. In places where gender roles remain rigid—where the burden of childcare falls disproportionately on women—fertility rates tend to decline even further.

Governments are now scrambling to reverse these trends, offering financial incentives, parental leave, and family-friendly policies, but these efforts rarely succeed. The decision to have children is deeply personal, and no amount of government intervention can force people to start families if they do not see a future where that choice is viable. The reality is that low fertility rates are not an anomaly—they are a feature of modern societies, and the challenge ahead is not reversing this trend but adapting to it.

This raises profound questions about the way societies structure their economies. The assumption that populations must always grow in order to sustain economic development is being tested. For decades, GDP growth was tied to demographic expansion, but in a world where populations are stagnating or shrinking, new economic models are needed. Some nations are experimenting with automation to compensate for workforce shortages. Others are investing in education and productivity, hoping that a smaller but more skilled workforce can sustain economic momentum. Still, others are turning to migration, attempting to offset declining birth rates by bringing in young workers from abroad. Each of these strategies comes with its own risks and challenges, and no single solution is likely to work across all societies.

The demographic transition is not just an economic story—it is also a political one. As populations age and workforces shrink, the balance of political power is shifting. Older voters, who tend to be more conservative and resistant to change, are becoming a dominant political force in many countries, while younger generations, despite their numbers, are often shut out of decision-making. This creates a growing generational divide, one that is playing out in elections, policy debates, and even cultural conflicts. The rise of populist movements in many parts of the world is, in part, a reaction to these demographic pressures. When economic opportunities shrink and social cohesion weakens, political instability follows.

Yet, for all the anxieties surrounding demographic change, history offers a different perspective. People have lived long lives in the past, and societies have adapted to shifting population structures before. The difference now is that the pace of change is accelerating, and the tools available to manage it—whether

through policy, technology, or migration—are being tested in ways they never have been before.

As climate change accelerates, migration patterns will shift even further, forcing new questions about governance, borders, and global responsibility. As life expectancy rises, societies will have to rethink what it means to grow old in a world where traditional retirement is no longer an option for many. As birth rates continue to decline, new economic models will need to emerge—ones that do not rely on perpetual growth but on sustainability and resilience.

The demographic era ahead will not be defined by crisis alone. It will be shaped by adaptation, by innovation, and by the willingness of societies to confront these changes rather than resist them. The world is entering uncharted demographic territory, and while the challenges are immense, so too are the possibilities for new ways of thinking, governing, and living. The question is not whether societies will change—they already are. The question is whether they will be prepared for the world that is emerging.

This issue of Decypher does not offer easy answers, because there are none. But it seeks to ask the right questions—about how demography intersects with power, economics, migration, and identity. And as populations shift, shrink, and move, the choices made today will determine the shape of the world for generations to come. ■

Booms, Busts and the Future of Asia: Pre-Modern, Modern and Post-Modern Demography

PAUL MORLAND

Demography, the rise and fall and movement of populations, causes a certain unease for many people. On the one hand, they recognise that it is a powerful force which has shaped our human story until now and will continue to shape our common destiny. On the other hand, many get confused. Are there too many people in the world or too few? Are societies we once associated with large families (Italy, say, going back a while, or Mexico more recently) still having them? Most reasonably educated people have some sense of what the reverend Thomas Malthus argued at the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries and might have some notion of the so-called demographic transition but they perhaps confuse the two and struggle in either case to relate these to the current scene.

Much of this confusion, I think, is cleared away by envisaging history, or demographic history at least, in three phases, which I call for the sake of simplicity 'the pre-modern', 'the modern' and 'the post-modern'. I will set out what I mean by these and then explain why Asia, or at least East, South-East and South Asia, can be used as a particularly stark demonstration of my thesis.

In the pre-modern era, the conditions described by Malthus broadly hold. The economy is overwhelmingly an agricultural one, its productive capacity grows only slowly and, given the prolific potential of humans to procreate, human numbers tend to press up against the frontiers of the possible. In some societies custom or practice (from at best partially-effective contraception to late marriage to infanticide) keep the population below this frontier. But where efforts to curb fertility are not made, or where they are largely ineffective (eighteenth-century China is often held up as an example), the vast majority of people live in dire need, at the edge of existence.

But just as Malthus was writing, we see, at least in his British homeland, a shift of the Malthusian pre-modern demographic dispensation to what we can call the modern. The dawning of the industrial age removed the Malthusian constraints, or at least raised them far faster than anyone of Malthus's generation had envisaged, even

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as that era unfolded before their eyes. Vast new continents fell under the plough or pasture for the service of European tables and stomachs, allowing first British and then more widely European populations to grow. Demographic modernity marks the shift into and through the developmental process. It is not a straight-forward or simple story, but essentially as countries and regions became more industrialised, more wealthy and more educated, first their mortality rates fell, creating fast and consistent population growth, then their fertility rates fell. Thus, population growth rose and fell. A society undergoing this process transitions from high fertility and high mortality with a small population, to high fertility and low mortality with a growing population, and finally to low fertility and low mortality with a large, stable population. That, at any rate, is the theory, and it fits the history of demographic change pretty well, despite its critics.

The key thing to grasp about demographic modernity is that it is a process, not a destination, and that it is a process in which the key drivers are material (more and better food, more salubrious housing, improved healthcare and public health). As a society is able to offer these improved conditions, its death rate falls first- people are better fed and generally looked after - and then the birth rate falls. The fall in the birth rate is associated with the general experience of lower infant mortality, with people needing to bear fewer children in order to meet their family size goals. It is also associated with a rise in the number of people living in cities where children can be more expensive to raise and take longer to be economically useful and people are more likely to be educated, particularly women, and thereby have both the ability to determine their own fertility and a desire to do so. Part of the decline in fertility rates is, of course, influenced by access to modern contraception, the willingness to use it, and its effectiveness.

Although income per capita is an imperfect measure for the various and complex factors which determine progress through socio-economic development and the demographic transition, it turns out to be a reasonable proxy. I took a look at the relationship between a country's income and fertility rate, infant mortality, and life expectancy in 1970 and found moderate correlations: the higher the income, the lower the fertility rate and infant mortality, and the longer the life expectancy. But once a country reaches a given level of development, again using GDP per capita as a proxy, the relationship breaks down. Looking at the same set of countries in 2019, when just about all of them had materially higher per capita incomes than fifty years previously, we find that each correlation (income and fertility, income and infant mortality, and income and life expectancy) is weaker. This is particularly true for the total fertility rate, where between a third and 40% of the correlation has been lost. The point is underlined by comparing less wealthy and more wealthy countries at the same time. For the wealthiest quarter of countries, any relationship between income and fertility rates had just about broken down altogether.

What does this mean? Essentially that once we are through a process of development accompanied by demographic transition, the old material drivers of fertility rates (and other key demographic indicators) no longer apply. Whether you are in dirt-poor Chad (with a fertility rate of six children per woman) or emerging South Africa (with a fertility rate just above two children per woman) affects your fertility rate. South Africans also live nearly a decade longer than Chadians and experience less than half the infant mortality rate. But whether you are quite rich Poland or very rich Luxembourg, the precise level of GDP per capita or any other material measure makes little difference. The influence of material factors on demography has diminished. What matters for even modestly rich countries today – and indeed for more and more countries as global development proceeds – are a set of cultural attitudes and practices which have nothing to do with just how rich they are. I often cite Israel and

South Korea, both wealthy, urban, and highly educated, yet in the former, the average woman has more than four times as many children as in the latter. Whatever is going on, it can no longer be explained by measures of development. This is what is meant by demographic post-modernity.

Where is Asia?

The key thing to grasp about the schema suggested above is that different countries and regions pass through these phases at different points, so at any given time, some countries may still be in the pre-modern phase, while others have already reached the post-modern phase.

Where, then, is Asia today? In this article, I restrict myself to the parts of the continent classified by the UN as 'Eastern Asia', 'Southern Asia', and 'South-Eastern Asia'. I am therefore excluding Central Asia and West Asia / the Middle East. Despite this exclusion, the region under consideration is one of extraordinary diversity and variation according to just about every metric. It includes some of the world's least developed and most developed countries. For example, the GDP per capita in Japan is more than eighty times that in Afghanistan.

Adopting the schema above, we can simply categorise Asian countries by their level of development and map them onto what we would expect. Malthusian pre-modernity is over almost everywhere. Poor Afghanistan and Pakistan are clearly at the relatively early stages of their development. With per capita incomes of around US$400 and US$1,400 per annum, they are indisputably poor countries. Their fertility rate remains relatively high although it is clearly falling (about 4.5 for Afghanistan and 3.5 for Pakistan) and their life expectancy short although clearly rising (in the mid-sixties, so decades longer than it was in the middle of the twentieth century). Both countries have experienced a rapid rise in their populations. Note that the data for Afghanistan generally predates the 2023 Taliban takeover, whose socially regressive policies may well reverse some of these trends. The challenge for the governments of these countries is to continue to improve healthcare and public health and through general human development, especially female education, and through the propagation of family planning to continue raising life expectancy and reducing fertility and population growth. Insofar as these governments, particularly that of Afghanistan, refuse to do so, we can expect to see arrested human demographic development.

Perhaps the above paragraph can be criticised for suggesting the imposition of Western values on non-Western countries, and such a criticism is not entirely undue. The desire that people live reasonably long and healthy lives should hopefully be universal. The desire for women to be free to control their own fertility – and to choose to do so by having on average families of moderate sizes – is more controversial. But an ideological commitment to a worldview in which a nation's population grows exponentially should bring with it a responsibility to explain how such a population can be provided for.

At the other end of the developmental spectrum, Japan and South Korea are well into what we call the post-modern phase of demography. They enjoy among the world's lowest infant mortality rates (around two per thousand) and longest life expectancies (into the mid-eighties) but also face persistently low fertility rates and ageing populations, with a declining working-age population. Their challenges are slightly different. Japan fell below replacement fertility earlier, around 1970, and for about 35 years has had a fertility rate below 1.5. It took South Korea until the early-to-mid 1980s to go sub-replacement but it plunged faster and further. Today, the South Korean fertility rate is just two-thirds of the level of Japan's. But in terms of the all-important support ratio (the balance of those in work to those of retirement age), Japan is suffering from the cumulative effects

of longer-lasting low fertility. In any case, both societies are enroute to a close-to 100% support ratio (i.e. one worker per retiree) and it is quite difficult to predict how any society is going to function at this level. A former Japanese prime minister reasonably warned of societal collapse.

The state of Japan's and Korea's demography is not, we would contend, simply a function of their advanced socio-economic condition. We have already cited Israel—a country that, per capita, is significantly wealthier than either and has a fertility rate much higher than both. One could also cite countries like the US and France, which, although suffering from too few births, have much healthier fertility rates than those in advanced East Asia. Just as the poorest countries in Asia are among the most lamentable cases of low human development outside sub-Saharan Africa, so the wealthiest Asian countries have the lowest fertility rates anywhere. Singapore and Hong Kong fare little better than Japan and South Korea. Culture is a slippery concept (it is far easier to correlate demography with material, financial, and economic factors), but something in Asian culture seems to discourage bringing children into the world when societies become wealthy.

The challenge for countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan is one of human development, and if their governments are serious about addressing it, they will find it relatively straightforward. Billions of dollars in external aid are available to support them. The challenges for countries like Japan and South Korea are far more complex. Getting fertility rates up, if that is what you want to do as a country, is no mean feat. Much thought and effort have been devoted to this, yet no tried-and-tested methods guarantee success.

The Fatal Case of the In-Betweens

By looking at Asia through the lens of the three-era schema outlined above, we observe differing policy challenges across the region, though none that are surprising. As time has gone on, we seem to find that there is a tendency for countries to move through it faster, or, to put it differently, for the demography to race ahead of the socio-economic development.

When it comes to life expectancy and infant mortality, this is an indisputably good thing. Take India as a good example. Its per capita GDP is only around US$2,500. Admittedly, this is in current US dollar exchange terms, which undoubtedly understates the actual living standards of the average Indian. In Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms (i.e. adjusting for the relative affordability of goods and services within India), it is approximately four times that amount. Still, for all its recent economic successes, India remains a relatively poor country. Yet since 1980, it has more than halved its life expectancy gap with the US, reducing it from two decades to less than one. The average Indian now lives to 68, the average American to 77. Infant mortality rates in India plunged from 43 to 23 per thousand in just the decade from 2012 to 2022.

But the problem for India is that fertility rates too are speeding downward. The average Indian woman now has barely two children and in many parts of the country it is much lower. The fertility rates in significant areas of the country such as Punjab, West Bengal, and Kerala are now similar to those in wealthy countries in Western Europe and North America.

These are relatively recent developments, so there are still plenty of young people and a burgeoning workforce in many Asian countries, India included. The worry is that if fertility rates are this low when socio-economic development, for all its advances in recent decades, is still only just seriously taking off, then just how low is fertility going to fall when these countries reach middle-income status. It is not just India. Thailand has a fertility rate that would put it among the poorer-performing European countries. "The phrase 'old before they are rich' has

gained traction in recent years, and we are witnessing it become a reality across much of Asia.

The challenge of pro-natal policies was once a luxury problem of the rich world. In the coming years and decades, it is going to become something that much of developing Asia needs to think about. ■

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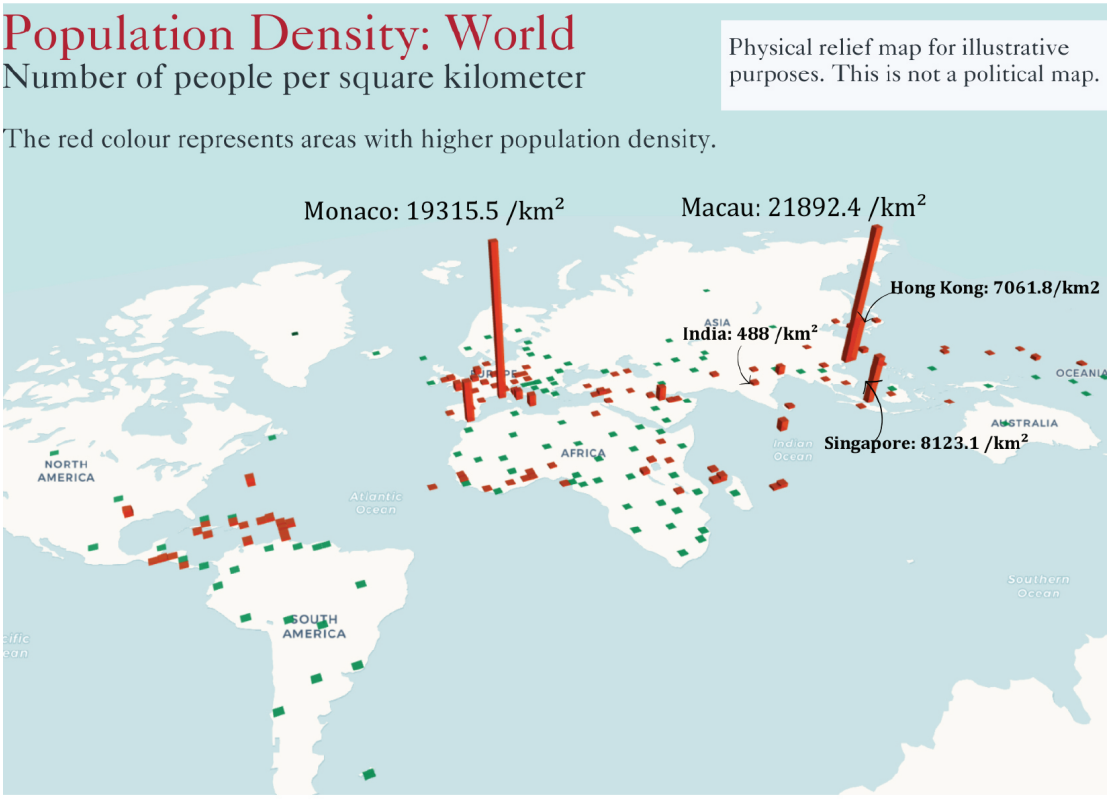
Population Density: World

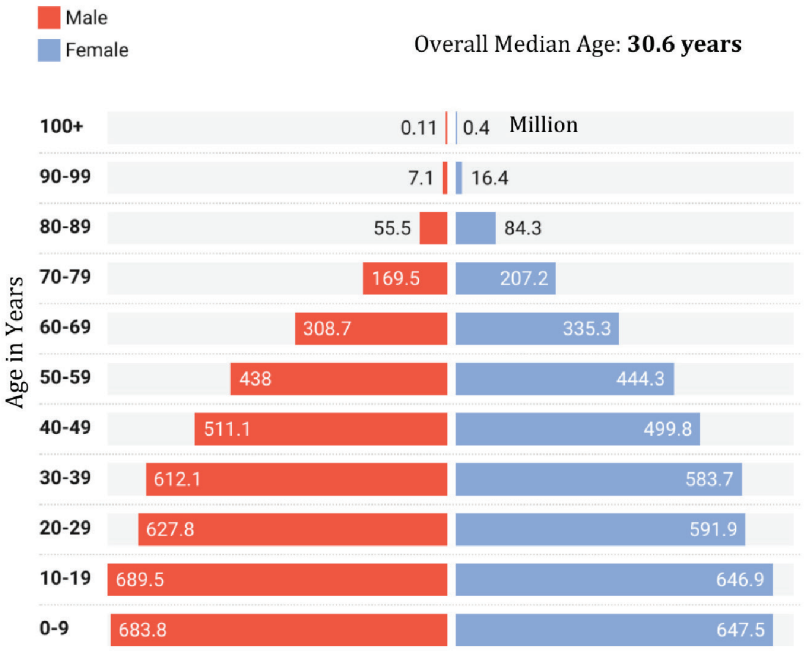


Source: World Population Review

The map illustrates country-wise population density (people per square kilometer) using a color gradient, where red indicates higher density and green represents lower density. Additionally, bar heights correspond to population density, with taller bars signifying greater density. In the map we can see Macau has the highest population density globally.

World Population by Age Group, 2024

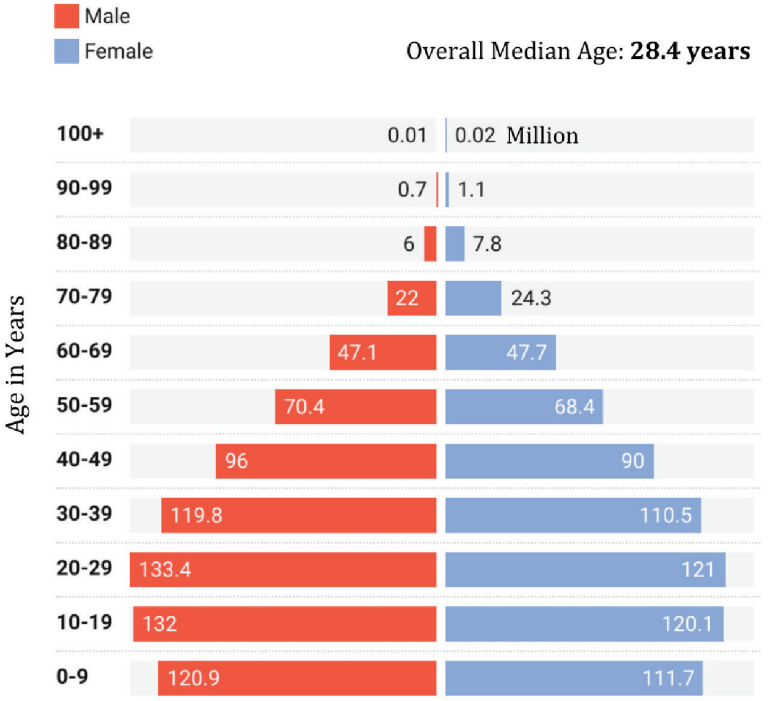
Values in Million



Source: UN Population Division, PopulationPyramid.net

Population of India by Age Group, 2024

Values in Million



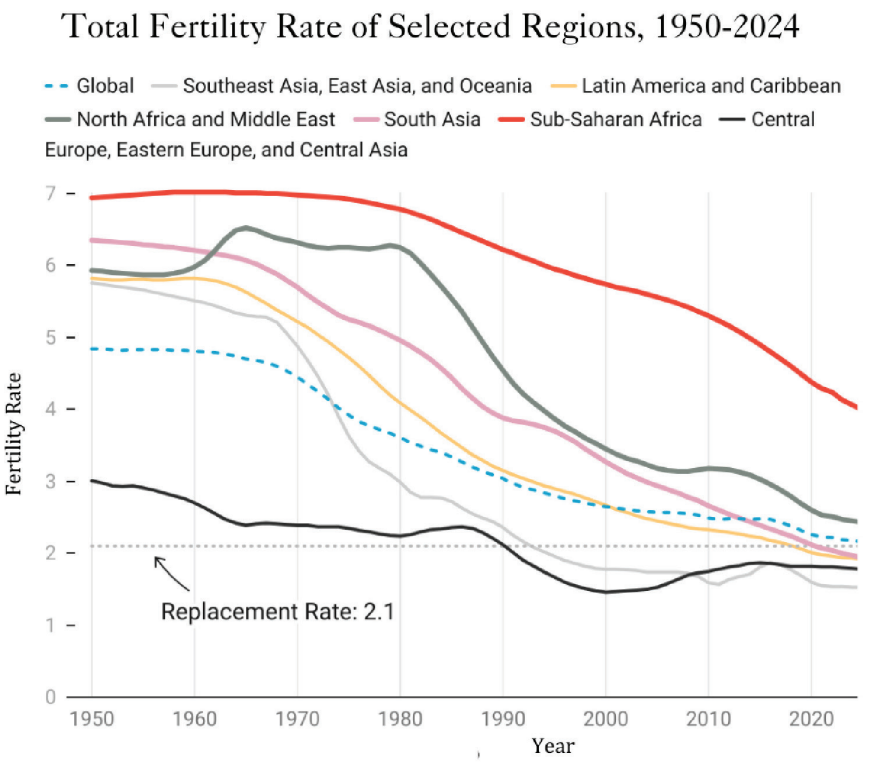
Source: UN Population Division, PopulationPyramid.net

Total Fertility Rate: Global and South Asia

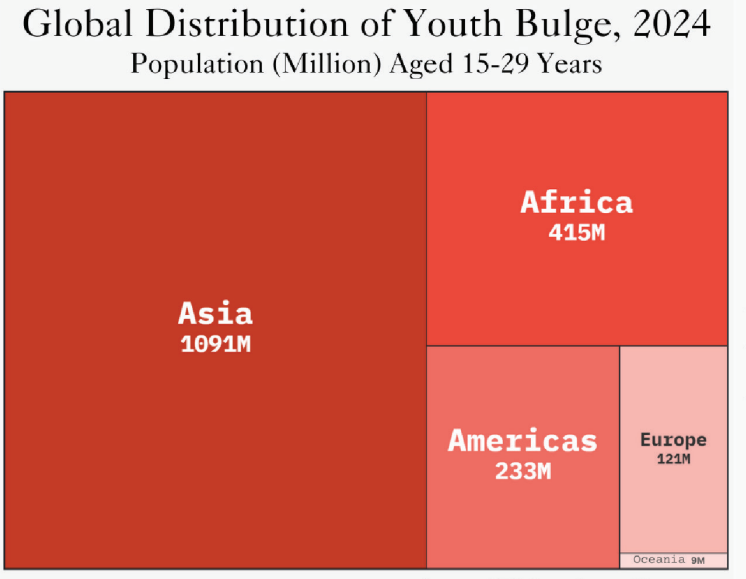
Year	Global	South Asia	India	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
1950	4.8	6.4	6.2	6.9	7.3	6.7	5.0	6.3	7.3	5.2
1990	3.0	3.9	3.5	7.2	4.7	4.8	5.6	5.3	5.9	2.5
2000	2.6	3.3	3.1	6.9	3.5	3.6	2.8	4.0	4.7	2.2
2010	2.5	2.7	2.5	6.4	2.8	2.5	2.2	2.6	4.0	2.3
2020	2.3	2.1	2.0	5.5	2.0	1.9	1.7	2.2	3.3	1.9
Projection 2024	2.2	1.9	1.8	5.0	1.8	1.8	1.6	2.0	2.9	1.8
Projection 2100	1.6	1.2	1.1	1.7	1.1	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.2	1.4

Source: Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME)

The graph illustrates the total fertility rate trends globally and in South Asia from 1950 to 2100. Over time, both global and South Asian fertility rates have steadily declined. Projections indicate that in the future, these rates will drop below the replacement level of 2.1.



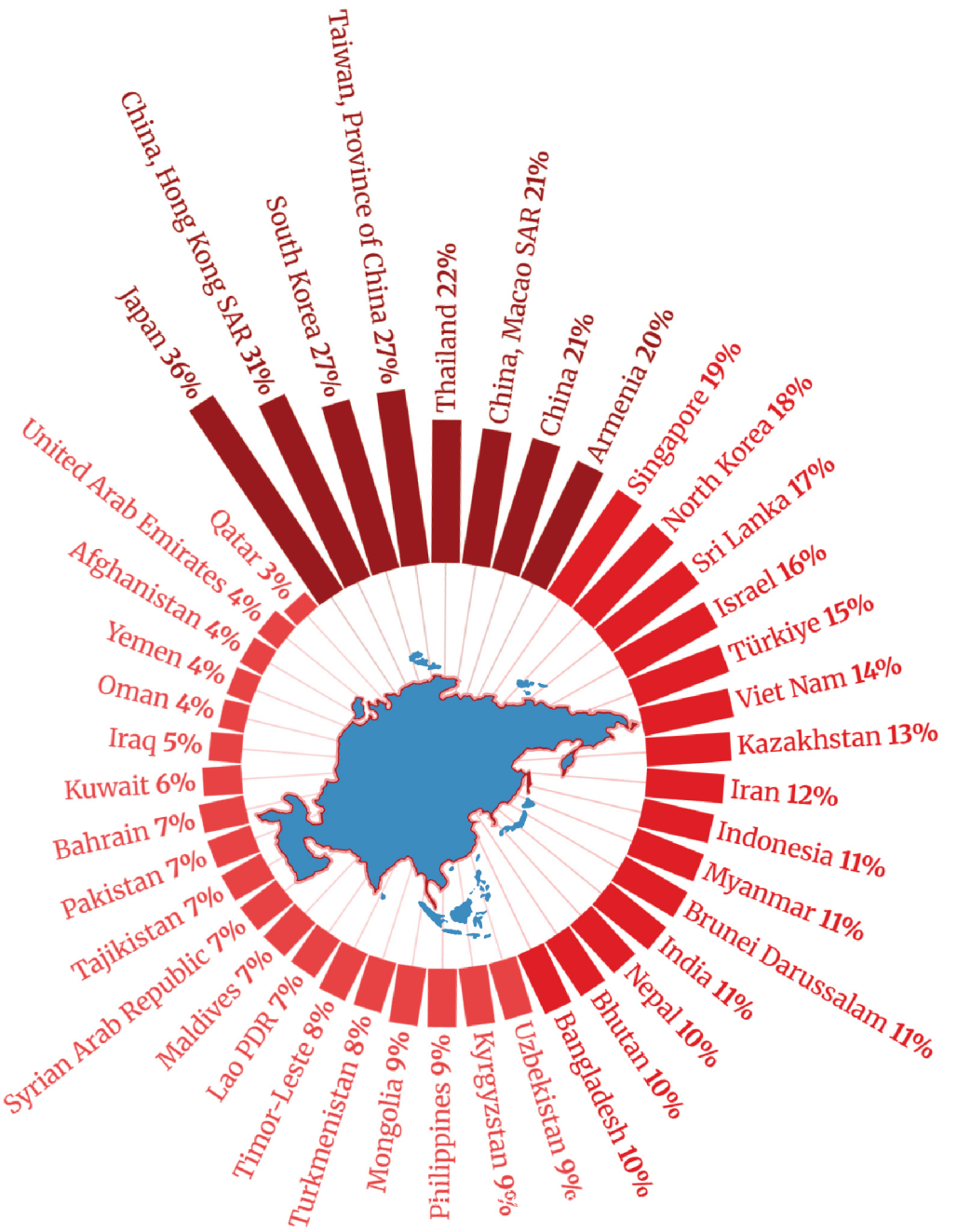
Source: Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME)



Asia has the highest youth Population (Aged 15-29 years) followed by Africa.

Source: UN Population Division

Percent of Elderly Population in Asia, 2024

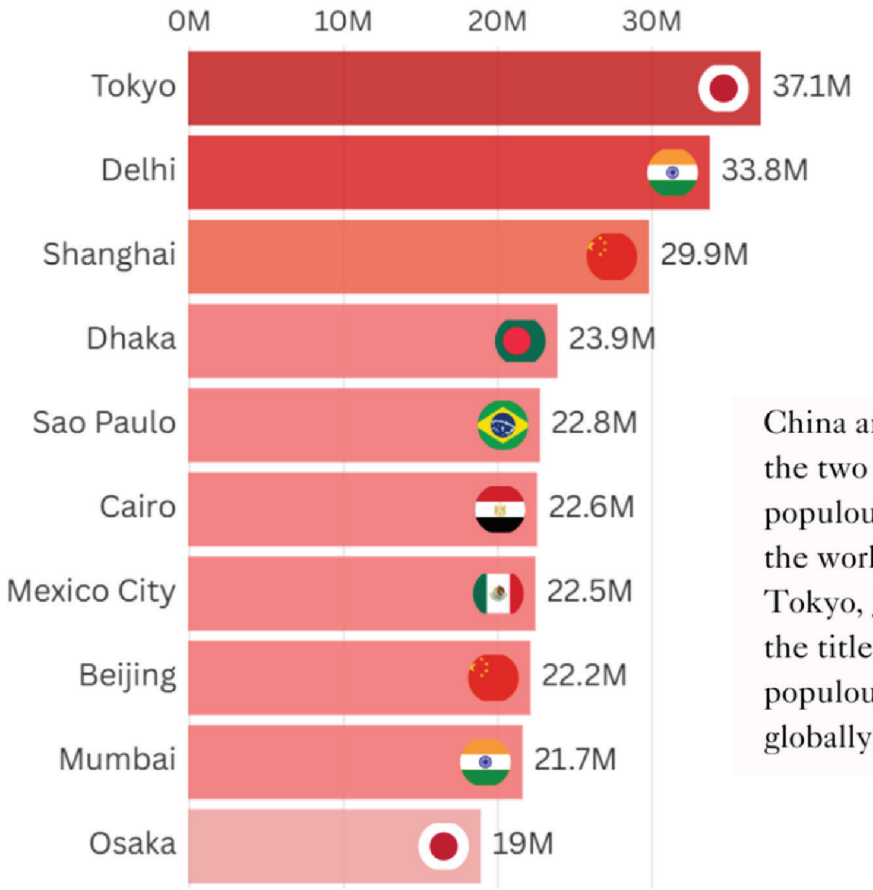


Source: UN Population Division

Japan has the highest percentage of its population aged 60 and above in Asia, followed by China, Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region).

The percentage represents the proportion of the elderly population (aged 60 and above) relative to the total population of the country.

World's Largest Cities by Population (Million), 2024



China and India are the two most populous countries in the world. However, Tokyo, Japan, holds the title of the most populous city globally.

Source: World Population Review

(For Representation Purposes only)

A Billion Aspirations: India Needs To Grow Rich Before It Gets Old

INDU BHUSHAN

India's billionth baby was born in May, 2000. The economy was a steady 6.4%, though still recovering from the impact of the sanctions put in place by the United States after the nuclear tests. As one of the 42,000 births that day, the billionth baby was designated to have been born in the Safdarjung Hospital, though no one could be entirely sure. The milestone was part of the Indian government campaign to educate people about the importance of having small families. Newspapers and the still nascent television media had news features and strong editorials worrying about the population problem.

Now two and a half decades later, and 441 million births later our perspective on population has undergone a drastic change, and for good. India today benefits from what demographers call a "demographic dividend" – a period when the working-age population greatly outweighs dependents, where there is scope for accelerated economic growth. With about 65% of the population below the age of 35, and a median age of 28, Indian economy is well-primed to grow rapidly. However, this leap will depend not just on the size of the population, but also on the skills and productivity of the labour force. Like a good successful investment, realising the benefits of demographic dividend requires early and strategic investment. The window of the demographic dividend is a narrow-- by 2061, the elderly population will overtake the younger population. If we are not a high income country by then, it would be an opportunity squandered.

The Potential of India's Demographic Dividend

India's population is estimated to have crossed 1.45 billion in 2024, making it the most populous country, and one with an overwhelmingly large young population. The dependent population (children and the elderly) is much smaller than the working population, this is the demographic sweet spot which has in the past contributed to rapid economic growth across the world.

It is necessary to reiterate the point that demographic dividend has a narrow window. A population projection for 2047 by the United Nations shows the workforce age bracket's population will begin decreasing as the median age rises from today's age of 28 to a projected age of 38 by the year 2050 and the advantage completely vanishes by 2061.

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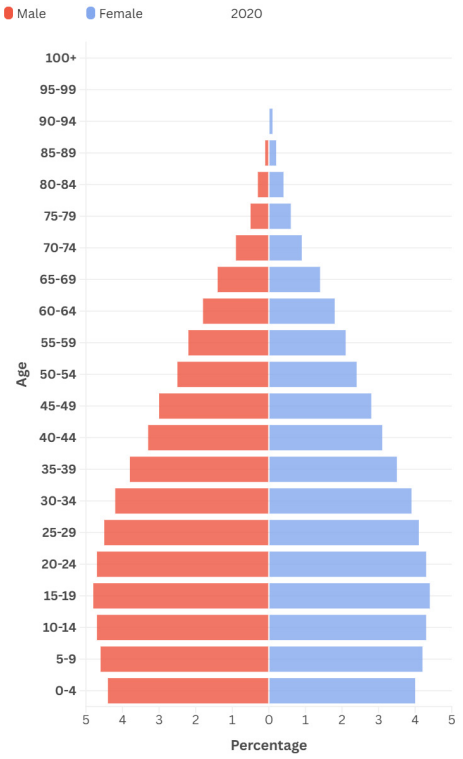
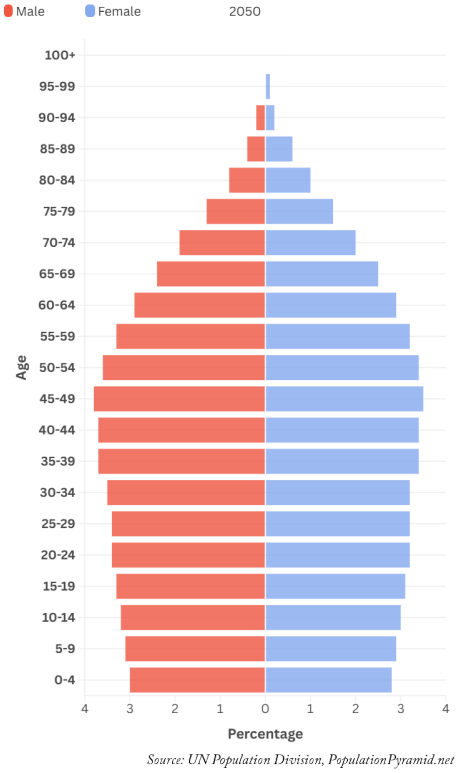
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF INDIA IN 2020 AND 2050





Source: UN Population Division, PopulationPyramid.net

The economic advantage of a young and substantive population can be harnessed only if the additional labour force resulting from the youth bulge is productively employed, and it must be educated, skilled, and healthy to exercise the right conferred on it. A lot therefore depends on whether and how we are able to ensure an educated, skilled, and healthy population.

The transition from a young working population to an ageing population cannot be avoided and requires careful planning. This transition has in the past led to sustained economic growth in countries that have managed to navigate it through careful planning and smart policymaking. China, South Korea, and Japan are examples of how countries have managed to use their demographic opportunities to achieve notable economic changes in a very short time.

The vision to see India as a developed country by 2047, a centenary as a free country is aspirational and must be welcomed. For now though, India is counted as a lower middle-income country with a per capita income of about US$ 2400. The economists at the World Bank in 2024 put out a report stating that India needs to do a lot of catching up if it wants to avoid the spectre of "middle income trap", for at current levels in will take 75 years for India to reach 25% of the per capita income of the US.

Learning from International Experience

Asian economies' experiences hold lessons for India. China's economic development since the 1980s has been deeply influenced by its demographic dividend, based on massive investments in education and health, and by economic reforms that swiftly unfolded in the 1980s to open up global trade links and accelerate urbanisation.

Similarly, South Korea's phenomenal economic development between the 1960s

and the 1990s was facilitated by investments in education aimed at creating a highly skilled young workforce, increasing female workforce participation, and an eagerness to build industrialisation and technological advancement.

Japan's post-WWII economic miracle between the mid-1950s and the early 1970s was the result of policies to induce participation of women in the workforce, education and skill opportunities, stimulating technology and industrial efficiency, and maintaining strong systems of social welfare and health across the population pyramid.

GOVERNMENT SPENDING BY SECTOR: INDIA SHARE OF EXPENDITURE AS PERCENT OF GDP

Indicators	Percent of GDP
Real Economy (Manufacturing, Infrastructure, Agriculture and Services)	34.7%
Social Protection	8.7%
Social Service expenditure	7.8%
Education	4.1%
Health	1.8%

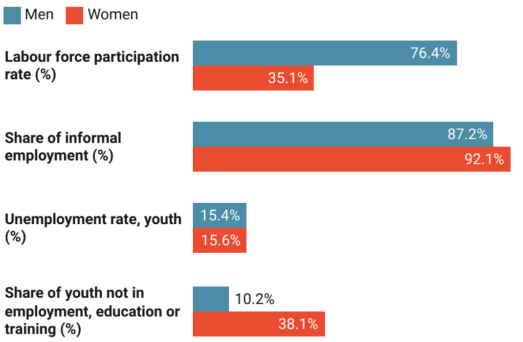
Source: Investment in India - IBEF, 2025, National Health Accounts (NHA), 2024 and World Bank - Government expenditure on education, 2022

India's Special Challenges

Although these examples are illuminating, it is imperative to recognise that India has structural problems that are distinctive. Most importantly, more than 81.1% of the workforce is employed in the informal economy, characterised by low productivity and under-compensation. The recent global economic fragmentation and roll back of progress in international free trade have intensified the challenges facing the workers, leaving many in state of uncertainty with limited upward mobility. It has led to stagnating wages, and a lack of opportunities for the young joining the workforce.

The quality of employment remains a major concern. Many lack proper exposure to quality education, options for skill upgradation, and secure employment opportunities. This gap poses a serious threat of converting the demographic dividend into a demographic liability. In order to optimise the contribution of our young labour force to country's long-term economic progress, we will have to improve the quality of employment, raise productivity, and increase access to education and training. These are not economic imperatives but a moral duty towards our youth, the future of our nation.

KEY STATISTICS ON GENDER GAPS IN THE WORKFORCE IN INDIA, 2023



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey, Data for 2023

In addition, the female labour force participation rate in India remains one of the lowest among major economies. Despite rising educational attainment among women, social norms, lack of secure employment opportunities, wage disparities, and inadequate childcare support continue to restrict their participation in the workforce. Structural barriers, such as limited access to skilling programs and workplace safety concerns, further discourage female workforce engagement. Increasing women's participation in the labour market is not just a social issue but an economic necessity. Unlocking this potential could significantly boost India's GDP and drive sustainable development.

The Human Side of India's Population Conundrum

Behind these statistics are human narratives that define the broader systemic challenges involved in meeting our obligation to the next generation.

Our demographic profile is not uniform for the entire country. India exhibits significant fertility rate variations across regions, socioeconomic groups, and educational backgrounds. These differences have profound demographic, economic, and social implications, shaping migration patterns and potentially fueling social tensions.

Fertility rates in India vary widely between the northern and southern states. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in southern states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh has already fallen well below replacement level (2.1 children per woman), largely due to higher female literacy, better healthcare access, urbanisation, and stronger family planning adoption. In contrast, northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh continue to have higher fertility rates, exceeding the replacement level.

A similar divide exists between various socio-economic groups. Women with higher levels of education tend to marry later, have fewer children, and participate more actively in the workforce. On the other hand, low literacy and lack of awareness in less-educated households contribute to early marriages and higher fertility rates, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting women's autonomy in reproductive choices.

The stark fertility divide across regions and socioeconomic groups could lead to social and political tensions. As the population in northern states grows faster than in the south, concerns about economic disparities, political representation, and resource allocation may intensify. Southern states, which have successfully reduced their fertility rates and are experiencing slower population growth, may feel disproportionately burdened by fiscal transfers and policies that favor more populous northern states. Additionally, differences in family structures, gender norms, and economic aspirations could create cultural rifts, shaping perceptions of development and social progress.

The demographic imbalance between high-fertility and low-fertility states is already driving large-scale migration. With declining working-age populations in the south and labour surpluses in the north, economic migration from northern to southern states is set to increase. Cities like Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad are already witnessing an influx of workers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha, driven by job opportunities, better wages, and improved living conditions. While migration helps balance labour shortages and promotes economic integration, linguistic, cultural, and social tensions between migrants and native populations may arise, requiring thoughtful policy interventions to ensure smooth integration.

India's fertility divide is reshaping the country's demographic landscape, influencing economic growth, migration trends, and social cohesion. Addressing these disparities requires investment in education, women's empowerment, and equitable resource distribution, ensuring balanced development across regions. While migration can serve as an equalising force, proactive policies are needed to manage cultural assimilation and economic integration, preventing demographic imbalances from translating into deeper social fractures.

Tapping the Demographic Dividend

For India to tackle this demographic change effectively, the application of a multidimensional approach catering to many issues of this trend is needed:

1. Education and Skill Development

The foundation of our strategy requires a revitalised emphasis on education and skills building. The urgent need is for deeper reforms in our education system in terms of improvement in quality, relevance, and access. Beyond the emphasis on rote-learning, we must focus on developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and vocational competencies in harmony with industry demands. Age specific data is clear in demonstrating that disparities persist in educational attainment levels, amongst youth aged 20-24 just 47% of young women and 53% of young men have completed higher secondary or college education by 2019-21., though it is markedly higher than the levels of 2015-16. The lack of large proportions of youth entering tertiary or vocational education has been flagged time and again.

Technical and vocational training needs to be expanded and better integrated with industry demand. Our Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and polytechnics have to be modernised with fresh curricula and equipment. Education and industry need to be coordinated so that the training courses keep abreast with the changing market needs. Technological skills and digital literacy should be part and parcel of our educational system. With the global economy increasingly turning to automation and artificial intelligence, it is only fitting that our labour force learns to adapt and thrive in such a changing environment.

2. Generation of Employment and Quality Improvement

Creating adequate jobs for our expanding labour force requires a multi-faceted strategy. Job-intensive industries like manufacturing, construction, tourism, and healthcare need policy intervention to increase their employment absorption capacity.

The formal sector needs to be expanded by regulatory changes that facilitate compliance for firms without compromising the safeguards required for employees. Small and medium enterprises, which generate employment for the majority of our workforce, need to be given special focus using focused financial support, technology upgrade support, and market link support. In addition to the creation of jobs, we also have to help improve the quality of employment. This involves improving the quality of the working environment, social protection coverage, fair remuneration, and opportunities for professional development. Improved quality employment enhances the well-being of people while increasing output and economic development.

3. Women's Economic Participation

Increasing women's participation in labour force would have to be addressed through broad strategies such as cheap and safe childcare, flexible working hours, safe transport, safety from workplace harassment, and the removal of discriminatory promotion and hiring policies. We would also have to work towards changing social attitudes and norms that limit women's economic roles.

Increasing women's participation in the workforce could contribute between 1.5-2.0 percentage points to the annual GDP growth of India and hence be among the most valuable interventions for inducing economic growth.

4. Health and Social Welfare Systems

A productive workforce is determined by a healthy workforce. We need to increase access to quality healthcare services, prioritising preventive care and the management of non-communicable diseases that increasingly plague our working-age populace.

POPULATION COVERED BY SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOORS/ SYSTEMS-INDIA, 2023

Indicators	% of population
Poor persons covered by social protection systems	100.0%
Mothers with newborns receiving maternity benefits	58.2%
Children/households receiving child/family cash benefits	51.9%
Population covered by at least one social protection benefit	48.8%
Vulnerable persons covered by social assistance	38.2%
Persons with severe disabilities collecting disability social protection benefits	18.3%
Employed covered in the event of work injury	8.3%

Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT Data

Additional concern is with our population ageing, building strong social security systems is more vital than ever. Pension coverage has to be extended to informal workers beyond the formal sector. Health insurance programs have to be made stronger and universalised to cover households against catastrophic health spending. The social protection initiatives outlined above are beyond the ambit of welfare policies; instead, they are strategic human capital investments that support productivity and increase social stability.

OLDER POPULATION COVERED BY SOCIAL PROTECTION-INDIA, 2023

Indicators	% of population
Labour force participation rate of people aged 65 years or over	22.7%
Informal employment rate of 65 years or over	97.4%
Older persons covered by social protection systems	42.5%
Persons above retirement age receiving a pension	45.9%

Source: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT Data

5. Urbanisation and Regional Development

With increasing numbers of people migrating to cities, planned urbanisation is the need of the hour. We need to build tier-2 and tier-3 cities as growth centres to decongest metros. Urban infrastructure, housing, transport, and basic services need to be invested in for this.

At the same time, it is necessary to ensure balanced regional development through targeted interventions in less developed regions. Special focus should be given to states with high population growth rates and limited economic opportunities, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of India. Addressing the regional imbalances requires investment in education, women's empowerment, and equitable resource distribution. While migration can serve as an equalising force, proactive policies are needed to manage cultural assimilation and economic integration, preventing demographic imbalances from translating into deeper social fractures.

The Way Forward: A Call for Firm Action

For India, the stakes are extremely high, and time is running out. The demographic bonus is a finite window of opportunity to accelerate our economic change, but the opportunity will not be available for eternity.

I think that achieving this demographic potential to the fullest requires a new national commitment that transcends political boundaries. The challenge requires the collaboration of all levels of government — national, regional, and local—and an active role from the private sector, academia, civil society organisations, and community leaders.

We need to meet this test with the same urgency and national resolve that we used in our response to the 1991 economic crisis. The reforms we launched then transformed the

course of India's economy. Today, we require the same firm and powerful action to ensure that our demographic dividend pays rich dividends to our economy and society.

From Demographic Dividend to Development

As we pass through this time of change in the development of our country, we must recognise that the ultimate test of our success will not be in terms of aggregate economic figures but in terms of the overall welfare and increased opportunities presented to all Indian citizens.

The demographic dividend that we enjoy represents not just an economic opportunity but also a heavy responsibility towards the youth. Each young person in India has legitimate aspirations for a better life—dignified work, proper healthcare, quality education, and social security. Our initiatives and policies must be designed to address these aspirations.

If we succeed in this endeavour, the coming decades will see India transitioning into a developing nation of long-term and broad-based prosperity. If we don't succeed, we risk failing the aspirations of millions of Indians, condemning them to lives of underemployment, insecurity, and unfulfilled potential.

The choice that faces us is inescapable. The time for reflection is past; we are at a point that demands firm, thought-out, and timely decisions. India has to become rich before it becomes old. Our common future hangs on this necessity.

As I have emphasised throughout my professional career as an economist and a public servant: economic growth is not an end in itself but a means to improve the quality of life of all citizens. Let this simple principle guide our approach towards the demographic dividend. ■

THE PEST HOUSE AND PLAGUE PIT IN FINSBURY FIELDS.

The (In)Visible Hand: Populations, Economies, and State Power

EMILY MERCHANT

In November 2022, as the world's human population passed the eight billion mark, observers disagreed about what the future held. The numbers were not in question: the UN's World Population Prospects projected that the global population would continue to grow until the 2080s, peaking at 10.4 billion and declining slightly thereafter. The disagreement concerned what the numbers meant, both in that moment and for the future. Some saw in the UN's figures the triumph of human ingenuity. UN Secretary-General António Guterres proclaimed that "the milestone is an occasion to celebrate diversity and advancements while considering humanity's shared responsibility for the planet." Others, however, saw looming disaster. Among the worriers, some believed that 10.4 billion—and even the eight billion of 2022—were too many people for the Earth's delicate ecosystem to handle, while others saw disaster looming after the peak, when the world would likely experience an absolute decline in human numbers.

The debate over whether the world is headed toward catastrophic overpopulation or disastrous depopulation elides the fact that global population is a statistical fiction. Populations are political objects, constituted through the statistical practices by which governments count their subjects and register vital events. These forms of enumeration give rise to populations that are legible to and manipulable by the governments that make them, counting and classifying people in ways that facilitate specific governmental objectives and policies. Populations are thus an effect of state power. Censuses of various kinds have existed since antiquity, each reflecting the exigencies of the governmental or non-governmental (usually ecclesiastical) authority that carried it out.6 Governments in Europe and North and South America began collaborating to standardise census-making practices and share their results in the nineteenth century. After World War II, the UN Population Division attempted to extend standardisation to all countries of the world, making it possible, for the first time, to calculate the total number of Earth's inhabitants by aggregating the populations constituted by national censuses in every country.

While natural scientists in the second half of the twentieth century sometimes considered global population size and growth in relation to the natural environment, social scientists and governments typically focused on the

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size and growth of national populations in relation to national economies. More recently, attention to the worsening climate crisis has sharpened calls for global population control, but has also fostered the realisation that addressing climate change will require directly cutting emissions, which is unlikely to occur through any reasonable reduction in population growth. This realisation, together with growing concern about depopulation, has refocused population thought on the relationship between national populations and national economies and whether, in any given country, the former is growing too quickly or too slowly to engender growth in the latter. This essay examines how governments came to view population change—specifically the manipulation of birth rates in one direction or the other—as a lever to promote economic growth, often with disastrous consequences.

Economies are the statistical twin of populations, constituted through methods of national income accounting that emerged between the world wars. In the years following World War II, the UN began to statistically represent the world as a community of sovereign nation states, each defined by an economy and a population. Dividing the former by the latter produced gross national income (GNI) per capita, which served as a measure of the wellbeing of a country's residents until the introduction of the Human Development Index in 1990. GNI per capita provided a seeming index of quality of governance by which countries could be ranked relative to one another, producing a moral imperative for governments to maximise their economies relative to their populations. It was only in the late 1950s and 1960s, largely through the work of the US-based Population Council, that manipulating rates of population growth became a strategy for increasing GNI per capita.

In the mid-twentieth century, using the data collected by the UN, economists and demographers could array the countries of the world along what they presented as a universal path of progress toward higher per capita national income and thus greater wellbeing. On the economic side, the path was most iconically described in the late 1950s by the economist Walt Rostow as "the stages of economic growth." According to this model, societies transitioned across five stages, over a period of several decades, from agrarian economies with little overall economic growth (stage 1) to industrial mass-consumption economies with rapid self-sustaining economic growth (stage 5). While the phrase "economic development" is today often used as a synonym for economic growth, mid-century economists understood development as the qualitative transformation described by Rostow from an agrarian economy with little growth potential to an industrial economy with continuous growth.

Drawing generalisations from England's Industrial Revolution, mid-century demographers at Princeton University's Office of Population Research expected that the process of economic development would be accompanied by massive demographic change, which they termed "the demographic transition." According to demographic transition theory, societies with low-growth agrarian economies had high birth and death rates, which balanced one another to keep population stationary. As countries acquired the infrastructural prerequisites for industrialisation, however, mortality rates would fall while fertility rates remained high, spurring rapid population growth. This growth would eventually be slowed by the further progress of industrialisation, which would change the economic calculus of childbearing and thus reduce birth rates. In the final stage of economic development, birth and death rates would be balanced at low levels, with no overall population change. Princeton's demographers characterised demographic transition, like economic development, as a universal, unilinear, and irreversible process in which the countries of Western Europe and North America were in the lead and those of Africa, Asia, and Latin America trailed behind. They were initially unconcerned about the population growth

entailed by demographic transition, as they expected it to be temporary and driven by economic development, a process that would increase GNI per capita even as population sizes increased.

Almost as soon as economists and demographers articulated these theories of economic development and demographic transition, it became clear that the countries across the world were not following their predictions. In parts of Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, public health interventions had reduced death rates dramatically in the absence of economic development. American businessmen began to worry that the resulting population growth would make these countries susceptible to communist revolution, threatening US-based corporations' access to overseas materials, markets, and labour. In 1952, John D. Rockefeller III, who had just become chairman of the Rockefeller Foundation, established the Population Council to channel money from Rockefeller sources and other American philanthropists towards efforts to slow population growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Achieving this goal, however, was politically challenging. By defining and reporting on populations to the UN, governments exerted sovereignty over them. Governments had traditionally valued larger populations, viewing them as a source of economic dynamism and military strength. By publishing population data for every country worldwide, the UN made each country's population legible to actors in other countries, but efforts on the part of US businessmen or philanthropists to use that legibility to intervene in population growth overseas could represent an act of aggression, imperialism, or even genocide. In the postwar period, the growth of populations could be legitimately controlled only by the governments that constituted those populations.

To encourage governments to exert control over the growth of populations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the Population Council and its allies took a three-pronged approach. First, they sponsored demographic research that framed high fertility rates as a barrier to economic development. The key study was Population Growth and Economic Development in Low-Income Countries: A Case Study of India's Prospects, funded by the World Bank and published in 1958 by the Princeton University demographer Ansley Coale and the CIA economist Edgar M. Hoover. The Coale-Hoover Report, as it was informally known, relied on simulation rather than direct observation. Coale projected population growth in India over the next thirty years under various fertility scenarios; Hoover then projected economic growth under each fertility scenario. The results were thus fully determined by Coale and Hoover's starting assumptions, according to which lower fertility meant more household savings and therefore more capital investment and faster economic development, thus reversing the causal relationship between demographic transition and economic development. The Population Council ensured that the Coale-Hoover Report was widely circulated and its findings broadly accepted, particularly among leaders of rapidly growing developing countries, who increasingly viewed fertility reduction as critical to the success of their economic development and nation-building projects.

Second, the Population Council and its allies sponsored research into contraceptive technologies that could be used on a mass scale with minimal effort from users, leading to the development of new intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUDs). The Population Council held the patents on these IUDs and subsidised their production for countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In contrast to other forms of contraception, which represent birth control for individuals and couples, the science and technology studies scholar Chikako Takeshita has described the IUD as "birth control for a nation," a technology designed to reduce a country's birth rate rather than facilitate individual control over childbearing. IUDs could be

inserted quickly by individuals with minimal training, making them impossible for users to remove at will. Their effects could be easily factored into a country's population and economic projections.

Third, the Population Council and its allies provided consultation to governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that decided to implement family planning programmes. India became the first country to implement such a programme in 1952. By 1970, national family planning policies or programmes were also in place in China, Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Kenya, Malaysia, Mauritius, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, and Turkey. However, some were more extensive than others. In many places these programmes were welcomed with considerable enthusiasm by existing local civil society birth control movements, often led by elite women, which had failed to achieve much traction prior to the rise of governmental concern with the effects of population growth on economic development. The Population Council assisted governments with mass communication campaigns aimed at promoting the uptake of family planning services and inculcating small family norms. Advertisements of various kinds depicted small families as happier, healthier, and wealthier than large families, and portrayed family planning as a means of promoting both national and individual prosperity. Yet the Population Council and governments undertaking family planning policies and programmes typically described their goals and evaluated their efficacy in terms of reductions in fertility rates, the number of IUDs inserted or sterilisations performed, rather than the expected benefits for individuals or nations.

In 1966, the Population Council drafted a resolution that John D. Rockefeller III presented to the UN on Human Rights Day, designating family planning a human right and therefore exerting additional moral pressure on governments to launch or expand family planning programmes. To be sure, the family planning programmes that proliferated worldwide from the 1960s onwards provided contraceptive options to many who sought them but otherwise lacked access. Yet that was not their primary goal. The Population Council's resolution framed the individual right to family planning as a response to the perceived threat of rapid population growth to governments' economic development and nation-building ambitions. For some supporters of international population control—such as Planned Parenthood and USAID, which began providing family planning assistance in 1965, and the UN Fund for Population Activities (today the UN Population Fund), which received most of its money from USAID—reducing fertility rates was the only objective. The Population Council, however, broadened its aims in the 1970s, when its demographic director indicated his approval of Romania's extreme pronatalist policies, which included compulsory gynaecological exams as well as the complete outlawing of contraception and abortion. The Council's goal, it seemed, was to empower governments to take control of their countries' fertility rates as a means of promoting economic growth, whether that meant increasing or reducing fertility. If access to family planning could be taken away when it came to be seen as a drag on economic growth, it was hardly a human right.

Although some Americans recommended coercive and even murderous approaches to reducing population growth in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the Population Council advised governments that family planning should be voluntary. Its definition of voluntary was quite capacious, however, including just about anything short of limits on family size, compulsory sterilisation, or compulsory abortion. Some governments explicitly crossed this line-for example, India during its Emergency and China with its One-Child policy. Other governments used a variety of incentives and penalties to promote small families. Singapore, for example,

raised hospital delivery fees and removed tax benefits for a woman's fourth child and any thereafter, and gave those children lower priority for primary school admission. The harms perpetrated by overzealous government efforts to reduce fertility have been widely documented. While historical accounts of these programmes have generally described them as an excessive response to a real problem, economic research in the 1980s found no necessary or direct relationship between fertility and economic development. Whether high fertility hinders development or a reduction in fertility hastens it depends on numerous local social, political, and economic factors.

Some of the countries that made the strongest efforts in family planning—such as Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea—experienced dramatic economic growth, but their governments also made direct investments in economic development that far exceeded their investments in fertility decline. In South Korea, for example, family planning accounted for than 1% of the country's economic development budget. While the Population Council's analysis suggests that fertility in these countries declined at least somewhat more rapidly than it would have in the absence of government family planning programmes, it is not clear that these programmes made a tangible contribution to economic development. In 2024, these countries had some of the world's lowest total fertility rates: 0.86 in Taiwan, 0.73 in South Korea, and 0.95 in Singapore, as compared to a replacement rate of approximately 2.1. Yet, these countries are not alone in experiencing low fertility. Of the 236 countries that the UN reported on in 2024, nearly half had fertility rates below replacement level.

Demographers and economists today point to dependency ratios—the number of people under 15 or over 64 divided by the number of people of working age—as the key metric linking populations to economies. Fertility above and below replacement both produce high dependency ratios, which is expected to hinder economic growth. If we are to rely on population as a lever to promote economic growth, a delicate balance must therefore be maintained. The scientists who continue to advise the governments of developing countries to reduce their fertility are seeking what is known as a demographic dividend—an increase in productivity and savings that is expected to occur when a decline in the fertility rate reduces the dependency ratio. Yet if fertility falls below replacement, the demographic dividend will be followed by a rapidly rising dependency ratio as each generation of workers is replaced by a smaller one.

The countries that once most enthusiastically and coercively promoted smaller families are today adopting the most enthusiastic and coercive policies to promote larger families. South Korea and Iran, for example, have restricted access to birth control and abortion. China has reconfigured its government family planning agencies, once responsible for enforcing the one-child policy, to promote a "new fertility culture." Women there report being called by neighbourhood officials to inquire about their menstrual cycles and childbearing plans. Authoritarian regimes in Europe are also pushing hard on pronatalism, with Hungary exempting women from paying income tax if they have four or more children and Russia banning "child-free propaganda." In the United States, the new Transportation Secretary vows to prioritise communities with above-average marriage and birth rates. The demographer Dennis Hodgson has warned that "over-ardent neo-Malthusian population controllers are no longer the greatest threat to women's reproductive rights. That place has been assumed by over-ardent pronatalist population controllers in low-fertility countries."

Today's pronatalist policies, like the anti-natalist policies of the past that continue in many parts of the world, configure women's (and men's) bodies and lives in the abstract as policy tools while disregarding the actual lives and bodies of the women (and men) involved.

Fertility change in either direction is, at best, a crude, indirect, and slow mechanism for achieving economic and other policy goals, while economic growth itself is a crude, indirect, and inefficient means of advancing human wellbeing. Just as the anti-natalist policies of the mid-twentieth century were motivated—at least in part—by the desire of American businessmen and philanthropists to control overseas populations and by the desire of governments to control unruly elements of their own populations, today's pronatalist policies seem to be motivated primarily by xenophobic nationalism and patriarchal nostalgia. Both sets of policies scapegoat and target the most vulnerable members of society. Characterising either population growth or impending depopulation as a catastrophe, and focusing solely on fertility adjustments as the solution, absolves governments of their responsibility to use the full range of policy tools available to address the economic, environmental, or social issues currently attributed to excessive, insufficient, or negative population growth in just, equitable, and effective ways. ■


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Kleidung wider den Tod zu Rom. Anno 1656.

Also gehen die Doctores Medici dahei zu Rom, wann sie die andere Pest ertrancte se-
sonen besuchen, sie zu curiren und tragen, sich wider dem Gifft zu sichern, ein langes Kleid von ge-
wächsten Tuch ihr Angesicht ist verlarvt, für den Augen haben sie grosse Crystalline Brillen, wider
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wol versehen ist, eine lange Ruthe und darmit deuten sie, was man thun, und gebrauche soll.

The Age of Depopulation: Surviving a World Gone Grey

NICHOLAS EBERSTADT

Although few yet see it coming, humans are about to enter a new era of history. Call it "the age of depopulation." For the first time since the Black Death in the 1300s, the planetary population will decline. But whereas the last implosion was caused by a deadly disease borne by fleas, the coming one will be entirely due to choices made by people.

With birthrates plummeting, more and more societies are heading into an era of pervasive and indefinite depopulation, one that will eventually encompass the whole planet. What lies ahead is a world made up of shrinking and ageing societies. Net mortality—when a society experiences more deaths than births—will likewise become the new norm. Driven by an unrelenting collapse in fertility, family structures and living arrangements heretofore imagined only in science fiction novels will become commonplace, unremarkable features of everyday life.

Human beings have no collective memory of depopulation. Overall global numbers last declined about 700 years ago, in the wake of the bubonic plague that tore through much of Eurasia. In the following seven centuries, the world's population surged almost 20-fold. And just over the past century, the human population has quadrupled.

The last global depopulation was reversed by procreative power once the Black Death ran its course. This time around, a dearth of procreative power is the cause of humanity's dwindling numbers, a first in the history of the species. A revolutionary force drives the impending depopulation: a worldwide reduction in the desire for children.

So far, government attempts to incentivise childbearing have failed to bring fertility rates back to replacement levels. Future government policy, regardless of its ambition, will not stave off depopulation. The shrinking of the world's population is all but inevitable. Societies will have fewer workers, entrepreneurs, and innovators—and more people dependent on care and assistance. The problems this dynamic raises, however, are not necessarily tantamount to a catastrophe. Depopulation is not a grave sentence; rather, it is a difficult new context, one in which countries can still find ways to thrive. Governments must prepare their societies now to meet the social and economic challenges of an ageing and depopulating world.

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In the United States and elsewhere, thinkers and policymakers are not ready for this new demographic order. Most people cannot comprehend the coming changes or imagine how prolonged depopulation will recast societies, economies, and power politics. But it is not too late for leaders to reckon with the seemingly unstoppable force of depopulation and help their countries succeed in a world gone grey.

A Spin of The Globe

Global fertility has plunged since the population explosion in the 1960s. For over two generations, the world's average childbearing levels have headed relentlessly downward, as one country after another joined in the decline. According to the UN Population Division, the total fertility rate for the planet was only half as high in 2015 as it was in 1965. By the UNPD's reckoning, every country saw birthrates drop over that period.

And the downswing in fertility just kept going. Today, the great majority of the world's people live in countries with below-replacement fertility levels, patterns inherently incapable of sustaining long-term population stability. (As a rule of thumb, a total fertility rate of 2.1 births per woman approximates the replacement threshold in affluent countries with high life expectancy—but the replacement level is somewhat higher in countries with lower life expectancy or marked imbalances in the ratio of baby boys to baby girls.)

In recent years, the birth plunge has not only continued but also seemingly quickened. According to the UNPD, at least two-thirds of the world's population lived in sub-replacement countries in 2019, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. The economist Jesús Fernández-Villaverde has contended that the overall global fertility rate may have dropped below the replacement level since then. Rich and poor countries alike have witnessed record-breaking, jaw-dropping collapses in fertility. A quick spin of the globe offers a startling picture.

Start with East Asia. The UNPD has reported that the entire region tipped into depopulation in 2021. By 2022, every major population there—in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—was shrinking. By 2023, fertility levels were 40 percent below replacement in Japan, over 50 percent below replacement in China, almost 60 percent below replacement in Taiwan, and an astonishing 65 percent below replacement in South Korea.

As for Southeast Asia, the UNPD has estimated that the region as a whole fell below the replacement level around 2018. Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam have been sub-replacement countries for years. Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world, joined the sub-replacement club in 2022, according to official figures. The Philippines now reports just 1.9 births per woman. The birthrate of impoverished, war-riven Myanmar is below replacement, too. In Thailand, deaths now exceed births and the population is declining.

In South Asia, sub-replacement fertility prevails not only in India—now the world's most populous country—but also in Nepal and Sri Lanka; all three dropped below replacement before the pandemic. (Bangladesh is on the verge of falling below the replacement threshold.) In India, urban fertility levels have dropped markedly. In the vast metropolis of Kolkata, for instance, state health officials reported in 2021 that the fertility rate was down to an amazing one birth per woman, less than half the replacement level and lower than in any major city in Germany or Italy.

The UNPD has estimated that the replacement threshold for the world as a whole is roughly 2.18 births per woman. Its latest medium variant projections—roughly, the median of projected outcomes—for 2024 have put global fertility at just three percent above replacement, and its low variant projections—the lower end of projected outcomes—have estimated that the planet

is already eight percent below that level. It is possible that humanity has dropped below the planetary net-replacement rate already. What is certain, however, is that for a quarter of the world, population decline is already underway, and the rest of the world is on course to follow those pioneers into the depopulation that lies ahead.

The Power of Choice

The worldwide plunge in fertility levels is still in many ways a mystery. It is generally believed that economic growth and material progress—what scholars often call "development" or "modernisation"—account for the world's slide into super-low birthrates and national population decline. Since birthrate declines commenced with the socioeconomic rise of the West—and since the planet is becoming ever richer, healthier, more educated, and more urbanised—many observers presume lower birthrates are simply the direct consequence of material advances.

But the truth is that developmental thresholds for below-replacement fertility have been falling over time. Nowadays, countries can veer into sub-replacement with low incomes, limited levels of education, little urbanisation, and extreme poverty. Myanmar and Nepal are impoverished UN-designated Least Developed Countries, but they are now also sub-replacement societies.

During the postwar period, a veritable library of research has been published on factors that might explain the decline in fertility that picked up pace in the twentieth century. Drops in infant mortality rates, greater access to modern contraception, higher rates of education and literacy, increases in female labour-force participation and the status of women—all these potential determinants and many more were extensively scrutinised by scholars. But stubborn real-life exceptions always prevented the formation of any ironclad socioeconomic generalisation about fertility decline.

Eventually, in 1994, the economist Lant Pritchett discovered the most powerful national fertility predictor ever detected. That decisive factor turned out to be simple: what women want. Because survey data conventionally focus on female fertility preferences, not those of their husbands or partners, scholars know much more about women's desire for children than men's. Pritchett determined that there is an almost one-to-one correspondence around the world between national fertility levels and the number of babies women say they want to have. This finding underscored the central role of volition—of human agency—in fertility patterns.

Volition is why, even in an increasingly healthy and prosperous world of over eight billion people, the extinction of every family line could be only one generation away.

Countries for Old Men

The consensus among demographic authorities today is that the global population will peak later this century and then start to decline. Some estimates suggest that this might happen as soon as 2053, others as late as the 2070s or 2080s.

Regardless of when this turn commences, a depopulated future will differ sharply from the present. Low fertility rates mean that annual deaths will exceed annual births in more countries and by widening margins over the coming generation. According to some projections, by 2050, over 130 countries across the planet will be part of the growing net-mortality zone—an area encompassing about five-eighths of the world's projected population. Net-mortality countries will emerge in sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, starting with South Africa. Once a society has entered net mortality, only continued and ever-increasing immigration can stave off long-term population decline.

Future labour forces will shrink around the world because of the spread of sub-

replacement birth rates today. By 2040, national cohorts of people between the ages of 15 and 49 will decrease more or less everywhere outside sub-Saharan Africa. That group is already shrinking in the West and in East Asia. It is set to start dropping in Latin America by 2033 and will do so just a few years later in Southeast Asia (2034), India (2036), and Bangladesh (2043). By 2050, two-thirds of people around the world could see working-age populations (people between the ages of 20 and 64) diminish in their countries—a trend that stands to constrain economic potential in those countries in the absence of innovative adjustments and countermeasures.

A depopulating world will be an ageing one. Across the globe, the march to low fertility, and now to super-low birth rates, is creating top-heavy population pyramids, in which the old begin to outnumber the young. Over the coming generation, aged societies will become the norm.

By 2040—except, once again, in sub-Saharan Africa—the number of people under the age of 50 will decline. By 2050, there will be hundreds of millions fewer people under the age of 60 outside sub-Saharan Africa than there are today—some 13 per cent fewer, according to several UNPD projections. At the same time, the number of people who are 65 or older will be exploding: a consequence of relatively high birth rates back in the late twentieth century and longer life expectancy.

While overall population growth slumps, the number of seniors (defined here as people aged 65 or older) will surge exponentially—everywhere. Outside Africa, that group will double in size to 1.4 billion by 2050. The upsurge in the 80-plus population—the "super-old"—will be even more rapid. That contingent will nearly triple in the non-African world, leaping to roughly 425 million by 2050. Just over two decades ago, fewer than 425 million people on the planet had even reached their 65th birthday.

The shape of things to come is suggested by mind-bending projections for countries at the vanguard of tomorrow's depopulation: places with abidingly low birth rates for over half a century and favourable life expectancy trends. South Korea provides the most stunning vision of a depopulating society just a generation away. Current projections have suggested that South Korea will mark three deaths for every birth by 2050. In some UNPD projections, the median age in South Korea will approach 60. More than 40 per cent of the country's population will be senior citizens; more than one in six South Koreans will be over the age of 80. South Korea will have just a fifth as many babies in 2050 as it did in 1961. It will have barely 1.2 working-age people for every senior citizen.

Should South Korea's current fertility trends persist, the country's population will continue to decline by over three per cent per year—crashing by 95 per cent over the course of a century. What is on track to happen in South Korea offers a foretaste of what lies in store for the rest of the world.

Wave of Senescence

Depopulation will upend familiar social and economic rhythms. Societies will have to adjust their expectations to comport with the new realities of fewer workers, savers, taxpayers, renters, home buyers, entrepreneurs, innovators, inventors, and, eventually, consumers and voters. The pervasive greying of the population and protracted population decline will hobble economic growth and cripple social welfare systems in rich countries, threatening their very prospects for continued prosperity. Without sweeping changes in incentive structures, life-cycle earning and consumption patterns, and government policies for taxation and social expenditures, dwindling workforces, reduced savings and investment, unsustainable social outlays, and budget deficits are all in the cards for today's developed countries.

Until this century, only affluent societies in the West and in East Asia had gone grey.

But in the foreseeable future, many poorer countries will have to contend with the needs of an aged society even though their workers are far less productive than those in wealthier countries.

Consider Bangladesh: a poor country today that will be an elderly society tomorrow, with over 13 per cent of its 2050 population projected to be seniors. The backbone of the Bangladeshi labour force in 2050 will be today's youth. But standardised tests show that five in six members of this group fail to meet even the very lowest international skill standards deemed necessary for participation in a modern economy: the overwhelming majority of this rising cohort cannot "read and answer basic questions" or "add, subtract, and round whole numbers and decimals." In 2020, Ireland was roughly as elderly as Bangladesh will be in 2050—but in Ireland nowadays, only one in six young people lacks such minimal skills.

The poor, elderly countries of the future may find themselves under great pressure to build welfare states before they can actually fund them. But income levels are likely to be decidedly lower in 2050 for many Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and North African countries than they were in Western countries at the same stage of population greying—how can these countries achieve the adequate means to support and care for their elderly populations?

In rich and poor countries alike, a coming wave of senescence stands to impose completely unfamiliar burdens on many societies. Although people in their 60s and 70s may well lead economically active and financially self-reliant lives in the foreseeable future, the same is not true for those in their 80s or older. The super-old are the world's fastest-growing cohort. By 2050, there will be more of them than children in some countries. The burden of caring for people with dementia will pose growing costs—human, social, economic—in an ageing and shrinking world.

That burden will become all the more onerous as families wither. Families are society's most basic unit and are still humanity's most indispensable institution. Both precipitous ageing and steep sub-replacement fertility are inextricably connected to the ongoing revolution in family structure. As familial units grow smaller and more atomised, fewer people get married, and high levels of voluntary childlessness take hold in country after country. As a result, families and their branches become ever less able to bear weight—even as the demands that might be placed on them steadily rise.

Just how depopulating societies will cope with this broad retreat of the family is by no means obvious. Perhaps others could step in to assume roles traditionally undertaken by blood relatives. But appeals to duty and sacrifice for those who are not kin may lack the strength of calls from within a family. Governments may try to fill the breach, but sad experience with a century and a half of social policy suggests that the state is a horrendously expensive substitute for the family—and not a very good one. Technological advances—robotics, artificial intelligence, human-like cyber-caregivers and cyber-"friends"—may eventually make some currently unfathomable contribution. But for now, that prospect belongs in the realm of science fiction, and even there, dystopia is far more likely than anything verging on utopia.

The Magic Formula

This new chapter for humanity may seem ominous, perhaps frightening. But even in a greying and depopulating world, steadily improving living standards and material and technological advances will still be possible.

Just two generations ago, governments, pundits, and global institutions were panicking about a population explosion, fearing mass starvation and immiseration as a result of childbearing in poor countries. In hindsight, that panic was bizarrely overblown. The so-called population explosion was in reality a testament to increases in life

expectancy owing to better public health practices and access to health care. Despite tremendous population growth in the last century, the planet is richer and better fed than ever before—and natural resources are more plentiful and less expensive (after adjusting for inflation) than ever before.

The same formula that spread prosperity during the twentieth century can ensure further advances in the twenty-first and beyond—even in a world marked by depopulation. The essence of modern economic development is the continuing augmentation of human potential and a propitious business climate, framed by policies and institutions that help unlock the value in human beings. With that formula, India, for instance, has virtually eliminated extreme poverty over the past half-century. Improvements in health, education, and science and technology are fuel for the motor generating material advances. Irrespective of demographic ageing and shrinking, societies can still benefit from progress across the board in these areas. The world has never been as extensively schooled as it is today, and there is no reason to expect the rise in training to stop, despite ageing and shrinking populations, given the immense gains that accrue from education to both societies and the trainees themselves.

Remarkable improvements in health and education around the world speak to the application of scientific and social knowledge—the stock of which has been relentlessly advancing, thanks to human inquiry and innovation. That drive will not stop now. Even an elderly, depopulating world can grow increasingly affluent.

Yet as the old population pyramid is turned on its head and societies assume new structures under long-term population decline, people will need to develop new habits of mind, conventions, and cooperative objectives. Policymakers will have to learn new rules for development amid depopulation. The basic formula for material advance—reaping the rewards of augmented human resources and technological innovation through a favourable business climate—will be the same. But the terrain of risk and opportunity facing societies and economies will change with depopulation. And in response, governments will have to adjust their policies to reckon with the new realities.

The initial transition to depopulation will no doubt entail painful, wrenching changes. In depopulating societies, today's "pay-as-you-go" social programmes for national pension and old-age health care will fail as the working population shrinks and the number of elderly claimants balloons. If today's age-specific labour and spending patterns continue, greying and depopulating countries will lack the savings to invest for growth or even to replace old infrastructure and equipment. Current incentives, in short, are seriously misaligned for the advent of depopulation. But policy reforms and private-sector responses can hasten necessary adjustments.

To adapt successfully to a depopulating world, states, businesses, and individuals will have to place a premium on responsibility and savings. There will be less margin for error for investment projects, be they public or private, and no rising tide of demand from a growing pool of consumers or taxpayers to count on.

As people live longer and remain healthy into their advanced years, they will retire later. Voluntary economic activity at ever-older ages will make lifelong learning imperative. Artificial intelligence may be a double-edged sword in this regard: although AI may offer productivity improvements that depopulating societies could not otherwise manage, it could also hasten the displacement of those with inadequate or outdated skills. High unemployment could turn out to be a problem in shrinking, labour-scarce societies, too.

States and societies will have to ensure that labour markets are flexible—reducing barriers to entry, welcoming the job turnover and churn that boost dynamism, eliminating age discrimination, and more—given the urgency

of increasing the productivity of a dwindling labour force. To foster economic growth, countries will need even greater scientific advances and technological innovation.

Prosperity in a depopulating world will also depend on open economies: free trade in goods, services, and finance to counter the constraints that declining populations otherwise engender. And as the hunger for scarce talent becomes more acute, the movement of people will take on new economic salience. In the shadow of depopulation, immigration will matter even more than it does today.

Not all aged societies, however, will be capable of assimilating young immigrants or turning them into loyal and productive citizens. And not all migrants will be capable of contributing effectively to receiving economies, especially given the stark lack of basic skills characterising too many of the world's rapidly growing populations today.

Pragmatic migration strategies will be of benefit to depopulating societies in the generations ahead—bolstering their labour forces, tax bases, and consumer spending while also rewarding the immigrants' countries of origin with lucrative remittances. With populations shrinking, governments will have to compete for migrants, with an even greater premium placed on attracting talent from abroad. Getting competitive migration policies right—and securing public support for them—will be a major task for future governments but one well worth the effort.

The Geopolitics of Numbers

Depopulation will not only transform how governments deal with their citizens; it will also transform how they deal with one another. Humanity's shrinking ranks will inexorably alter the current global balance of power and strain the existing world order.

Some of the ways it will do so are relatively easy to foresee today. One of the demographic certainties about the generation ahead is that differentials in population growth will make for rapid shifts in the relative size of the world's major regions. Tomorrow's world will be much more African. Although about a seventh of the world's population today lives in sub-Saharan Africa, the region accounts for nearly a third of all births; its share of the world's workforce and population are thus set to grow immensely over the coming generation.

But this does not necessarily mean that an "African century" lies just ahead. In a world where per capita output varies by as much as a factor of 100 between countries, human capital—not just population totals—matters greatly to national power, and the outlook for human capital in sub-Saharan Africa remains disappointing. Standardised tests indicate that a stunning 94 per cent of youth in the region lack even basic skills. As huge as the region's 2050 pool of workers promises to be, the number of workers with basic skills may not be much larger there than it will be in Russia alone in 2050.

India is now the world's most populous country and on track to continue to grow for at least another few decades. Its demographics virtually assure that the country will be a leading power in 2050. But India's rise is compromised by human resource vulnerabilities. India has a world-class cadre of scientists, technicians, and elite graduates. But ordinary Indians receive poor education. A shocking seven out of eight young people in India today lack even basic skills—a consequence of both low enrolment and the generally poor quality of the primary and secondary schools available to those lucky enough to get schooling. The skills profile for China's youth is decades, maybe generations, ahead of India's youth today. India is unlikely to surpass a depopulating China in per capita output or even in total GDP for a very long time.

A New Chapter

The era of depopulation is nigh. Dramatic ageing and the indefinite decline of the human population—eventually on a global scale—will mark the end of an extraordinary chapter of human history and the beginning of another, quite possibly no less extraordinary than the one before it. Depopulation will transform humanity profoundly, likely in numerous ways societies have not begun to consider and may not yet be in a position to understand.

Yet for all the momentous changes ahead, people can also expect important and perhaps reassuring continuities. Humanity has already found the formula for banishing material scarcity and engineering ever-greater prosperity. That formula can work regardless of whether populations rise or fall.

Humanity bestrides the planet, explores the cosmos, and continues to reshape itself because humans are the world's most inventive, adaptable animal. But it will take more than a bit of inventiveness and adaptability to cope with the unintended future consequences of the family and fertility choices being made today. ■


WORK
RETIRE

No Golden Handshake? : Work Till You Live

FARHEEN

"All countries should begin planning now."

– Averting the Old-Age Crisis,World Bank, 1994

Pension expenditures across Asia will be up from 1% to 3.6% of GDP by 2030. It was never meant to be this expensive. A century ago, most people did not live long enough to worry about retirement. When Otto von Bismarck introduced the first state funded pension in 1889, it was designed for those over 70 at a time when Germany's average life expectancy was just 39. The goal of the scheme was to keep workers loyal, socialists at bay, and not to help the elderly. Few people lived long enough to withdraw them, so it worked back then. This was picked up by other countries during industrialisation, for similar reasons, so as to maintain stability against labour movements.

Fast forward to Asia in the 21st century, and the math no longer adds up. People are living longer, but pension systems are either incomplete, underfunded, or outright broken. Many countries introduced pensions while still moving from agrarian to industrial economies. Formal employment was not widespread. Social safety nets were weak. Governments assumed economic growth would take care of future pensions. It didn't.

Asian countries never built the kind of welfare state seen in post-war Europe. The region's approach to pension was shaped by economic pragmatism more than social security. Esping-Andersen's classic welfare state typology, liberal, conservative, and social-democratic, struggles to fit Asian economies. Instead, academics like Ian Holliday have argued that Asia is closer to a "productivist welfare model," in which economic expansion is prioritised and social security is intended to meet the demands of the labour market rather than social redistribution. This is evident in how pensions are structured. Unlike Europe, where universal pension schemes provide a baseline income for all, most Asian countries have fragmented systems that tie benefits to employment status. Civil servants and formal

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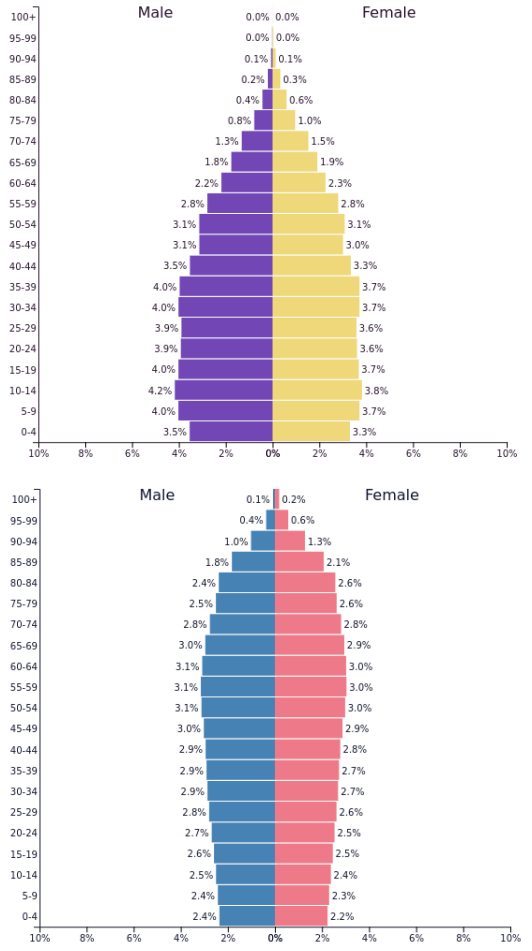
sector workers receive generous pensions, while informal workers, migrants, and rural populations are left with little to no safety net. In China, for instance, retired government workers receive pensions nearly four times higher than those from the private sector.

TOWARDS DEMOGRAPHIC BURDEN:



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision.

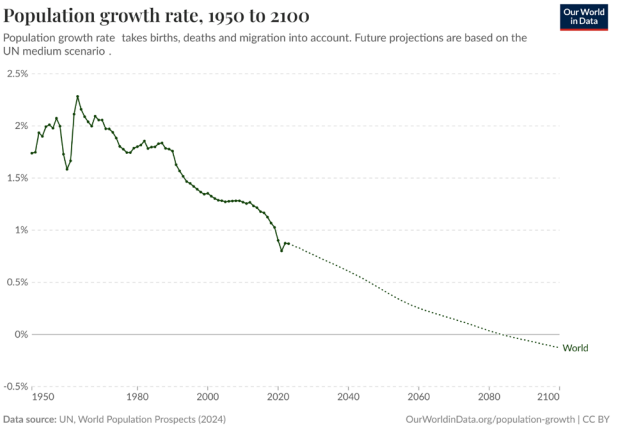
A demographic explosion drove Asia's economic rise. The "Asian Economic Miracle," a term associated with World Bank economist Andrew Mason, described how certain countries took advantage of their demographic dividend, a period when the working-age population far outnumbered the dependents6. The paper challenged the prevalent neoclassical economic theory of the day by highlighting how government intervention, trade policies, and labour-intensive industries let nations maximise this advantage.

Overpopulation was the main concern at the time. Asia was at the center of it. Too many people, not enough resources. Governments responded with aggressive birth control policies: China's one-child policy, India's sterilisation drives. For decades, the Malthusian concern about unbridled population increased shaped social and economic development. But the real "population bomb" of the 21st century is not too many people, it's too few young workers supporting too many elderly. "Longevity and lower fertility are turning the classic population pyramid into a rectangle," demographers Dr. Deboosere and Dr. Vandenheede note.

And the problem is bigger than just aging, many Asian economies are hitting the 'middle-income cliff'. Initially coined by economist Oizumi Keiichiro from Japan Research Institute, the term captures a more extreme form of the middle-income trap whereby countries experience population ageing before attaining high-income status causing economic stagnation. Unlike the typical growth slowdown in middle-income economies, these countries face a shrinking workforce and rising dependency ratios before they fully develop. China, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the very nations riding a young workforce to wealth are suddenly ageing before their economies develop. Although many middle-income countries peaked in working-age share between 2010 and 2020, their GDP growth is now slowing. The working-age population of China fell for the first time in 2012 and is expected to fall by 200 million by 2025. Thailand's labour force peaked in 2017 and is in freefall going forward. Additionally, Vietnam peaked in 2011 and South Korea in 2019. By 2040, the same pattern will also strike Indonesia,

Bangladesh, India, and Singapore.

COUNTRIES BY WHEN TOTAL FERTILITY IS EXPECTED OR OBSERVED TO FALL BELOW 2.1 BIRTHS PER WOMAN



Source: UN2024

This decrease in the working population is the direct result of a historic fall in fertility rates. Fertility rates have nosedived in countries across Asia. With fertility rates much below the replacement level of 2.1, Japan (1.2) and South Korea (0.7) have some of the lowest birth rates worldwide. South Asian and Central nations such as Yemen (4.6) still have high fertility rates, thus their populations will remain younger for longer. Though younger, India (2.0) is following this path as urban fertility rates drop drastically.

Part of the explanation is also the growing dependency ratio. From 6% in Central Asia and Western Asia to 17% in East Asia, the share of people aged 65 and above is also progressively rising. With a shockingly 29% elderly population, Japan leads; followed by South Korea at 19%; Taiwan at 18%; and China at 15%. By contrast, areas like South Asia and Central Asia still have rather young populations; just 7% and 6% respectively are 65+ years old. Except for western Asia, most Asian countries are expected to fall below the replacement rate 2.1 by 2025, though.

This slow change marks the end of demographic dividend, which drove the Asian miracle and toward demographic onus, burdening the economy from aging population. Oizumi points out that "if the demographic divided can be considered as a tailwind for economic growth, population ageing could be considered as a headwind." The headwind brought on by population ageing is clearly showing now.

Social Safety Net for the Aged in Asia:

One of the most visible effects of demographic onus is in our safety nets. These systems, designed for a time when workers outnumbered retirees, are now struggling to keep up with shrinking workforces and an ageing population.

TABLE 1- MEMBERSHIP OF MANDATORY PENSION SCHEMES BY POPULATION AND LABOUR FORCE

Country	Year	Members	Percentage of population aged 15 to 65	Percentage of labour force	Country	Year	Members	Percentage of population aged 15 to 65	Percentage of labour force
East Asia/Pacific					**OECD Asia-Pacific**				
China	2021	480 700 000	48.7%	60.7%	Australia	2020	16 000 000	95.6%	117.2%
Hong Kong (China)	2022	4 590 000	90.80	120.6%	Canada	2019	18 723 000	75.1%	89.1%
Indonesia	2021	30 660 901	16.5%	22.0%	Japan	2019	67 460 000	91.4%	98.9%
Malaysia	2021	7 690 000	32.8%	47.2%	Korea	2021	22 350 000	60.3%	78.3%
Philippines	2021	40 490 000	55.5%	92.4%	New Zealand				
Singapore	2021	2 770 600	69.3%	84.6%	United States	2022	179 256 000	81.6%	108.8%
Thailand	2021	23 740 954	47.6%	60.8%	**Other OECD**				
Viet Nam	2021	16 700 000	24.9%	29.7%	France	2019	28 322 400	71.4%	91.4%
South Asia					Germany	2019	36 694 000	68.3%	83.7%
India	2021	258 786 358	27.2%	54.8%	Italy	2019	23 823 000	62.4%	95.5%
Pakistan	2022	9 176 081	6.6%	12.4%	United Kingdom	2005	28 402 200	71.5%	93.2%
Sri Lanka	2019	2 500 000	17.6%	30.3%	**OECD9**			**75.8%**	**95.1%**

Source: National reports.

Source: Pensions at a Glance Asia/Pacific 2024, OECD

Pension coverage across Asia is rather unequal. With Hong Kong leading at 90.8% of the working-age population registered in a pension scheme, China and Japan have some of the highest pension coverage percentages. South Asia lags far behind. At just 6.6%, Pakistan has the lowest coverage; India, with its large economy, covers just 27.2% of

its working-age population. This problem is made worse by the way labour markets are set up. Workers in the sizable informal sectors of many Asian economies never make pension contributions. In India, 90% of the workforce works without the protections of the pension system, even though formal employees are covered by it. Southeast Asia, where there is still a significant amount of informal employment, faces the same issue. As a result, many retirees rely on insufficient personal savings or family support instead of receiving any official pension at all. In nations like the Vietnam, where only 25% of the working-age population has pension coverage, the situation is especially dire. These systems tend to exclude or marginalise women, as they often fail to consider the challenges faced by them. Although countries do provide targeted pension to the most vulnerable (destitutes, or widows), these tend to be quite little.

For those who do have pensions, the differences are rather striking. Retirees of China's government get four times the pension paid in the private sector. Public-sector workers in Malaysia, Japan, and Korea have far more generous benefits than those in the private sector. This two-tier system has increased disparity and left many workers without protection. Among those who qualify, replacement rates, that is, pension as a percentage of pre-retirement income are low relative to OECD benchmarks. At 72%, the Philippines boasts the highest replacement rate; India, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka all fall below 40%. Moreover, net pension replacement rates, what retirees take home after taxes, also vary greatly. China leads at 88%; Pakistan comes in lowest at 41%. The inequalities do not stop there either. China boasts the highest pension wealth, that is, the whole lifetime value of retirement benefits, 15.7 times annual earnings for men, 15.5 for women, while Pakistan and Sri Lanka have just 6.1 times annual earnings.

The real crisis, though, is with pension funding. Most Asian nations rely on Pay-As-You-Go (PAYG) systems, in which current workers support current retirees. This comes under Defined Benefit (DB) system, where employers and government bear the cost of pension. These models collapse when the worker-to-retiree ratio declines. By 2035 China's urban worker pension fund is expected to be in deficit; South Korea's reserves will run out by 2055. Already spending 10% of its GDP on pensions, Japan is seeing rising expenses. China's ageing population is expected to rise to some 26% by 2050, giving rise to the 4-2-1 problem, meaning one child would have to bear the responsibility of two parents and sometimes four grandparents, a result of the one-child policy era. With a declining current replacement rate of 1.16 compared to, the necessary 2.1 for a stable population. America, for instance, has a declining yet more stable replacement rate of 1.62, supported by its open immigration policies, a stance opposed by many East Asian countries. Governments across Asia will be compelled to cut benefits, increase taxes, or borrow without intervention, so burdening the financial load to next generations.

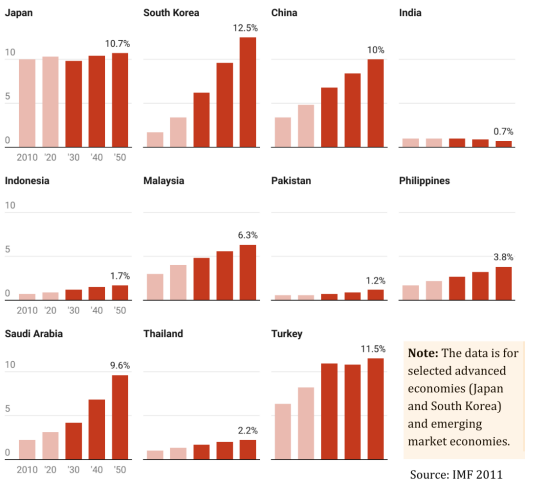
Some nations have switched to Defined Contribution (DC) systems, whereby employees fund their own retirement. Moving towards funded defined contribution (FDC) models, which lighten the state's load, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka Combining pensions with housing savings and healthcare savings, Singapore's Central Provident Fund (CPF) distributes risk across several needs. These systems do, however, come with certain dangers. Today, financial markets and wages define retirement security. Workers save less if wages remain unchanged. Retirement funds disappear if markets collapse. With some of the lowest accrual rates (below 0.5%), speed at which pensions grow, India and Hong Kong practically make it impossible for low-income workers to save enough.

Governments are already confronting difficult decisions. The financial pressure is growing. China's workforce is declining while its pension expenditure is set to triple by 2030.

Among the fastest-growing dependence ratios worldwide are those of Thailand (44 per 100) and South Korea (41 per 100). By 2054, China's old-age dependency ratio is also expected to reach 64.2 per 100 working-age persons; in Hong Kong, it will soar to 117.1. By 2040, once young economies like Indonesia, India, and Bangladesh will face demographic pressure. Governments expected economic development to support pension funds, but GDP by itself cannot help to solve the crisis. Particularly in low-tax countries, the pension load is rising more quickly than tax collections.

Many Asian governments maintained low tax rates to remain competitive, unlike Europe, where strong taxes support social security. This is now backfiring. Economist Peter Morgan from ADB, estimates that public pension spending in emerging Asian economies will increase by up to 3.6 percentage points of GDP by 2030. For some countries, this will be a gradual shift. For others, it will be a fiscal shock. But unlike Japan, many Asian economies have not yet reached high-income status. They will have to bear this burden with weaker fiscal reserves.

PENSION EXPENDITURE AS PERCENTAGE OF GDP, 2010–2050



To escape this, some governments are experimenting with hybrid pension plans. PAYG is mixed in China with personal savings accounts. The CPF system in Singapore distributes risk among several uses. All of these strategies, however, call for more labour contributions and lowering take-home pay. To increase pension coverage, other governments might be compelled to levy social security taxes on unregistered income. Without reform, millions of retirees will be left without support.

The 'Workforce' Squeeze

The actual burden of an ageing population is not just on pension systems but on the labour force. Not only are retirees supported by the declining 24–65 age group; they also bear the financial weight of whole economies. Less workers today have to support more pensioners, but that is only one aspect of the issue. They are also paying for their own growing needs including childcare, housing, healthcare, and savings for their own ultimate retirement. The outcome is a generation being financially stretched in both directions.

Many of this workforce are aware they are funding a system that might not be able to help them down road. While they pay more to support pensions for others, they have little assurance those pensions will last when it comes time for their own retirement. Unlike the generation of their parents, they cannot depend on government safety nets or extended families to give financial stability. Rather, they have to negotiate a volatile job market and growing expenses with less public benefits.

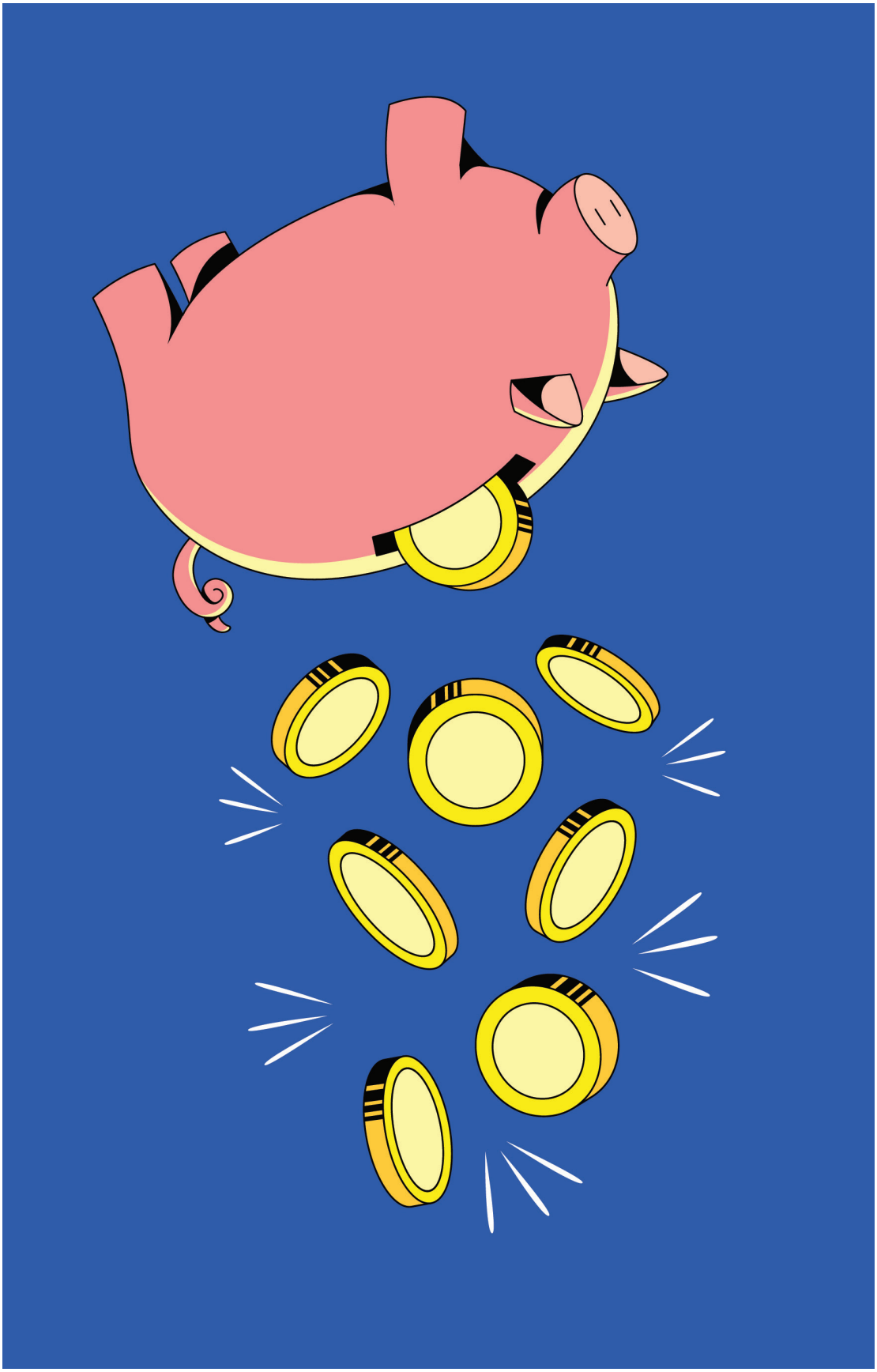
Often the answer is delaying retirement. More countries are opting to increase the retirement age. This, however, assumes that people can and want to work into their late sixties and seventies. For many in physically taxing professions, this is impractical. Currently, women can still retire five years earlier than men in countries including China, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; but this policy is probably going to be changed, adding more

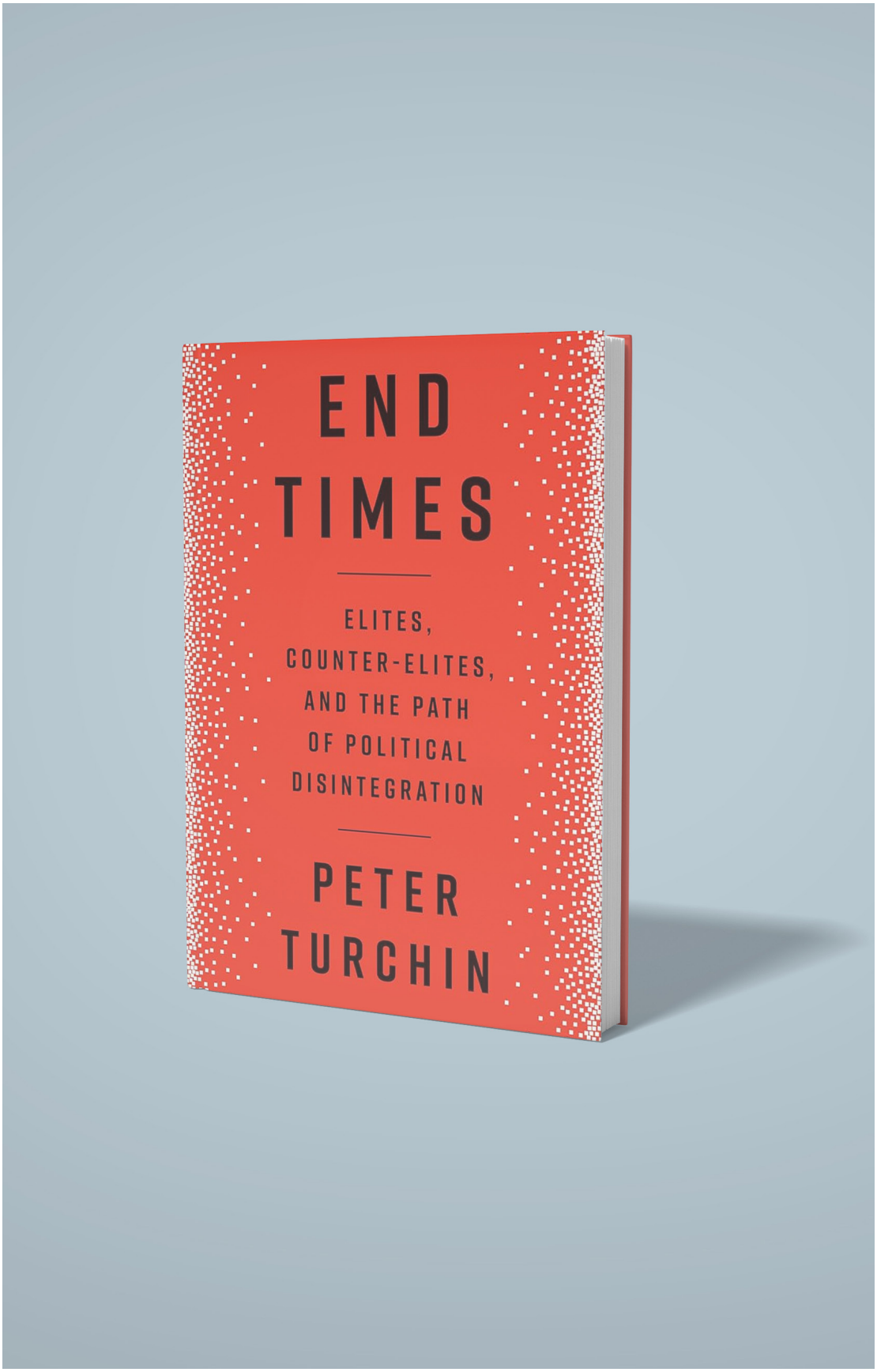
pressure. Others, including Australia and Japan, have already raised retirement ages above 65, so defining longer working life as the norm. Longer careers do not always translate into steady employment, though. Many older employees struggle to keep up in sectors that are fast changing or suffer with age discrimination.

Another approach countries are trying to experiment with is improving fertility. Some governments have begun to set up matchmaking for their young labour force, by making fertility a state issue. Meanwhile, civil society and market are stepping up to fill these gaps. For example, Emoha in Bangalore, India, has a vertical called Emoha's Daughters who are assigned to elderly for remote caregiving. But that is far from enough.

As economist Andrew Mason noted, countries with a "workforce bulge," see more economic growth and productivity. That bulge is now changing into a workforce squeeze. This is more than just pension crisis, it's an economic one. Younger generations will inherit a system that no longer fits them, disposable incomes will drop, and tax loads will grow. Governments must make impossible decisions between raising payroll taxes, cutting benefits, pushing more risk onto individuals, or raising retirement ages. While every decision has political and financial consequences, doing nothing is the most expensive one of all.

The pension crisis facing Asia is not a future one. There are already signs of the squeeze. Whether governments act now or later will decide whether retirement stays a right or turns into a privilege only the few can afford.■




END TIMES
ELITES, COUNTER-ELITES, AND THE PATH OF POLITICAL DISINTEGRATION
PETER TURCHIN

End Times: Exploring Political Disintegration

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER TURCHIN

Dr Peter Turchin is a complexity scientist and historian specialising in cliodynamics, a field he pioneered that applies mathematical modelling to the study of historical societies. He is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut and a research associate at the School of Anthropology, University of Oxford. He also leads projects at the Complexity Science Hub Vienna and is the founding director of the Seshat: Global History Databank. His research explores long-term social processes, the rise and fall of empires, and patterns of political instability. He has authored numerous books, including War and Peace and War, Ages of Discord, and End Times: Elites, Counter-Elites and the Path of Political Disintegration.

Amogh Rai

Your book is fascinating, but I first came across your work through a smaller book that analysed 3,495 vital statistics to examine civilisations. As an economist interested in history, that approach intrigued me. Your background is in ecology, but you now apply complexity science to global history. Could you explain how Cliodynamics began and what it entails?

Peter Turchin

I've always been a complexity scientist, even before the field was formally established. Initially, I applied this approach to animal and plant populations, but now I study the evolution and dynamics of human societies.

Complexity science examines dynamic systems where multiple components interact in non-linear ways. Small changes can trigger cascading effects, making outcomes difficult to predict without computational and mathematical tools. We use explicit models—equations or agent-based simulations—to connect our assumptions with observable consequences and test theories with data, ideally large datasets.

My background is in population ecology, a field that integrated mathematics and data long before the social sciences. About 25 years ago, I realised these methods could fill gaps in our understanding of historical dynamics.

Amogh Rai

Your book blends large statistical models with narrative history, using examples like China's Mandarin class and England's War of the Roses to illustrate elite overproduction (a technical term used by Peter Turchin wherein a society is producing too many elite members relative to its ability to absorb them into the power structure leading to instability). Where does your data come from, particularly given the scarcity of written records in many societies, such as India?

Peter Turchin

This challenge isn't unique to history. In geology or evolutionary biology, we can't directly observe past events; we reconstruct them from incomplete data. The same applies to historical societies, though systematic methods had not been widely used in history until recently. By studying large-scale states that emerged around 6,000 years ago, we see they typically function well for about a century before experiencing crises…

Crises inevitably emerge, often leading to civil wars, revolutions, or upheavals. One key driver is population immiseration—the widespread impoverishment of society. When large sections of the population suffer economic hardship, dissatisfaction rises, increasing the risk of violence.

To analyse this, we examine economic data—wages, income, and wealth—but also social and psychological well-being, measured through happiness and dissatisfaction surveys. For historical analysis, biological well-being serves as a proxy. Average population height, influenced by childhood nutrition, physical hardship, and disease exposure, provides valuable insights. Since genetic composition remains stable, height trends reflect broader societal conditions. Human skeletons, preserved across centuries, offer a rich dataset; in Western Europe alone, over two million skeletal remains help track immiseration trends. This is one way historical proxies allow us to understand past societal shifts.

Amogh Rai

Your book discusses cycles of violence linked to immiseration—turmoil, an opening-up period, then stabilisation. In End Times (2023), you reference Angus Deaton's work on Deaths of Despair in the U.S. Do you see this cycle as a global phenomenon or a regional one?

Peter Turchin

We primarily study internal dynamics within large states like the U.S., China, and Russia. While external factors matter, larger states tend to be more insulated, making internal cycles clearer. Over a thousand years, we see rough synchronicity in crises across major states, though not perfect alignment.

History shows four major disintegration periods: the Age of Revolutions (1789–early 20th century), peaking in the 1848 European revolutions, China's Taiping Rebellion, and the U.S. Civil War; the General Crisis of the 17th Century, affecting Eurasia and the Americas; the Crisis of the Late Middle Ages (1350–1450); and the Crisis of the 12th Century. These cycles are primarily internally driven but can align due to global conditions—like metronomes on a shared surface gradually synchronising.

Amogh Rai

That makes sense. One striking part of your book is how you connect two seemingly different historical figures—Abraham Lincoln and Donald Trump.

Your framework of elites and counter-elites makes sense, but when you extend it historically—linking Trump and Lincoln through common patterns—an important question emerges: Can elites today escape these cycles?

In Russia, for example, we've seen a massive exodus of millionaires and billionaires. If elites leave, does that mitigate chaos or merely shift instability elsewhere?

Peter Turchin

That's a great question, but first, let's outline the forces driving instability.

When a society remains stable for several generations, elites accumulate power. Without constraints, they begin to reshape the economy in their favour, increasing wealth inequality. This process—what I call the wealth pump—transfers resources from the lower classes to the elite, leading to:

Widespread immiseration – Economic decline for the majority.

Elite overproduction – More people aspiring to elite status.

Intensified internal conflict – Growing competition among elites.

Modern societies recruit elites based on wealth and education. As elite numbers swell but opportunities remain limited, factionalism and instability grow.

Now, does elite migration reduce instability? It depends. On one hand, their departure can ease internal competition. On the other, it can weaken institutions, cause brain drain, and export instability elsewhere. The outcome depends on how remaining elites manage the situation.

A key problem is elite overproduction —more degree holders competing for a fixed number of elite positions, especially in politics. It's like musical chairs: if the number of players triples but the chairs stay the same, conflict is inevitable.

Now, let's return to your question. Would you mind repeating it?

Amogh Rai

Sure. Unlike in revolutionary France or medieval England, elites today have more mobility. Russian billionaires relocate to Dubai, avoiding complete collapse at home but also failing to stabilise it. Does this challenge Engels' thesis?

Peter Turchin

Not at all. Elite migration has always been part of the process.

Take the English Revolution. After Charles I's defeat, many Cavaliers fled to the American colonies, reducing tensions at home. Similarly, in 1990s Russia, oligarchs controlled the state, but when Putin consolidated power, many were forced out. Once abroad, their influence over Russian politics diminished.

Elite flight can temporarily ease pressure, but it doesn't eliminate instability—it simply shifts its dynamics.

This may have other negative consequences, but in terms of state stability, elite migration can be beneficial.

For example, during the Ukraine war, many degree holders left Russia, reducing elite competition. While this may harm economic growth, it stabilises the state—those who remain earn higher salaries and feel more secure, lowering the likelihood of rebellion. I'm not saying this is an overall good outcome, but strictly from a stability perspective, it reinforces order.

Amogh Rai

That's interesting. In your book, you discuss how English elites once exported their dissatisfaction by extracting rents in France, which contributed to instability there. Today, Russian elites relocating to the West don't seem to destabilise their host countries but still influence their homeland. Meanwhile, those who stay must maintain loyalty to the regime or face dire consequences. Does this mean modern instability is more manageable than in the past?

Peter Turchin

Not necessarily. The fundamental dynamics remain.

Take the Crisis of the Late Middle Ages—France collapsed due to elite overproduction and internal conflict, allowing England to invade. English nobles seeking status relocated to France, easing tensions at home. But when France recovered and expelled them, these displaced elites returned to England, fuelling internal strife that led to the Wars of the Roses.

Today, elites may be more mobile, but the pressures of competition and overproduction still exist. When billionaires flee to places like London or Cyprus, they lose direct influence over their home country, easing internal pressure without necessarily destabilising their new location. They often become political retirees rather than agitators.

Contrast this with Russia in the 1990s, when an influx of Western economic advisors and fund managers created pressure on the government. The key difference is whether elites are leaving or entering a country—one

process reduces instability, while the other can exacerbate it.

Amogh Rai

That's a fascinating insight. Now, shifting to another theme in your book—your views on lawyers stood out. You don't single out other professions in the same way. Why do you consider them particularly problematic?

Peter Turchin

Another historically disruptive profession is teaching—many revolutionary leaders, like Hong Xiuquan of the Taiping Rebellion, were teachers.

As for lawyers, many major revolutionaries—Lenin, Castro, Robespierre, Gandhi, and Lincoln—were trained in law. Even today, many dissident elites in the U.S. come from law backgrounds. Yale Law School, for example, has produced figures like Stewart Rhodes, founder of the Oath Keepers. This isn't to say lawyers are inherently dangerous, but historically, they have played key roles in revolutionary movements.

Amogh Rai

That's interesting, especially in the context of AI and automation.

Peter Turchin

The issue isn't lawyers themselves but their oversupply. In the U.S., the legal profession was balanced in the mid-20th century, but today, three times as many law graduates enter the field as there are jobs. With AI likely to automate legal tasks, this could worsen—potentially leaving six times more graduates than available positions.

The real risk isn't just unemployment but frustrated elites—intelligent, highly trained individuals with few opportunities. Historically, such conditions have fuelled revolutionary movements.

Amogh Rai

That ties into your broader concern about job creation. Given the fragile economic landscape, what long-term policies should states adopt to address these risks?

Peter Turchin

States have historically managed elite overproduction by creating new positions—military officers, bureaucrats, or ideological roles like clergy. However, this often leads to another crisis: fiscal collapse. As the general population becomes impoverished, tax revenues decline, putting further strain on state resources, especially when trying to accommodate surplus elites.

Financial collapse has often triggered instability—both before the English Civil War and the French Revolution, state expenditures became unsustainable. Simply creating more elite positions isn't a long-term solution; it eases short-term pressures but doesn't address the root causes. Historically, societies escape these cycles only after a period of civil war or revolution, which forces mass downward mobility among elites—some are killed, exiled, or pushed down the hierarchy.

The key to stability is shutting down the wealth pump—the system that funnels resources from the lower classes to the elite. Without this, elite overproduction continues, ensuring future crises. The Russian Revolution provides an example: mass elite displacement was brutal, but it temporarily resolved elite overproduction and restructured the economy in ways that improved worker wages.

Amogh Rai

That makes sense for the Western context. But looking at China's historical collapses, was elite overproduction the main cause, or did external factors—like famine—play an equal role? Your book Figuring Out the Past suggests that empire collapses often follow long cycles of displacement.

Peter Turchin

Elite overproduction is the most consistent driver of crisis, though factors like environmental stressors can exacerbate instability. China exemplifies this—natural

calamities often coincided with periods of elite competition, amplifying societal breakdowns.

Amogh Rai

Agreed. But consider Japan—between 1990 and 2012, its economy stagnated, yet the state remained stable. Does this challenge your framework?

Peter Turchin

Not necessarily. Japan already experienced a long period of instability—from the Meiji Restoration (1868) to the end of World War II (1945). Before modernisation, Japan faced a structural demographic crisis—its population surged, and the samurai class expanded even faster, leading to widespread impoverishment among them.

Post-1945, Japan underwent dramatic restructuring under U.S. occupation. General MacArthur oversaw elite displacement, economic reforms, and power redistribution. This downward mobility helped reset elite competition, allowing Japan to avoid the crises seen in other stagnating economies.

Japan has not yet reached full-blown crisis, but underlying pressures are building. A colleague researching Japan's social and economic trends has found stagnating birth weights—an indicator of societal stress—and widespread corruption.

Japan's political system functions more like a clan structure, with more than half of its prime ministers in the past 70 years descending from a single 19th-century samurai lineage. This monopolisation of power fuels elite frustration, increasing the risk of counter-elites.

A key next step would be a global analysis, selecting ten countries to track elite overproduction and instability, similar to what I did for the U.S. in 2010. By publishing predictions and evaluating them over a decade, we can rigorously test the theory's validity.

Amogh Rai

That makes sense. In End Times, you outline strategies to counter instability. Since publishing, have you added anything new to this toolbox?

Peter Turchin

Not significantly. The structural problems driving instability—particularly in the U.S.—have worsened over the past year. One unexpected development has been inflation. While overall inflation rates have declined, food and energy costs—critical for lower-income groups—have surged.

Economists ask, why is everyone unhappy when inflation is falling? But essentials like rent, fuel, and food have become significantly more expensive. Meanwhile, elite overproduction remains unchecked, exacerbating societal instability. These trends continue moving in an unfavourable direction.

Amogh Rai

Professor, my final question is in two parts.

First, how have neoliberal economic policies—especially second- and third-generation reforms—contributed to elite overproduction? In Asia, we've seen risky, VC-funded startups thrive under low interest rates, often elevating founders into the top income brackets regardless of their success. Has this economic recklessness—low taxation, artificial interest rates, and trickle-down economics—widened inequality and fuelled counter-elites?

Peter Turchin

Absolutely. As societies stabilise, ruling elites reshape economies to their advantage—often using ideology to justify it. In the U.S., neoliberalism provided this cover.

Initially a fringe economic school, neoliberal ideas gained traction in the 1970s—not because they were necessarily sound, but because they served elite interests. These policies—low taxation, deregulation, and weak industrial policy—spread to Europe and beyond, worsening inequality and instability.

Amogh Rai

That brings me to my second question. Around the world, figures like Trump and Milei have risen on populist waves but failed to meaningfully steer their states. Is this because modern bureaucratic elites are too entrenched, limiting their ability to enact change? And what does this mean for the future of the state?

Peter Turchin

The problem is that leaders like Trump and Milei don't understand the root causes of instability. Milei, in particular, takes neoliberalism to an extreme, believing unfettered markets will self-correct—when, in reality, his policies deepen immiseration.

Trump, despite his lack of coherence, instinctively recognised the need for industrial policy, which economists increasingly acknowledge as necessary. However, his execution was poor, and other policies—such as tax cuts for the wealthy—exacerbated inequality.

The key issue is a failure to grasp these deeper structural problems. End Times was written precisely to highlight them—so that we focus on real solutions instead of policies that create unintended consequences.

Amogh Rai

I'm a big fan of your work, especially Ages of Discord. I'd love to invite you back to discuss it when you have more time.

Thank you, Professor Turchin, for this insightful conversation. ■


THE PEOPLE
BRING DC TO
ITS KNEES
HAVE THE POWER
TRUMP

Are the Kids Alright?: A Demographic Boom or a Political Landmine

MANASHJYOTI KARJEE

A society that fails to channel the energy of its youth will be forced to confront its rebellion. Nowhere is this more relevant than in Asia today. The region is undergoing a historic demographic shift. Young people aged 15 to 29 comprise over 27% of South Asia's population and 25% of Southeast Asia. Asia's youth dominated demography is not just a statistical quirk - it's a force shaping Asia's political and economic future. This youth bulge - a surge in the proportion of young adults, is both an opportunity and a looming crisis.

Handled wisely, the youth bulge can power economies, drive technological innovation, and transform societies. Mishandled, it can fuel mass unemployment, political unrest and even violent conflicts. The challenge isn't just managing numbers, it is managing expectations. Millions of young people are entering the workforce, seeking not just jobs but a future. Governments that fail to provide opportunities risk facing a generation that is restless, disillusioned and ready to take to the streets.

Here, we explore how different Asian Nations are navigating this demographic moment. While some have turned their youth into economic engines some are struggling with instability.

Understanding the Youth Bulge

Asia is young. In many of its countries, a staggering share of the population is between the ages of 15 to 29. This creates a demographic pattern that many demographers and the World Bank call the youth bulge. Youth bulge as a concept was rooted in the Malthusian idea of ecological imbalance which says that rapid human population growth will inevitably lead to resource strain. The term now, however, is used as a politico-demographic term based on the chronological age.

But youth itself is a fluid concept. It's also about social roles, political identities, and economic status. In many cultures, adulthood is not determined by turning 18 or 21 but by when an individual starts a family or gains financial independence. Crucially, young populations are not monolithic. The vanguards, the most politically active youth like the student leaders, activists or influencers set the tone and shape the broader youth movement. Considering this, the age bracket of 15 to 29 reflects the core group entering adulthood which impacts economic growth, labour markets and social stability.

In many developing Asian countries youth

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bulge is more prevalent. Infant mortality rate, especially by the 1980s, declined because of better healthcare and nutrition. The birth rate remains high as it depends on changing people's reproductive behaviour based on culture, society and traditional family values which take longer to change. This combination resulted in the surge of the young adult population.

The World Bank has repeatedly warned that in low-income countries the swelling of the youth population overwhelms state resources. The challenge? Whether the Asian governments can harness the demographic wave or whether it will overwhelm them triggering unrest.

Youth as a Catalyst for Unrest

History offers us a lot of warnings. When the youth bulges, so do revolutions. The French Revolution, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Arab Spring each saw a restless, youthful population pushing against stagnant population orders. More recent data also back up this pattern, when youth cohorts face economic stagnation and lack opportunities, conflict - especially internal armed conflict, becomes more likely.

Take South Asia. Groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) long capitalised on the economic despair of the youth. Jobless young men were recruited with the promise of purpose and financial security.

The link between youth bulges and violence is clear: it's not the size of the population or the economy that matters but whether the country can provide them with enough opportunities to keep them engaged.

Economic pressure translating into unrest is also seen in different settings. Even in some high-growth economies, job creation hasn't kept pace with the demand of the youth. Bangladesh, for instance, has averaged 6.5% GDP growth over the past decade which is impressive on paper. But around the same time period of this impressive growth, youth unemployment has hovered around 16%. Growth that doesn't translate into job breeds frustration. As is the case with the Bangladeshi youth, when the youth is locked out of opportunity, instability follows.

Democracy, Dictatorship and Youth-led Upheaval

Economic hardships alone don't cause instability. The political systems matter just as much. Democracies within their framework are meant to provide outlets for frustration in the form of protests, elections and activism. When these channels fail or the state machinery does not respond adequately, discontent can boil over. Sri Lanka's Aragalaya protests in 2022 were a case in point. Young people with corruption and economic mismanagement, took to the streets, forcing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's government to collapse.

Autocracies take a different approach. They bet that by suppressing all forms of dissent they can keep the youth at check. Amidst the presence of different regime types, history shows us a pattern: full democracies which offer political expression and hard autocracies which brutally suppress dissent tend to be more stable. It's the semi-democracies - the ones that have democratic features like elections and political pluralism but lack full democratic practices and institutions, that are the most vulnerable to youth-led uprisings.

An interesting dynamic is seen in patriarchal and exclusionary regimes, as well. In places like Afghanistan or Syria the youth found themselves with few opportunities and no political voice. Many, especially men, turned to radical groups; not necessarily out of ideology but because they offered financial security, structure and a sense of belonging. The Taliban before they took control of Afghanistan, the ISIS in its heyday and other such terror outfits have long understood this and exploited it with chilling efficiency.

If the youth are exploited by these outfits to further their cause, the youth are also the most willing to challenge the repressive norms. In November 2024, a 30-year-old Iranian woman made global headlines when she publicly removed her garments at Tehran's Islamic Azad University, defying Iran's strict dress code. It was a single act. But it represented something larger: the Iranian youth willing to push back despite imminent repercussions against entrenched authority.

The Urbanisation Trap: When Cities Fail their Youth

Urbanisation boosts the political risks of the youth bulge. Across Asia, young people are flocking to the cities in search of jobs and better lives. Instead, many find overcrowded housing, poor public services and meagre opportunities in an unforgiving job market. That's led to what the social scientists call the 'waithood'- an extended period where the youth feel stuck unable to transition to independent lives with stable jobs.

And when frustration builds, movements erupt. Thailand's youth-led protests in 2020 and Sri Lanka's in 2022 were fuelled in part by urban demography. Young people, educated yet unemployed or underemployed, turned to mass mobilisation in the street when traditional pathways failed them.

Many governments have kicked the can down the road to address these issues. As the clock ticks let's look at countries that have tackled the issue.

How Some Countries turned Turmoil into Triumph

While many countries struggle with the youth-led uprisings, there are some that have turned their young demographics into engines of economic growth and political strength. Here, we will look at South Korea and China who followed two completely different models. One embraced democracy and technological innovation; the other relied on authoritarian control and industrial expansion. Both, however, found ways to channel the energy of the youth into a productive force rather than let it turn into a destabilising force.

South Korea: From struggling economy to Tech Giants

South Korea was a war-torn country in the 1960s. By 1990, it transformed into an economic powerhouse. This shift in a short period of time is often dubbed as the East Asian Miracle. A critical factor that led this transformation? A young, educated and skilled workforce. This was the result of deliberate, far-sighted policies designed to maximise human capital and not a mere stroke of demographic luck.

South Korea made massive investments in education, vocational training, and research. South Korean policies like the National Charter of Education and Industrial Workforce Development Policy created a workforce tailored for a high-tech economy. The universities expanded, STEM fields were prioritised, and technical training ensured that the graduates had the skills that the employers needed. This wasn't education for education's sake. Degrees translated into jobs. Job creation kept pace with population growth. The rural areas were simultaneously modernised through self-reliance by initiatives like the Saemaul Undong. Result? The GDP per capita soared from $1,100 in 1965 to over $30,000 by 2020.

Beyond the economic miracle, South Korea managed its political transition carefully. From military rule to democracy in the 1980s, the country opened up avenues to increase people's participation. This reduced the risk of radicalisation. But this didn't mean the end of youth activism, far from it. The 2017 impeachment of President Park Geun-

hye, driven by mass protests, and recent demonstrations against President Yoon's policies show that young Koreans remain a powerful political force. Stability, as South Korea proves, is always a work-in-progress, ongoing and never-ending.

China: Controlling the Wave, Not Riding it

The Chinese approach was different. China sought to control its youth. The One-Child Policy, enforced from 1975 to 2015, reshaped the country's demographics. This created an "upside-down pyramid" with a shrinking youth population supporting an aging society. The unintended consequences of this policy are now evident in the form of labour shortages and an overburdened pension system. Efforts are being made to reverse the trend by lowering the legal marriage age and encouraging higher birth rates.

But there is a darker story to the Chinese demographic reality. The socialist policies like the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) under Mao Zedong led to political purges, widespread famines, and mass executions. This resulted in an estimated 40 to 50 million deaths. The youth were the primary victims of the political actions. Historians attribute the majority of the casualties to the catastrophic agricultural policies, while political crackdowns, forced labour, and persecution during various purges claimed the lives of millions more.

Unlike South Korea, which channelled the youth potential through demographic participation, China doubled down on political control. Authoritarian resilience- a term that can be used to describe Beijing's ability to adapt without loosening its grip has allowed the Communist Party of China to maintain order while suppressing dissent. Campaigns on patriotic education and strict censorship ensured ideological conformity. It reinforced the idea that youth-driven unrest is a threat to Chinese stability.

At the same time, the Chinese economic engine has provided jobs on an unprecedented scale. Industrialisation and technological advancement have absorbed millions into the workforce.

But cracks are beginning to show. The Chinese economy has slowed down, unemployment is rising, and the conditions of work are deteriorating. Economic slowdowns can be showcased by the collapse of the Evergrande Group in the real estate crisis in 2021. Evergrande defaulted on over $300 billion in liabilities triggering a broader crisis in the already indebted real estate sector creating a ripple effect in other sectors. Many young Chinese reject the traditional demanding "996" work schedule (9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week) and instead choose a minimalist lifestyle, doing only the bare minimum to get by. Young people are willingly opting out of work by a silent protest called the "Tang Ping", which translates to "lying flat".

While mass uprisings since Tiananmen Square have been rare. The White Paper Protests of 2022 where the youth took to the streets against the stringent COVID-19 lockdown, is a stark reminder that even in tightly controlled societies frustrations can boil over. The Chinese experience raises questions over the long-term consequences of the heavy-handed control over demography.

The Blueprint for Stability

There is no one-size-fits-all model for managing youth bulge, but some principles do stand out. Economic diversification and job creation are essential. Countries like Pakistan with vast unemployed youth populations risk a tide of instability until they act fast. Education that aligns with market needs is crucial. South Korea's investment in human capital and China's focus on vocational training both demonstrate how skills development can drive economic growth.

Democratic transition when managed well can provide institutional avenues for

youth engagement, reducing the risk of radicalisation. The South Korean experience shows how gradual political liberalisation can prevent turmoil. By contrast, countries that neglect youth participation whether through economic exclusion or political repression - often find themselves grappling with unrest.

Challenges remain for Asia despite these lessons. Youth unemployment in East Asia hovers at 14.3%, while South Asia faces an alarming 54% skill hap. Investments in high-tech industries and in skill development for artificial intelligence and digital financing could bridge the gap, equipping young workers for a rapidly evolving job market. Countries like the Philippines and Indonesia with large informal labour sectors could benefit from expanding Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs to boost workforce readiness.

At the heart of this is a simple reality; economic opportunity, education, and political participation determine whether a youth bulge becomes an asset or a liability. If the governments fail to create pathways for economic and political inclusion, frustration turns into rebellion.

Blindspots in Youth Bulge Research

The concept of the youth bulge often explains youth behaviour through broad psycho-biological patterns while overlooking the cultural and social nuances. The tendency to treat youth as a homogenous group ignores crucial distinctions in class, ethnicity, ideology and identity. There is also a tendency by the leading scholars to focus on correlation rather than causation when linking youth to conflict. The feminist scholars have rightfully pointed out that the discourse of youth and instability is too male-centric, assuming young men are the primary drivers while ignoring the role of women in conflict and activism.

There are still some major blind spots in research. How do youth bulges interact with economic inequality and political instability in middle- and low-income nations? A deeper, comparative analysis across regions could provide stronger predictive models for understanding when the youth turn into assets and when into sources of unrest.

To conclude, youth bulge is not an automatic recipe for instability. It is a challenge that requires strategic policies, and not fatalism. Asia's future would be determined by the fate of its youth- and by the decisions made today. Governments that invest in education, job creation and political inclusion will turn their youth into engines of growth. Those that fail will find themselves confronting unrest, economic stagnation and missed opportunities.

The question really is not whether the youth bulge will shape Asia's future- it will. The real question is whether Asia's leaders will seize the moment or squander it. ■

Pakistan at Sea: Between People and Climate Change

MANASHJYOTI KARJEE

Pakistan is inexorably moving towards a dystopian future where scarcity and deprivation become the norm. The country's population as per the census increased from 208 million to 241 million, an increase of around 16% (34 million in absolute terms), between 2017 and 2023. This population explosion in the country is outstripping its ability to provide for millions, turning demographic expansion into a national crisis. The Pakistani youth bulge will play a crucial role in the future trajectory of the country as 64% of the country's population is under the age of 30. Pakistan's population continues its rapid accent, with growth outpacing regional averages. Pakistan adds between 4 to 5 million people every year as its population is expanding at an alarming rate of 2.4% annually. By 2030, the country is projected to reach a population of 300 million. The country stands at a crossroads – the economy, burdened by slow growth, inflation, and mounting debt, is failing to absorb the influx of youth. However, if provided with opportunities, this demographic wave could drive progress.

Deep-seated cultural and religious norms have shaped attitudes toward modern contraceptive methods and family planning in Pakistan, fueling a relentless population surge. As the country's youth-dominated demographic expands, the state's infrastructure struggles to keep pace. The nation has also emerged as a focal point of climate change, with extreme weather events unleashing widespread disruption and devastation.

Climate change functions as a threat multiplier—worsening pre-existing economic, social, and political tensions, particularly in states with fragile governments and youth-dominated populations. Unlike traditional security threats such as military threats, climate change affects multiple national security dimensions simultaneously - economic, food, environmental, and human security. The youth face heightened risks of displacement, unemployment, and disenfranchisement as environmental degradation accelerates. Resource scarcity can also drive violent competition where the capacity of the state to mediate conflict is weak.

Pakistani youth are at the heart of climate change. As climatic conditions worsen, young people, who make up two-thirds of the population, will be forced to either adapt or migrate—deepening economic and social instability. Ranked as the fifth most vulnerable country by the Global Climate Risk Index, Pakistan is experiencing increasingly severe climate shocks, with young people bearing the brunt. Reports indicate that around 12% of deaths in Pakistani children under the age of five are linked to air pollution. Extreme heatwaves have pushed temperatures above 50°C in some regions, making life untenable in parts of Sindh and Balochistan.

Beyond economic stagnation, climate change is worsening Pakistan's demographic stress. The floods, droughts, and heatwaves are becoming more severe in Pakistan, as the country ranks among the most vulnerable to climate disasters. Over 30 million people were displaced by the 2022 floods, with one-third of the country submerged, wiping out homes, infrastructure, and farmlands. The flood caused the destruction of 9.4 million acres of crops and the loss of 1.1 million farm animals. UNICEF estimated that half of those affected were children, facing not only the loss of homes and schools but also rising health risks from malnutrition, disease, and extreme weather. The flood caused 50% rise in child undernutrition, leaving 44% of children under five stunted.

Agriculture, a sector that employs nearly 40% of the Pakistani population, is increasingly under strain, driving rural-to-urban migration and compounding economic pressures in overcrowded cities. Pakistan's cities are now at the epicentre of the youth-driven crisis. Rural migration, forced by climate displacement due to floods and water shortages, has led to unplanned urban expansion, overwhelming public infrastructure. Urban job markets are unable to absorb the rising demand, forcing young workers into unstable, low-wage employment.

The lack of quality education and vocational training further restricts social mobility, pushing many into informal employment and fueling urban frustration. This has led to a surge in crime in cities like Karachi and Lahore. In many cases, unemployed youth migrate in search of work, increasing the risk of irregular migration and human trafficking networks. Unplanned urbanisation which intensifies competition for limited resources and creates informal settlements fuels sectarian, ethnic, and class-based conflict. Climate refugees from Sindh and Balochistan are contributing to tensions in Karachi, a city already struggling with political fragmentation and gang violence. This makes climate displacement an internal security challenge for Pakistan.

Resource scarcity is also fueling tensions between provinces. Water disputes, aggravated by glacial melt in the Himalayas, have heightened regional conflicts. Shortages of food and electricity have already triggered protests, highlighting how climate stress can act as a multiplier for political instability. In coastal cities like Gwadar, rising sea levels and extreme weather are eroding livelihoods. Saltwater intrusion into agricultural fields is forcing thousands of people to abandon their homes, decreasing the viability of coastal settlements. Karachi's role as a long-term economic hub is also at risk due to increased urban flooding and climate-induced economic decline. The Gwadar port project under CPEC is similarly vulnerable to climate change.

Pakistan's federal structure further complicates tackling climate challenges. Due to decentralisation, provinces have conflicting interests over water resources. The Indus Water Treaty, already a geopolitical issue with India, also fuels domestic inter-provincial conflicts between Punjab (the dominant agricultural province) and Sindh (the downstream recipient).

Persistent political turbulence in Pakistan, compounded by military intervention in governance, hampers the government's ability to address climate change—a crisis demanding sustained, long-term planning. Frequent leadership turnover erodes institutional continuity, while public distrust in the government and systemic governance failures further undermine efforts to implement meaningful environmental policies.

The Pakistani Army has been increasingly involved in disaster response and climate mitigation, stretching military resources. The National Security Policy (NSP) recognises climate change as a security threat, but military-led emergency responses cannot substitute long-term adaptation policies.

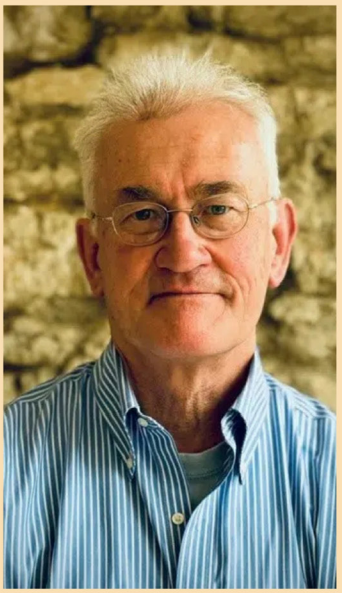
Meanwhile, Pakistani youth remain an untapped resource in combating the climate crisis. Youth leaders are at the forefront of advocating for sustainable policies and environmental reforms. However, their engagement remains superficial. While youth leaders are included in photo-ops, they are often excluded from policy discussions. Providing meaningful engagement to the youth could not only help in countering ecological degradation but also address broader socio-political disillusionment that leads to extremism.

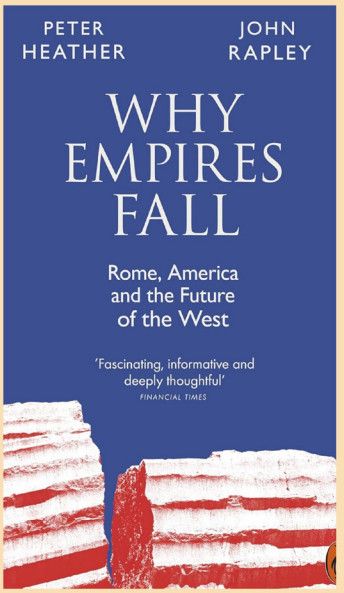
Without integrated policies addressing both environmental resilience and youth economic engagement, Pakistan risks a destabilisation loop—where climate stress fuels existing social fractures, which in turn degrade national security, reinforcing cycles of violence and state instability. ■

JOHN RAPLEY & PETER HEATHER

WHY EMPIRES FALL

ROME, AMERICA AND THE FUTURE OF THE WEST





The SenseMaker™

Peter Heather joined the department of Medieval History at King's College in January 2008 as the Chair of Medieval History. He was educated at Maidstone Grammar School, before moving to New College Oxford to complete his undergraduate degree and doctoral work. Prior to joining King's, Peter Heather worked at University College London, Yale University and Worcester College, Oxford.

John Rapley is a political economist specialised in global development, the world economy and economic history. Born, raised and educated in Canada, he returned to his parents' old meeting-ground, Oxford, on a post-doctoral fellowship. After launching his academic career there in the Department of International Development, Rapley decided to immerse himself in his subject by moving to the developing world. There, he spent the next two decades working as an academic, journalist and ultimately the creator of a think tank (the Caribbean Policy Research Institute). After helping governments navigate the 2008 financial crisis, he returned to Britain, making his home at the University of Cambridge.

Amogh Rai:

Welcome both of you. Today, we have an exciting discussion lined up with historian Peter Heather and economist John Rapley, co-authors of Why Empires Fall: Rome, America, and the Future of the West.

Your book examines the West as both a geographical and economic entity. But you also argue that its future depends on broadening its definition. Could you elaborate on that?

Peter Heather:

Yes, we argue that the West has traditionally been seen as Europe and North America. However, for it to have a future, it must expand beyond its hegemonic roots and become a more inclusive entity, incorporating societies that share fundamental values such as the rule of law and democracy. Many Asian and African countries already align with these values. If the West remains exclusive, it risks stagnation.

John Rapley:

Absolutely. Historically, the West began as a relatively small economic and cultural sphere. Over time, colonial expansion created a core-periphery dynamic, but now the periphery is growing in influence. This shift is evident—intellectually, economically, and even culturally. Many ideas that appear "foreign" to the West today actually originate from this expanded periphery, just as British cuisine once absorbed curry. The periphery now shapes the core, and that is unsettling for some.

The SenseMaker Interview.

Amogh Rai:

The book suggests that while rising powers challenge Western dominance, it is actually the West itself that is dismantling much of its own progress. How do you see this tension playing out?

Peter Heather:

There is a great deal of nostalgia-driven rhetoric about so-called traditional values, particularly in places like Hungary or parts of the United States. Policies encouraging higher birth rates as an alternative to immigration have been attempted, but they have not reversed demographic trends. The reality is that the world has changed. Some nationalist elements are desperately clinging to an era that has passed. As a historian, I see this as part of a larger transition—Western societies grappling with the loss of uncontested global dominance.

John Rapley:

If we take a longer view, civilisations evolve. Christianity, for example, is often regarded as a European religion, but its origins lie in Mesopotamia. Over time, its centre of gravity shifted, and now the developing world is its stronghold. Similarly, power and influence in the modern world are shifting away from the historical Western core. The challenge for the West is to adapt rather than resist this transformation.

You cannot claim that Christianity is in decline simply because it has become a minority religion in the Middle East or is shrinking in Europe. It has spread elsewhere, and the same logic applies to Western traditions. Take South Africa—when it took Israel to the International Court, it was upholding values of universal rights that many Western countries, particularly the United States, appeared to have abandoned.

Democracy, too, is under strain in the United States, but it is thriving in many developing countries. This reflects a broader trend—cultural and economic influence follows development. Consider Korea: in the 1950s, its films mimicked Hollywood but lacked confidence. As the economy grew, Korea developed its own hybrid model, and now Korean culture is a global export. The same applies to Bollywood. Economic growth fuels creative confidence, allowing these industries to compete on the world stage.

Despite the turmoil in the West, I remain optimistic. Some wish to freeze the past, such as JD Vance's vision of Christianity as a European institution, but history does not work that way. The Western tradition will likely endure—perhaps under a different name—because it is being kept alive in parts of the world that still uphold its core values.

Amogh Rai:

That is interesting, especially with your example of South Africa. It reminds me of The West Wing, where the fictional US president references Roman history, saying a citizen could walk to the empire's edge and invoke Civis Romanus sum—"I am a Roman citizen," ensuring imperial protection. That moment in the show reflected American power at its peak in 1999, which your book marks as the apogee of the Western empire.

Yet, globalisation was meant to integrate the world economically, but many contributors to that project now feel sidelined. Since writing the book, do you think the concept of Western values has diverged from what it once was? Would a 19th-century British observer recognise the 1999 Western dominance as its natural evolution, or would it seem entirely foreign?

The SenseMaker Interview.

John Rapley:

A 19th-century Briton would likely struggle with Britain's diminished role in 1999, realising its fate was dictated by a new imperial centre—the United States. Forward-looking thinkers might have predicted America's rise, but accepting Britain as a secondary power would have been difficult. Even today, many Britons resist this reality. Brexit, for instance, was driven in part by the idea that Britain could reclaim its former independence rather than being tied to larger economies.

Now, the United States is experiencing a similar reckoning. Just as Britain and France had to accept their imperial decline after the Second World War, America is beginning that transition, though many are unwilling to acknowledge it.

Regarding marginalised voices—those previously unheard are now part of the global discourse, and that discomfort is driving resistance. JD Vance's scepticism of Pope Francis, for example, is not just ideological; it reflects unease with a Church now shaped by Latin American influences rather than European traditions.

Western thought itself has become more fluid. While neoliberalism is often seen as a Western construct, many of its intellectual architects were from India and Africa, and some of its strongest resistance came from Western universities. The marketplace of ideas is shifting, and Western conservatives find themselves challenged by perspectives they previously ignored.

Peter Heather:

I completely agree. As a medieval historian, I think in millennia. The Industrial Revolution took generations to unfold, and adjusting to the loss of empire is similarly slow. That is no comfort to those caught in the upheaval, but it explains why the old imperial mindset is not disappearing easily.

Look at how many wars Britain, France, and even the Dutch fought after the Second World War to cling to their colonies. The United States is now in a similar phase—many in its leadership are not yet ready to acknowledge that the world has changed. But history moves forward, whether they like it or not.

Even when the fundamentals change, the consequences take time to unfold. That is especially true for Western traditions, which have always been contested spaces. If you look back to 1899, Britain was experiencing major internal struggles—women were fighting for the vote, and the working class was organising politically. The West has always been about expanding rights, albeit slowly and often reluctantly.

The best part of the Western tradition is its eventual commitment to fairness, equal treatment under the law, and a willingness—sometimes forced—to listen to new voices. This process is never smooth, but historically, it has been inevitable.

Amogh Rai:

That brings me to a historical perspective you engage with in the book. You reference historian Niall Ferguson's 2015 article, but I was also reminded of David Halberstam's The Next Century, which explored the Soviet Empire. He once described George W. Bush as someone who suddenly began invoking history to justify his decisions, despite previously relying on instinct and faith.

Today, everyone seems to be a historian—especially on Twitter. Leaders like Vladimir Putin regularly frame their politics through sweeping historical narratives, while figures like Elon Musk claim to be saving civilisation from collapse. Given that your book argues

historical processes unfold gradually and that the periphery plays a greater role than internal decay, why do you remain cautious about the future of the West?

John Rapley:

I wouldn't say I'm pessimistic about the West, but the key argument we make is that the West and the rest are not separate entities. The West only became what it is by extracting resources, labour, and value from the periphery. In turn, this process developed the periphery to the point where it now challenges the old core.

The mistake figures like Musk, Trump, and Farage make is thinking that the West rose independently. They see a rigid divide between the West and the rest when, in reality, the two have always been interconnected. Musk, for instance, grew up in apartheid South Africa, and some argue his worldview reflects nostalgia for a past where a privileged elite controlled access to resources.

This defensive, fortress-like mentality is captured brilliantly in J.M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians. The book explores how empires, in their attempts to defend civilisation, often commit the very barbaric acts they claim to oppose. Today, we see the same pattern—figures like Trump suggesting total destruction (e.g., turning Gaza into a beach resort) as a means of preserving civilisation.

Peter Heather:

A major realisation while writing this book was that empires aren't static entities—they are dynamic systems. They don't just consist of a dominant core but rely on a periphery that feeds wealth, labour, and value into the system. Over time, the periphery develops to the point where this structure stops functioning as it once did.

You can't turn back the clock. America will never again dominate global industrial production as it did in the mid-20th century. It might re-industrialise for domestic needs, but the era of American factories supplying the world is over.

Amogh Rai:

That brings us to the economic argument in your book. You critique the nostalgia-driven movements like Brexit and Make America Great Again, which assume that with the right tax policies and trade barriers, industries will return to the West. Yet, despite resistance to this idea initially, recent political shifts—particularly in the US—suggest a resurgence of economic triumphalism.

Why are we seeing this renewed confidence? The US struggles with poor health and education outcomes, yet the rhetoric suggests its global economic dominance is being restored. What has actually changed?

John Rapley:

Not much, fundamentally. The rhetoric has shifted, but the reality remains the same. Take Trump's approach—he threatened Canada with 25% tariffs, and in response, Canada announced new border patrol measures and a fentanyl czar. Trump spun this as a victory, but in reality, those measures had already been planned and announced in Canada weeks earlier.

Similarly, we hear pledges of investment in America, but until we see actual results, I remain sceptical. Meanwhile, economic uncertainty under Trump's policies has led to slowing investment. Businesses don't know what tariffs or policies will stick, which creates hesitation.

It's great political theatre, but in economic terms, it doesn't mean much.

John Rapley:

Trump's economic policies are unsustainable. I'd confidently predict that within a year, the US economy will be in a recession, potentially with a sharp market correction. This would leave Trump with bigger problems, especially with the midterm elections looming. Historically, the incumbent party loses seats, and given his weak mandate and falling approval ratings, Republicans are likely to lose the House. If that happens, Trump becomes a lame-duck president—he can make noise and cause damage, but he won't be able to push through major domestic policies.

If other world leaders are smart, they'll band together and respond forcefully. Canada, for instance, retaliated with its own tariff threats, which forced Trump to delay his actions. I expect he'll keep pushing deadlines forward indefinitely. His approach plays well with his audience, but it isn't fundamentally altering the global economic landscape—it's mostly damaging the US economy.

Peter Heather:

Exactly. None of the fundamentals are changing. Trump isn't reducing American debt; he's likely adding to it. His tax cuts primarily benefit the wealthy, while most voters wanted lower petrol prices or cheaper essentials—things that won't happen. If inflation spikes, there will be serious trouble.

Unless he changes the Constitution, he can't run again after two years, making him a lame-duck president by default. The Republican succession battle will be brutal, and while Trump will continue proclaiming his greatness, his actual ability to reshape structures is limited.

As a historian, I've never subscribed to the "great man" theory of history, and I don't buy it now. There's a lot of noise, but the underlying numbers and structures remain unchanged. Trump operates on loyalty rather than policy—if you flatter him, he rewards you. But that doesn't change economic realities.

Amogh Rai:

That ties into a major theme in your book—the administrative complexity of empires making them resistant to change. Today, regulations are multiplying, often originating in the EU before being adopted globally. But during COVID-19, regulations also faced backlash.

In India, for example, labour laws were relaxed to attract investment from China, removing union rights and shifting wages to a market-based system. Meanwhile, in the US, aid for global health initiatives like HIV treatments has been abruptly halted. Have there been similar moments in history where empires made such drastic, short-sighted decisions?

John Rapley:

COVID-19 accelerated existing trends, particularly the relative decline of the West. We saw political turmoil intensify, and while it's still unfolding, I suspect historians will mark it as a turning point. It's challenging to analyse in real time, but my next book will explore this further.

Peter Heather:

Pre-modern states had much smaller revenue streams and didn't fund extensive social programmes. They focused on military power and patronage for elites, so decisions didn't have the same sweeping impact. However, we do see parallels in reckless leadership.

Take Emperor Valentinian I—he staged military actions against groups that were willing to maintain peaceful relations just to appear strong. He also devalued diplomatic gifts that frontier leaders relied on to maintain stability. This triggered chaos along Rome's borders, all because he was more focused on appeasing his base than maintaining long-term stability. Similarly, Trump's actions create instability, but they primarily serve his political image rather than strategic governance.

Amogh Rai:

That brings me to climate change. Historically, environmental shifts have driven major regime changes, yet today, we see fierce resistance to acknowledging or addressing it. Two years ago, ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) investing was booming—now, major corporations are quietly backing away. Some tech giants are even investing in mini nuclear reactors. Is this just another cycle of denial, or is it something new?

John Rapley:

We discussed climate change while writing the book but realised it deserved its own analysis. If climate collapse occurs, all other debates become irrelevant. That's why isolationism is so dangerous—solving climate change requires international cooperation.

What's interesting is that despite the political shift, long-term investors are resisting this anti-ESG push. Pension fund managers, for example, need to think 40 years ahead, not just about quarterly returns. They see climate risks as real and are pushing back against short-term profit motives.

Even in the US energy sector, utilities recognise that if Trump rolls back renewables, they'll face power shortages because renewable energy is now the cheapest option. Trump believes he can stop these changes through sheer willpower, but the market forces at play are much bigger than him.

Amogh Rai:

That's a hopeful take. Finally, let's talk about the financial system. Global finance is deeply interconnected—Chinese investments fuel Indian markets, and Indian firms rely on American capital. Yet, financial backers of Brexit and Trump were some of the earliest adopters of economic nationalism. Historically, financial power thrives on integration. So why do we see financial elites pushing for isolationism?

John Rapley:

It's crucial to differentiate within the financial sector. Many major banks opposed Brexit because they knew it would hurt them, but hedge funds and certain investors backed it because they saw opportunities in economic instability.

There's money to be made in decline. Security companies profit from crime, traders exploit scarcity in civil wars, and certain sectors benefit from Brexit-related market chaos. These actors drive nationalist economic policies, not because they believe in them, but because they profit from them.

Similarly, in the US, major corporations weren't enthusiastic about Trump's first campaign, but now, tech oligarchs like Elon Musk see financial incentives in aligning with his administration.

The SenseMaker Interview.

They're betting on government contracts, not economic stability.

Peter Heather:

Exactly. Big capitalists prefer monopolies. They make the most money when they can predict outcomes and manipulate them. Many businesses hedge their bets, funding both political parties to ensure they have influence regardless of who wins.

Musk, for example, isn't interested in the well-being of the average American—he's focused on maximising his own profits. This is classic capitalism: monopolise where you can, and manipulate uncertainty to your advantage.

Amogh Rai:

That's a fascinating perspective to end on. Thank you both for your insights. ■

Climate Migration in Bangladesh: "We Don't Know Where to Go Next..."

RAFIQUL ISLAM MONTU

'The waves of Cyclone Sitrang have taken away all the property we earned in our entire life. Our fishing nets and boats have been washed away. Our income has stopped. We are living in huts on the embankment. We don't know where we will take our children,' said Jochna Rani Jaldas, 42, speaking about her suffering after losing everything in the cyclone.

Jochna Rani stood on the embankment in the Patenga area of Chittagong, Bangladesh, describing her ordeal after the extensive damage caused by Cyclone Sitrang. Many other families affected by the cyclone had also taken shelter on the embankment at that time. After losing their homes, they were living temporarily on the embankment slope. The waves of the sea pounded the shore. In the evening, some fishermen went out to sea, while others had just returned after fishing. Jochna Rani's family, however, was still unable to recover from their losses and prepare for fishing again. The crisis had gripped them even harder as their income remained at a standstill. The cyclone had left the fishing village paralysed, its fishermen's dreams buried under the rubble.

Like Jochna Rani, more than 300 fishing families in the Patenga area of Chittagong, Bangladesh, live with the risk of extreme crisis. Not only during 2022's Cyclone Sitrang, but also in many other disasters before, these fishing families lost everything. They have returned to earning income by coping with the crisis in various ways. The fishing families living in Patenga, including Jochna Rani's, are climate migrants. These families were forced to come to Chittagong city to earn a living more than 30 years ago. Facing frequent natural disasters, they were forced to take refuge in a city about 100 kilometres away from their native Sarikait village on the island of Sandwip. Not only fishermen but also residents of the coastal islands of Sandwip, which are eroding due to the rise in sea level, have been displaced and relocated. The lives and livelihoods of small communities living in the coastal areas of Bangladesh are increasingly at risk. This risk is increasing rapidly as the level of natural hazards increases due to the impact of climate change. They move from one place to another for safe shelter and livelihood. But even there, they are facing new crises. The coastal Jandas community, which depends on fishing, is one such community. Various research sources say that the population of this community in the coastal areas of Bangladesh, especially in the Chittagong region, is over 500,000.

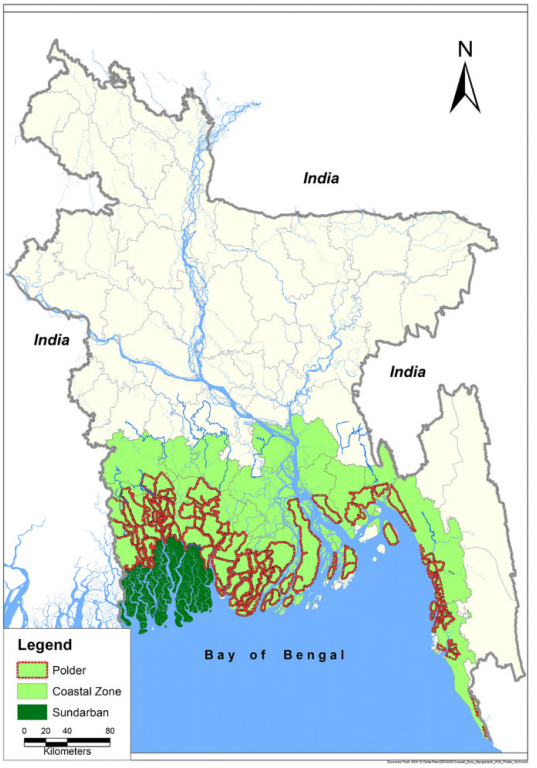
RAFIQUL ISLAM MONTU is an award-winning investigative journalist based in Dhaka, Bangladesh, specialising in climate, environment, coastal issues, and humanitarian reporting. A pioneer in coastal journalism, he has extensively covered the challenges and resilience of communities in Bangladesh's 16 coastal districts. His work highlights the impacts of climate change, natural disasters, and governance on coastal populations.

The Number of Climate Migrants is Increasing

The Climate Reality Project defines climate migration as, 'When a person or groups of people are forced or choose to leave their homes, temporarily or permanently, largely because of sudden- or slow-onset (more below) changes in their regional environment due to the climate crisis, it is considered climate migration. This movement can happen within a state or across an international border.'

The Climate Reality Project also says, 'So when we're talking about climate migrants, we're talking about people who leave their homes specifically due to climate stressors like changing rainfall patterns and heavy flooding, sea-level rise, and more frequent and powerful floods and hurricanes.'

Another definition of climate migrants says, 'Climate migrants are people who are forced to move due to climate-related events, such as cyclones, floods, and sea-level rise.' However, there is much debate about the definition of climate migrants. In many cases, climate change is accompanied by human-made factors. As a result, we cannot attribute all displacement events to climate-related causes. Still, we cannot deny the increase in displacement, and displaced people are living in extreme hardship.



In 1992, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that 'the most severe impact of climate change could be on human migration, with millions of people displaced by coastal erosion, coastal flooding and severe droughts.' This long-standing prediction of the IPCC has now become a reality. In recent years, many people have been displaced every year due to natural disasters. Displaced people in the coastal areas of Bangladesh seek refuge in the country's major cities for livelihood and residence. The number of migrants in Chittagong city is high. The list includes the names of Jochna Rani, Kalpana Rani, Nikhil Jaldas, Kishore Jaldas, Tejendra Jaldas and many others. The list is getting longer. The number of people displaced due to natural hazards is increasing not only on the east coast, but also throughout the coastal areas of Bangladesh.

The southwest coast of Bangladesh is facing multiple crises due to the impact of climate change. Frequent cyclones have put the area at risk. Cyclone Sidr in 2007, Cyclone Aila in 2009, Cyclone Fani and Cyclone Bulbul in 2019, Cyclone Amphan in 2020, Cyclone

Yaas in 2021, and many more natural hazards have affected the people of the southwest coast of Bangladesh.

Not only has the southwest coast been affected, but climate change has also impacted different areas of Bangladesh. In seven years, at least 1,053 people have died and 9.4 million have been internally displaced due to various climate-related disasters in 58 districts of Bangladesh. The study found that the country has faced economic losses of $4,120 million due to disasters, including seasonal floods, flash floods, river erosion, cyclones, storm surges, and landslides. The study was conducted by Start Fund Bangladesh (SFB), a civil society-led network of 45 NGOs working in Bangladesh since 2017, analysing data on all major natural disasters from 2014 to 2020. The Ministry of Disaster Management supported SFB in conducting the research.

Frequent cyclones, tidal waves, and rising sea levels along the coast of Bangladesh have forced many people to relocate over the past two decades. According to the Global Report on Internal Displacement 2021 by the Swiss-based organisation Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 4.443 million people were displaced in Bangladesh in 2020. Almost all of them were refugees due to natural disasters. The number of displaced people is expected to increase significantly due to climate change in the future. The World Bank's updated Groundswell report says that more than 210 million people worldwide could be displaced by 2050 due to the impact of climate change. Of these, more than 40 million people are in the South Asia region. In South Asia alone, 19.9 million people are estimated to be displaced.

May and June 2022 clearly showed the world why Bangladesh is one of the top seven countries most vulnerable to climate change. During those two months, the northeastern region of Bangladesh was hit by heavy monsoon rains and flash floods. Monsoons are a common occurrence in Bangladesh, but last year's heavy monsoon rains and flash floods were the worst in 122 years. The monsoon rains left much of northeastern Bangladesh underwater. More than 7 million residents were affected and nearly 500,000 were displaced from their homes.

Recent research by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) shows that from 1960 to 2022, the rate of climate-related disasters in Bangladesh almost doubled, from an average of four events per year before 1990 to seven events per year after 1990. The economic cost of climate-related damage has almost quadrupled, from an average of US$145.64 million annually (1960-1990) to US$557.53 million (1991-2022).

Climate Migrants in Cities Face New Climate Risks

Noorjahan Begum, 60, sat on a plastic chair in front of her house in a densely populated colony on the banks of the Karnaphuli River. More than half of the chair was submerged under water. The sun's rays shone on Noorjahan's tired face. Noorjahan's eyes were on the tidal water, which remained in front of her house until the end of the day. Noorjahan and thousands of other families in the colony were trapped in the tidal water for about five hours.

Looking at the tidal water in front of her house in the colony, Noorjahan remembered the day when her own house was swept away by a cyclone with a 5-metre-high wave. One of the largest cyclones to hit the coast of Bangladesh was on April 29, 1991. At that time, Noorjahan's house was on the banks of the Meghna River in Daulatkhan Upazila of Bhola, an island district on the coast of Bangladesh. Noorjahan fought against natural disasters for a long time in her life. After her husband died, her struggle with three children became even more difficult. Due to the impact of natural disasters, Noorjahan Begum shifted her house 22 times in her life. After losing all her property,

Noorjahan took refuge in this Bhera Market Colony in Chittagong city, 104 kilometres away from her lost home ten years ago. But even in this city, this woman has to worry about living safely. The entire colony becomes submerged in tidal water.

The days of high tide change the daily schedule of all the people in this colony, including Noorjahan. They have to complete all their work before the tidal water enters the house. During the tide (4-5 hours), everyone has to stay indoors. This colony named Bhera Market is in Ward No. 35 of Chittagong city. The Karnaphuli River flows next to the colony. The sea is only 16 kilometres away from this point of the river. Tide water from the sea enters the city canals through the Karnaphuli River. As a result, various areas of the city are flooded.

Not only the Bhera Market Colony, but more than half of the city of Chittagong is being flooded by tidal water. A survey by the Public Works Department, a government agency in Bangladesh, says that about 69 percent of the city's area is now more or less submerged in tidal water. According to another study, about 18 percent of the city's area is more severely affected by tidal water. Residents affected by the city's tides said that the flooded area has been increasing every year.

The latest picture of Chittagong city's high tide is very similar to the findings of a study published in Geophysical Research Letters in April this year. The study says that between 2015 and 2020, land in Chittagong, the second-largest city in Bangladesh, decreased by 2.39 centimetres per year, which has increased the likelihood of flooding about seven times faster than the average rise in sea level. The study says that several Asian coastal cities, including Chittagong in Bangladesh, are sinking faster than the rate of sea-level rise.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, sea levels have been rising by about three millimetres per year since 1993. Chittagong and other coastal cities are becoming vulnerable to climate migrants due to rising sea levels.

Like Noorjahan Begum, many other climate migrants have come to Chittagong city and are facing new climate risks. Millions of people from different parts of Bangladesh's coast have come to Chittagong in the past few decades in search of a livelihood. Most of them have lost their homes and all their belongings due to cyclones, river erosion, or tidal waves. They considered the commercial city of Chittagong a safe place to live and earn a livelihood. But here too they have to face natural disasters. Many families in this city have been forced to relocate repeatedly in the past few years. Many families live in high-rise areas of the city during the monsoon, paying high rents. After the monsoon, they move back to low-rise areas of the city for lower rents.

Mohammad Shahjahan, 60, works as a labourer in Chittagong city. He came to the city in search of work when he was just 20 years old. His home was in Dakshin Syedpur village in the coastal Bhola district. As a child, Shahjahan saw his father lose all his property. Their home had to be relocated seven times due to the erosion of the Meghna River. His father's house has long since been swallowed by the Meghna River. Both Shahjahan and his father once considered Chittagong a safe place to make a living. But now, Shahjahan worries about whether he will be able to continue living in the city.

Major Areas of Climate Migration on the Coast

Many people are displaced from the coast of Bangladesh every year due to the impact of climate change. Natural hazards such as cyclones, salinity, high tides, river erosion, floods, and landslides are the main causes of displacement. These natural hazards are gradually increasing on the coast of Bangladesh. On the other hand, many are moving elsewhere for their livelihood due to the reduction in opportunities for extracting

natural resources. For example, the decline of fish in rivers and seas and obstacles to extracting resources in the Sundarbans. One area facing an extreme crisis due to the impact of climate change is Bangladesh's coast, which is the focus of this discussion. As a frontline climate-affected country, Bangladesh is significantly impacted by climate change. Many people on Bangladesh's coast are forced to migrate under unusual circumstances.

Climate migrants in Bangladesh live in crisis. Their struggle for life becomes more difficult. They cannot live properly even if they cross the borders of the country to another country. The crisis is passed down from generation to generation. Women are at the forefront of these crises. I have learned about the crises of climate migrants by following their routes. These people are often forced to leave their homes due to natural disasters. Their final destination is the slum areas of the country's major cities, Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, and Barisal. But climate migrants live a very inhuman life in the slums. The slums of the country's major cities are also now facing climate risks. Cyclones, waterlogging, high tides, and heavy rains affect climate migrants in the cities. For example, many people from different parts of Bangladesh's coast moved to Chittagong city to work and live. But due to the impact of high tides, those people are now facing new risks. Many people from the southwestern coast of Bangladesh have lost everything in natural disasters and have gone to neighbouring India for their lives and livelihood. Some of them return home after working for a short time, while many settle with their families in different parts of India. Many such people live in the slums of Kolkata.

People living in the coastal areas face new natural hazards every year. The impact of sea level rise is affecting people's lives and livelihoods. The tidal water level during monsoon has increased significantly over the past few years. Millions of people living on islands outside the embankment are worried about their future lives. Cyclones, salinity, and river erosion are severely affecting people's lives. Natural hazards disrupt the rhythm of their daily lives. After a disaster, a new struggle begins in the lives of coastal people. Disasters make their struggle for life more difficult. People face multifaceted dangers to sustain their lives after a disaster. They are trapped in a debt trap. Life becomes critical. Many are forced to move to major cities for life and livelihood. Many families are displaced and take refuge in their own areas, districts or upazilas (sub-districts). Because, at that time, secure housing and livelihood opportunities are the most critical needs for displaced people. Climate displaced people are in crisis everywhere. Even in big cities, their daily lives are not secure. Displaced people also live in risky areas in Dhaka, Chittagong or Khulna cities. Recently, their living conditions in cities have deteriorated. Even in cities, they are changing places frequently. The problem is more complicated in the case of indigenous people or small communities on the coast. Climate migrants living in cities want to return to their villages. But they do not have the resources to return to their villages.

A joint study by Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra and Change Initiative found that about 50% of people living in Dhaka's slums have taken refuge from climate-induced cyclone-prone Barisal, Noakhali, Bhola, Khulna and Satkhira alone, having lost their homes and livelihoods. About 93% of people have lost their livelihoods and 52% have taken refuge in Dhaka's slums. The number of these people is increasing at an alarming rate. The study says that only 10% of people who come to Dhaka find formal jobs. The rest are living a low-quality life.

Zakir Hossain Khan, Executive Director of Change Initiative and Climate Finance Analyst, said, 'For the welfare and rehabilitation of people displaced by climate change, compact townships must be created in coastal cities in a planned manner. For this, an area-based plan must be implemented by formulating a strategy quickly. Capacity-based training must be provided in this plan,

considering the capabilities and needs of the vulnerable population.'

Disasters force people to cross borders

'I have lost time and again to natural disasters. I was forced to cross the border to India after Cyclone Aila in 2009 to make a living. After returning from India, I lost everything in Cyclone Amphan in 2020,' said Faruk Hossain. His home is in Kurikahunia village, Pratapnagar union, Ashashuni upazila, Satkhira district, on the southwestern coast of Bangladesh. Disasters have turned Faruk Hossain's life upside down. He has faced many disasters since childhood. In 2009, Cyclone Aila hit the family he had built. It left him completely destitute. After the damage caused by Cyclone Aila, Faruk Hossain was forced to leave the country and move to neighbouring India. He and his family lived in a slum there. He did various kinds of work, starting from collecting paper on the street to earn a living. After staying there for several years, various kinds of problems arose. Faruk Hossain returned to the country. With the money he had saved, he built a house on his own land in Kurikahunia village. But Faruk Hossain lost all his property in Cyclone Amphan and Cyclone Yaas in 2020. His family's crisis has worsened more than ever.

This reporter has learned about their crisis by speaking with many families, including Faruk Hossain's. Sources from families migrating to India for livelihood stated that many low-income families in different parts of India crossed the Bangladesh-India border at various times due to natural disasters. Most of them migrated to India for work after Cyclone Aila in 2009. Some migrated with their entire families, while others move seasonally for work and then return to Bangladesh. These migrants from Bangladesh are engaged in various jobs in India, such as harvesting paddy, planting paddy, making bricks, cleaning houses, and collecting paper on the streets.

This reporter, after investigating villages near the Sundarbans on the southwest coast of Bangladesh, found that many families are displaced every year due to natural disasters. A large portion of them migrate to India for work, while many others move to major cities within the country. Families stated that they migrate to India because of greater earning opportunities there. According to information provided by the chairmen of seven union councils in Koyra Upazila of Khulna district, 16,000 families have left their villages from different areas of the upazila in the past 10 years. The situation is similar in other affected upazilas along the southwest coast of Bangladesh.

Limited Opportunities for Climate Migrants

Many policies have been made in Bangladesh to address the impacts of climate change. Recently, a climate adaptation plan has been finalised. But a lot of money is needed to implement this plan. Government and non-government aid does not reach most people. Emergency aid initiatives are more visible after major disasters. But there is very little help for the long-term rehabilitation of the affected people. The Bangladesh government implements shelter projects with its own funds. There are various problems in implementing these projects. Many shelter projects have been implemented in climate-risk areas. Many shelter projects are damaged by natural disasters. In the case of migration, climate migrants mainly look for a place to live and earn a living. They look for an employment opportunity. Government shelter projects do not have that opportunity. For these reasons, displaced people are not encouraged to live there. Government opportunities do not reach real climate migrants. Even after cyclones, displaced people are deprived of emergency relief aid as they move elsewhere. Most people affected by natural disasters find

their livelihoods and places to live on their own. The benefits of government initiatives do not reach real climate migrants.

Climate-resilient cities can provide solutions Mongla, a city in Bagerhat district on the southwestern coast of Bangladesh, has come under a climate-resilient urban plan to accommodate climate migrants. Investments are being made in marine drive roads and other climate-resilient adaptive infrastructure. Previously, the city was regularly flooded by high tides. But now the city does not receive salt water. The city is surrounded by the walls of the World Heritage Mangrove Sundarbans. As a result, the city is immune to the major impact of cyclones. The Sundarbans protected the city from the impact of the 2007 cyclone and the 2009 cyclone Aila.

Mongla has provided work opportunities for climate-displaced people. The Export Processing Zone (EPZ) here has created job opportunities for many workers. The opening of the Padma Bridge has made Mongla's connection with Dhaka easier. Mongla is being connected to Dhaka through a train line. Air lines are being launched. Dredging of the Pashur River is being done to increase shipping facilities at Mongla Port. Affordable housing, schools and hospitals are available along with government services. As a result, Mongla city will become a bigger job site in the future.

The ex-Mayor of Mongla Municipality, Zulfiqar Ali, held this position for almost ten years. He was in charge until February this year. Zulfiqar Ali said, 'People used to have to leave Mongla in search of work. Now they have greater business and employment opportunities in the port, EPZ, various industries, and related sectors. As a result, people from different areas are coming here. They are staying here because of the better living conditions. The drainage system and roads of the city have already been modernised to ensure the living facilities of the people here. In the next five years, Mongla will be a regional economic hub. Rapid industrialisation here will provide accommodation for thousands of potential migrants.'

'We are working to make Mongla a climate-resilient city,' said Sheikh Abdur Rahman, the current mayor of Mongla Municipality. 'At one time, this city was regularly flooded during high tides. Now it is being brought under the climate-resilient urban planning. It has affordable housing, schools and health services. We have plans to modernise these services.' He added.

More climate-resilient cities like Mongla are needed. However, the Bangladesh government does not yet have a policy to make cities climate-resilient. However, the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) is working with the government to formulate a policy. The organisation is already working to establish two cities outside Dhaka as climate-resilient cities. One of them is Mongla and the other is Nawapara in Jessore district.

Regarding Mongla city, ICCCAD Coordinator Sardar Shafiqul Alam said, 'There are employment opportunities in this city, and more job opportunities will be created in the future. If civic amenities are properly ensured, climate-induced migrants will be able to live here. We have shared the study's recommendations with the local administration, and based on these, Mongla Municipality has already undertaken significant work.'

Change Initiative Executive Director and Climate Finance Analyst Zakir Hossain Khan said, 'Compact townships should be developed in coastal cities in a planned manner to support and rehabilitate people displaced by climate change. To achieve this, an area-based plan should be implemented through a rapidly formulated strategy. Capacity-based training should be incorporated into this plan, taking into account the capabilities and needs of the vulnerable population.' ■

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The Education Curve: Teaching Young People in a Greying World

SACHCHIDANAND JOSHI

In Indian culture, Vidhya Daan, which means imparting education to someone, is regarded as the greatest act of charity. Similarly, it is believed that Vidhya is the biggest treasure; that is why it is said, Vidhya Dhanam Sarv Dhanam Pradhanam. Traditional Indian wisdom knew what contemporary economists are only now recognising with sophisticated statistical analysis: that true wealth does not reside in figures but in the development of human potential. As we reflect on the deeper population changes that are remaking our world, this ancient advice provides a lens through which we may reframe our strategy towards education and development.

The Population's Story and Its Transformation

The transformation of populations has long fascinated policymakers and scholars. A few years ago, eminent planners and economic experts expounded with great confidence on the theory of the "demographic dividend" that was coming India's way – that wondrous moment when declining birth rates would produce a bulge in the working-age population, supposedly spurring economic growth. The impression was created that with this dividend, India's economy would rise phenomenally and triumphantly. But something was missing in that analysis, as if it were a piece of music played with technical accuracy but without soul. Their narrative was lusciously straightforward but fundamentally flawed.

Beyond Numbers: The True Wealth of Nations

It is strange that in the modern world, we have come to love quantification so much that we have reduced many complex human realities into neat indices. This characteristic of conventional demographic understanding, particularly regarding the demographic dividend, tends to focus solely on dependency ratios but does not touch on the qualitative side of human development.

Professor Wolfgang Lutz and his team's work provide the necessary revision to this incomplete picture. Through their careful study of 165 nations over three and a half decades, they found something that would not

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have astonished our philosophical ancestors: it is gains in education, not age structure changes, that underpin economic growth. In fact, in countries with poor foundations in education, shrinking youth populations are actually associated with poor economic performance.

Look at the divergent paths of two countries with comparable demographic profiles. South Korea transitioned from poverty to prosperity not merely due to demographic transition but through phenomenal investments in human capital creation. Their spectacular journey started with universal basic education and continued by developing high-order skills, cautiously matched to economic demands.

Meanwhile, several Latin American countries experienced similar demographic transitions but achieved far less impressive economic results. The difference was not in their population pyramids but in their commitment to meaningful education and skill development.

The magnitude of this effect is significant. Counterfactual analyses imply that without its educational transformation, South Korea's per capita income today would be only one-third of what it is. In contrast, the economic effect of demographic change alone would have been negligible.

We are reminded of the old Sanskrit proverb: "Sa vidya ya vimuktaye" – real education is that which liberates. In development terms, we could modify this to say that real education is that which contributes to both individual and societal change.

The Tapestry of Skills in a Changing Landscape

As we move along the congested streets of Old Delhi or the shiny hallways of Bangalore's IT parks, we witness the seeming contradiction between talent shortages and unemployment. Businesses complain in frustration about vacant slots despite millions of job seekers. This gap between education and employment persists across countries at all levels of development.

The skills gap manifests in different ways across our multi-faceted global terrain. In Japan's ageing society, firms struggle to find successors to retiring craftspeople and technical specialists whose skills have been accumulated over decades of hands-on practice. The time-honoured knowledge transfer across generations is strained under population pressure.

In young countries such as India, the problem takes another form. Millions of young men and women leave schools and universities with degrees but not with the skills that a fast-changing economy rewards. We often see a young engineering graduate driving an auto-rickshaw in a metropolitan city or a management graduate selling tea or opening a snack bar on the streets. When asked about their occupation, they may give a customary reply: "Sir, I can solve intricate equations, but nobody ever instructed me on how to solve real-life problems."

This disconnection is especially pronounced during times of technological change. The abilities needed today – critical thinking, adaptive learning, collaborative problem-solving – are exactly those frequently overlooked in schooling systems still geared towards memorisation and exam success.

Consider the delicate weaving of a Varanasi artisan, which embodies generations of knowledge gained through apprenticeship. The craft of such artisans is not just technical expertise but a comprehensive knowledge of materials, aesthetics, and cultural heritage. In comparison, our contemporary education systems tend to dissect knowledge into compartmentalised subjects without real-world interconnectedness.

The Geography of Learning in Demographic Transition

If we were to chart the evolving demography of education in our world, we would see patterns as intricate and diverse as the textile cultures of various Indian states.

The quantitative contours are striking. Between 2013 and 2022, the number of children aged under five declined in nearly 80% of OECD countries, while the age group of 5-14 continued growing in two out of three OECD nations. By 2031, according to projections, the trend will reverse in the majority of advanced economies, with decreasing school populations in 37 of 47 nations with available estimates.

These abstractions are reflected in concrete changes in educational environments. In my travels to rural schools in Kerala, I have seen buildings that were once filled with the vibrant sounds of children now half-empty, while urban classrooms in the same state are packed to the brim. In Japan's rural areas, schools that once served several villages have merged or shut down altogether as young families move to urban centres.

The inequalities between countries often surpass those within them. In OECD countries, urban metropolitan primary schools typically have 36 students per grade, while their rural counterparts have only 21. In South Korea, the disparity is even starker – 63 students per grade in cities versus just 10 in rural areas.

These trends have far-reaching implications for educational quality and equity. At a small school in Himachal Pradesh, a committed teacher instructs three grade levels in one room – a pedagogical task demanding exceptional skill. At the same time, in Delhi's elite private schools, specialist teachers educate students in technology-rich settings, further broadening the gap between privileged and disadvantaged learners.

The redistribution of educational opportunities along demographic lines thus becomes another channel through which inequality is reproduced across generations. Addressing this challenge requires not just technical solutions but a moral reckoning with issues of justice and social solidarity.

The Cultivation of Capabilities: A New Educational Vision

Our conventional model of education remains curiously outdated—an artefact of industrial-era thinking imposed on a post-industrial era. Despite cosmetic modernisations, the underlying design persists: age-graded cohorts moving through uniform curricula, with periodic testing largely centred on memorisation rather than application.

This system, always imperfect, is becoming increasingly dysfunctional in the face of demographic change and technological revolution. What we require is not incremental reform but a radical reimagining of how we build human potential across the lifespan.

What could this new approach include? Could it be an educational paradigm that draws from both ancient wisdom and modern understanding? First, it would adopt competency-based advancement instead of time-based progression. Why should a mathematically inclined child be required to follow the same timeline as peers with different strengths? This is similar to the ancient gurukul system, where learning evolved based on personal preparedness rather than fixed schedules.

Second, it would link skills development throughout the entire life course rather than concentrating formal education solely in childhood and youth. The old model functioned when career lifecycles were relatively stable, and life expectancy was shorter. Now that working lives extend beyond five decades and career changes are the norm, we must develop systems that enable continuous learning and adaptation.

For example, a textile factory worker in Surat, at the age of 52, retrained in solar panel installation following the closure of his factory through a community-run initiative. His story illustrates both possibility and exception—most displaced workers lack access to genuine skills development opportunities. A truly enlightened system would make such transitions accessible to all.

Third, it would foster not just technical skills but also the deeper capabilities that support adaptability and meaning-making: critical thinking, moral reasoning, creative expression, and self-reflection. These meta-capabilities transcend specific occupations and retain value in the face of technological transformation.

Finally, it would harness technology thoughtfully to personalise learning pathways while preserving the essential human dimension of education. The polarised debate between traditional and technology-centred approaches creates a false dichotomy. Like the Indian philosophy of Nitya Nootan, Chir Puratan—always evolving, forever eternal—effective education integrates diverse approaches according to context and purpose.

The Economic Imperative and Human Possibility

The economic implications of educational quality in the context of demographic change are profound. Take Nigeria, whose population trajectory will significantly impact global development outcomes over the coming decades. Simulations suggest that had Nigeria followed South Korea's path of educational expansion while maintaining its actual demographic trajectory, its per capita GDP in 2015 would have been 29% higher than observed levels. If both education and age structure had mirrored South Korean patterns, the gap would have been about 65%.

These figures are not merely abstract economic statistics but represent millions of human lives that could have been enriched through better development of capabilities. The stakes are just as high in high-income economies facing population ageing, where the productivity of declining working-age cohorts will determine the viability of social protection systems.

In a village in Maharashtra, an interesting case was observed where elderly villagers, lacking pension income, relied entirely on remittances from adult children working in distant cities. As family sizes shrink and life expectancy rises, such arrangements become increasingly precarious. The solution is not having more children but maximising the productivity and versatility of each individual through improved education and lifelong skill enhancement.

Yet policymakers tend to prioritise short-term economic fluctuations over the deeper forces that shape long-term prosperity. Human capital formation is among the most critical of these forces, yet it receives far less attention than quarterly growth rates or stock market performance.

The Widening Gulf: Demographic Transitions and Educational Inequality

A troubling pattern emerges in societies undergoing demographic transition: while fertility rates decline first among educated, high-income groups, lower-income populations come to constitute an increasing share of younger age cohorts. Simultaneously, urbanisation and immigration concentrate educational demand in regions often least prepared to meet it.

This demographic sorting creates a negative feedback loop: declining youth populations reduce political pressure for education funding at precisely the moment when increased investment is needed to support increasingly disadvantaged students.

In India, private institutions maintain

excellence through independent funding, while government schools—serving predominantly lower-income students—struggle with inadequate facilities and teacher shortages. Similar patterns are evident in countries ranging from Brazil to China to France.

A policy response to this growing divergence must include interventions designed to counteract demographic forces exacerbating inequality. Early childhood education has proven particularly effective in closing socioeconomic achievement gaps when delivered with cultural sensitivity and parental involvement. Funding models that direct additional resources to high-need areas can mitigate concentrated disadvantage.

In an anganwadi centre in rural Karnataka, well-designed early childhood programmes promote holistic development through nutrition, healthcare, and learning activities tailored to children's developmental stages. The young children I observed there—largely from rural agricultural families—demonstrated levels of curiosity and engagement comparable to those in elite urban preschools. Such programmes are essential investments in equity, yet they frequently lack sufficient resources and institutional support.

The Dissonance Between Employment and Education

A paradox pervades global labour markets: the simultaneous existence of skill shortages and widespread unemployment or underemployment. Employers struggle to find workers with the necessary skills, yet job seekers encounter difficulties securing stable employment. This contradiction is particularly pronounced during demographic transitions.

In ageing economies, businesses report critical skills gaps while simultaneously discriminating against older workers capable of acquiring the necessary competencies. In youthful societies, graduates with prestigious academic credentials drive rickshaws or work in call centres because their education emphasised examination performance over practical problem-solving.

The root cause of this dissonance lies in the misalignment between education and economic conditions. Educational systems operate with inherent time lags—curricula developed today shape the skills of workers entering the job market years later. Without careful coordination, mismatch is inevitable.

The acceptance of skill-based courses and the availability of resources for teaching such courses—particularly in government schools, where large numbers of students are enrolled—remain major challenges. While skill development is often nominally promoted, there is little infrastructure to enable students to gain real proficiency in any trade or technical skill.

Bridging this gap requires rethinking the relationship between education and employment—not by reducing education to narrow vocational training, but by cultivating broad, transferable skills alongside flexible education-to-work pathways throughout life.

Several promising models offer guidance. Singapore's SkillsFuture programme provides citizens with lifelong learning credits and a skills framework aligning educational providers with industry needs. Germany's dual apprenticeship system integrates classroom instruction with workplace training. Finland emphasises strong foundational competencies followed by specialised learning, ensuring adaptability alongside consistently high performance.

Another issue is the social perception of vocational education. It may seem trivial, but in Indian society, an office clerk often receives more respect than a highly skilled artisan. Similarly, within schools, a student excelling in mathematics or science garners more prestige than one proficient in a skill-based subject. Even teachers of academic subjects

like mathematics, science, or commerce receive greater respect and higher salaries than those teaching vocational skills.

The Path Forward: Policies for Human Flourishing

If the real demographic dividend comes from education and human capability development and not just from age structure, what policy measures could foster this potential?

First, we need to move beyond sectoral perceptions and understand education as a cornerstone of all development. It involves merging educational planning with overall economic and social strategy so that education ministries recognise educational investment as basic infrastructure and not as consumptive spending.

Second, we require more coherence throughout the life course. The artificial distinctions between early childhood development, primary education, secondary education, higher education, and workforce development create unnecessary transitions and lost opportunities. Nations need integrated human capability development strategies that cut across these conventional boundaries.

Third, we have to balance innovation with evidence. Practice in education tends to swing between wholesale adoption of untested innovations and entrenched resistance to change in spite of results. A more fruitful tack integrates respectful conservation of good practice with considerate adoption of tested improvements.

We see encouraging trends in Vietnam, where education reforms have prioritised problem-solving and creative thinking alongside strong literacy and numeracy foundations. Their systematic effort has paid impressive dividends, with Vietnamese youngsters now surpassing students from many richer countries on international tests.

Fourth, we need specially designed interventions to counter the demographic forces propelling inequality:

- Early childhood programmes that foster whole development among disadvantaged children
- Resource management systems that steer additional resources to high-need communities
- Inclusive strategies confronting non-academic barriers to learning
- Flexible re-entry pathways that support educational re-entry across adulthood

Lastly, we need to use technology wisely. Online learning presents promising solutions to demographic issues, potentially reaching high-quality education to areas of scattered populations. Yet, technology needs to enhance human interaction and be used with wise consideration for access and equity.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed both the potential and constraints of technology-supported learning. As online platforms allowed many to maintain continuity in their education, they also expanded already existing gaps between the connected and disconnected. This experience highlights the need for technological incorporation that facilitates educational intent and not propels it.

A Personal Reflection on Education's Purpose

Let me take a personal aside. Over several decades of study in very different educational settings – from Rajasthan village schools to top European universities – I have seen that the essential aim of education goes beyond economic usefulness, though that aspect is clearly vital.

Learning at its core is about the development of human potential and the passing on of civilisation's collective knowledge. It is our deepest intergenerational obligation –

the education of young adults not just for economic contribution but for reflective engagement in cultural, civic, and intellectual life.

The population problems confronting education systems globally are quite daunting. Certain societies have to educate fast-growing youth populations under limited resources. Others have to sustain educational quality and access amidst shrinking enrolments and budgetary constraints. All have to prepare students for futures marked by technological change and ecological uncertainty.

Overcoming these challenges involves transcending simplistic demographic dividend narratives to a more sophisticated perspective on human capability development. It involves an acknowledgement that real demographic dividends do not arise solely from beneficial age structures, but rather from the conscious development of knowledge, skills, and wisdom within every generation.

Looking ahead to 2050, prosperous societies will not be those with lucky population pyramids, but those best at developing the capabilities of their citizens through meaningful education and ongoing learning possibilities. The upcoming demographic challenges provide an unparalleled opportunity to rethink education systems globally – not just producing economic expansion but human flourishing over generations. In our ancient scriptures Hitopadesha, it is said:

Vidhya Dadati Vinayam

Vinaya Dadati Patratam

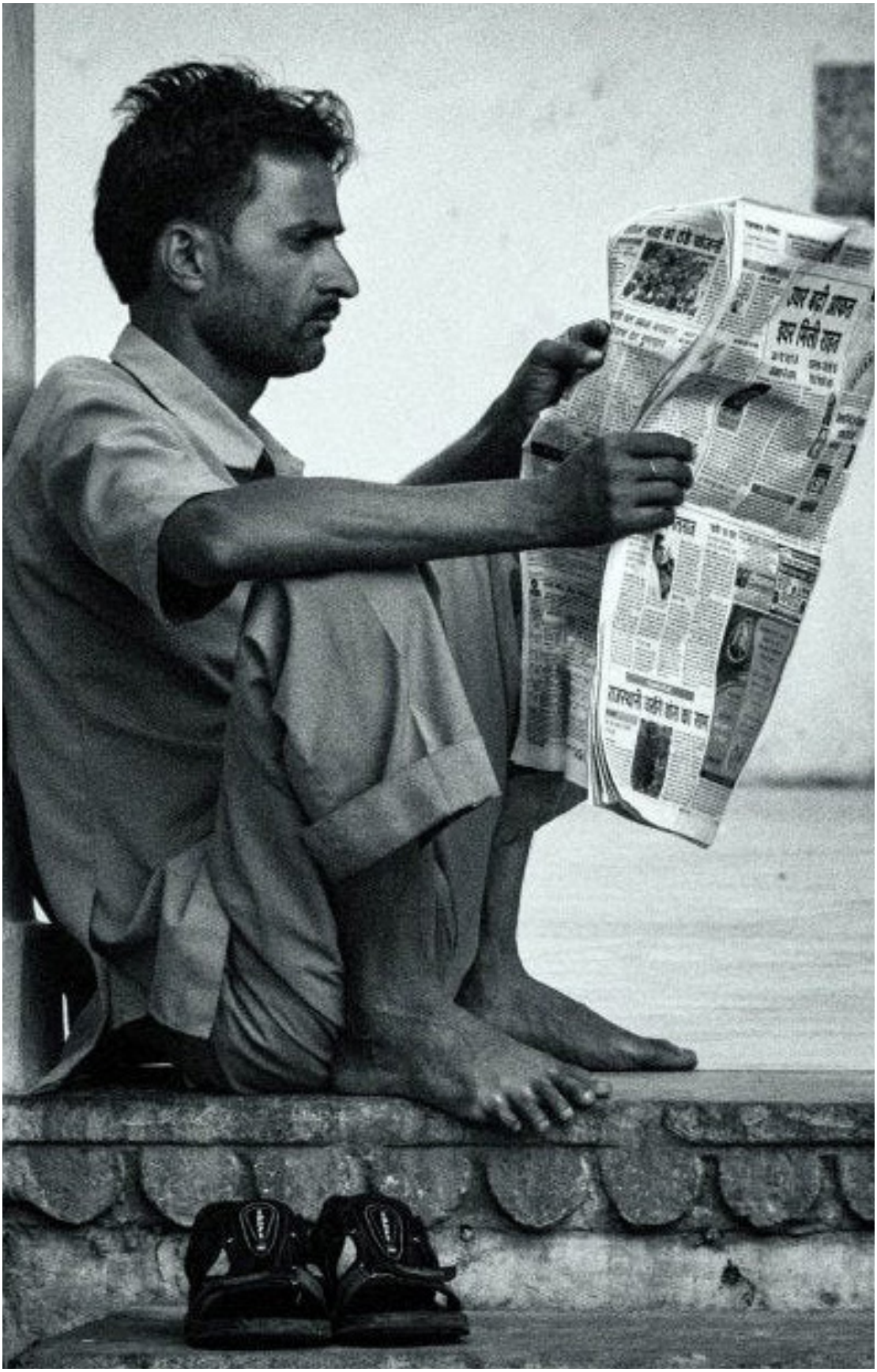
Patratvad Dhanamapnoti

Dhanaat Dharmam

Tato Sukham

Which means: Knowledge makes humble, Humility begets worthiness, Worthiness creates wealth and enrichment, Enrichment leads to right conduct, and Right conduct brings contentment and thus Happiness.

We need to change our perspective on Education and Skilling to make this world Happy and Prosperous. ■



Bulldozer Raj and *Nasbandi*: How the Emergency Meddled with Bodies

PRIYANKA GARODIA

"Memories of the Emergency are not just about political repression. They are about personal violations, about bodies taken without consent, about families torn apart by policies that treated people as numbers rather than human beings."

- Emma Tarlo in Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi

The ebbs and flows of a democracy are not a linear set of events, while some governments uphold the inherent values of a democratic government, others are not afraid to transgress them. There has been no government in Independent India's history that has committed as many excesses as had Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's administration during the Emergency implemented from June 1975 to March 1977. Steeped in controversy including the implementation of the draconian Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), severe censorship of the press, absolute suspension of civil liberties and the implementation of a twenty-point programme aimed at poverty alleviation and land redistribution with a centralised focus, the emergency period has been described as a dark period in Indian political history.

Under the leadership of Sanjay Gandhi, the son of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the forced sterilisation programme under the onus of population control and family planning, has been a lasting legacy of the emergency period. It disproportionately impacted the poor and minority communities of the country. Driven by Malthusian concerns and strong international pressure to curb India's then rapidly growing population - the implemented programme used coercive means including state-sanctioned violence and a systematic targeting of marginalised communities to meet its objectives. The state implemented a clear logic of difference- where some bodies were considered to be more dispensable than others – this included religious minorities like Muslims and Christians and lower caste groups like Dalits.

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The forced sterilisation campaign implemented by a member of the ruling and the son of the Prime Minster - is not only an example of the overreach of a draconian government but is also reflective of India's anxieties over population growth and demographic control. Reproductive rights were viewed through the lens of government control rather than individual autonomy and a logic of otherization i.e. demarcating some bodies as desirable and some as not, was implemented – echoes of which are felt even today across party lines.

The Need for Population Control

The 1960's saw the peaking of Cold War politics with the division of the world into two camps, with non-aligned countries caught in an act of balancing one superpower with another. India in the 1960s was economically weak and struggling to feed its population. Food shortage exacerbated by crop failure and two consequent droughts in 1965 and 1966, led India to be heavily dependent on foreign aid to meet its basic needs. Programmes like the PL-480 initiated in 1954, between the United States and India, provided some help to assuage the food crisis in the country and allowed it to embark on a modernisation of its agricultural sector becoming a culminating factor in the Green Revolution in the late 1960s. However, the benefits of the programme were limited and India's food problem continued.

The general belief guiding food aid during the time was based on the understanding that populations needed to be controlled to be able to better manage food resources. Guided by the works of Stanford Professor Paul R. Elrich's seminal work – The Population Bomb that predicted that the world's population would not be sustained by the food resources available on the planet - coercive population control measures were seen to be an important way in containing the population problem. Soon enough, international food aid became contingent on implementing population control measures.

A host of international actors like USAID, the United Nations, World Bank, Ford Foundation, the Population Council and the International Planned Parenthood Foundation along with the national Ministry of Health and Family Welfare were complicit in establishing means of population control that were transactional, contingent and politically motivated. Individual rights were willing to be circumvented to implement population control measures. The United States and the United Nations exerted incredible influence when it came to implementing these measures in India. The conditionality of the aid offered to India was exemplified through the voluntary family planning and promised IUD purchases that were worked into a food aid agreement between President Lyndon B. Johnson and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The cumulative aid offered by the World Bank, Ford Foundation and USAID was a whopping $1.5 billion annually, the most invested in the Global South at that time. What then happened was that the Indian state attributed to population control a sense of urgency and fear that was perhaps not felt at the local level. The Congress's concerns with demography emerged as early as the 1930's. While Malthusian concerns were evident in family policy policies, the elements of eugenics were hard to miss. This culminated in the mass sterilisation programmes conducted during the emergency.

The Implementation of Mass Sterilisation

Surprisingly, the implementation of mass sterilisation came from Sanjay Gandhi's five-point plan and not Prime Minister Gandhi's original twenty-point programme. Sanjay Gandhi adopted an often aggressive, extensive and absolutely unprecedented approach to the implementation of the

sterilisation programme to curb population growth. The first thing done was the implementation of quotas in achieving targeted vasectomies, IUD insertion and even tubectomies. Within this, vasectomies were the most popular method, preferred over the others. Fertility quotas, promotional incentives and downright coercion were used to implement these programmes. However, what was even more startling was the focus on the socio-economically backward groups that were targeted in fulfilling these quotas. The implementation of these policies were a product of the class and caste tensions that marked Indian society at that time – the suspension of democracy simply allowed the state to superimpose these calculated policies without an iota of accountability.

While people who had children were targeted, it was primarily the Muslim population, lower caste groups and those at the very margins of the socio-economic spectrum of Indian society who were lured into the medical procedure often without any knowledge of what was happening to their bodies. Islam's polygamy and apparent aversion to family planning (notions perpetuated popularly) were also seen as reasons to target the community specifically when sterilisation policies were drafted. Emma Tarlo in her seminal work on the emergency titled Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi provides evidence of how certain caste groups were able to escape sterilisation due to their standing in the caste system and their occupation. However, state imposition and violence were not alone in seeing the implementation of the sterilisation programme. The financial incentives offered were lucrative enough for them to opt for the procedures including cash benefits and land allotments.

The ruthless leadership of Sanjay Gandhi was displayed in his manipulation of public employees to meet the quotas introduced. Grade-4 and below state employees including teachers, municipal workers and even doctors and hospital staff were often threatened with job-related penalties if they failed to meet quotes leading to a sense of desperation among these sections and ultimately coercion in implementing sterilisation procedures. The overall system created was so violent that most individuals found it near impossible to refuse sterilisation due to the fact that the consequence of non-compliance was often withholding basic rights such as land allocation and food ration as promised by the Gandhi administration and the socialist voices she strongly supported.

What is Beauty? The Riots in Turkman Gate

As mentioned earlier, the problematic elements of policy were based on the Four-Point Programme as laid down by Sanjay Gandhi and not so much from the Twenty-Point Programme that Prime Minster Gandhi laid out - aimed at poverty alleviation. The two pillars of Sanjay Gandhi's Four-Point Programme were family planning and urban beautification – one dealing with how cities should be organised and the other family. Sanjay Gandhi's idea of what urban spaces should look like led to the clearing of cities like New Delhi, where sizeable amounts of the people were removed from the mainland and relocated to overcrowded slums and ghettos. Consequently, it is from these slums and ghettos that people were picked up to meet sterilisation quotas.

However, to think of the removal of people from inner-city Delhi to the ghettos was not straightforward – the people mostly removed were minorities from the fringes of society. Sanjay Gandhi hated the idea of poverty and his policies stemmed from his disdain of the economically backward. He used his cadre of carefully curated officials including Jagmohan, DDA vice-chairman, Navin Chawla, Secretary to the LG of Delhi, DIG Bhinder and the municipal commissioner of Delhi B.R. Tamta, along with the power of the Youth Congress to implement his ideas

and programmes. Close allies like Rukhsana Sultana and Arjun Dass were also complicit in the malpractices occurring in the region. The complete breakdown of the democratic apparatus of the state along with a personalised brand of politics that favoured individual allegiance was damning to the citizenry and people of Turkman Gate. While all of India felt the excesses of the Emergency, its most violative programmes were carried out in the Hindi-speaking belt of India, particularly Delhi. The extra-constitutional role adopted by Sanjay Gandhi, along with the mayhem of the Emergency was what cost Prime Minister Gandhi the next general election. Congress was completely ousted from Northern India in the 1977 general elections.

While there remain multiple districts, villages and towns that were impacted by the horrors of the emergency, the riots that occurred in the Turkman Gate region of Old Delhi, remains unforgettable. It remained a public reminder of the violence that was extended by the state during the emergency period. A predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, Turkman Gate was the site for the implementation of forced sterilisation and the urban development programme implemented by Sanjay Gandhi to clean the streets of Delhi. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA), along with the police force clashed violently with the residents of Turkman Gate over slum clearance and forced sterilisation. Peaceful protests over the "cleaning up" and "beautification" campaign of Delhi to meet modern standards were violently curbed, leading to the death of over 20 people officially – the unofficial death toll remains higher. Bulldozers were ordered to tear through the neighbourhood while families were still inside houses. People were picked up from the streets and subject to sterilisation procedures and local activists and leaders were dumped in jail in the name of security.

Overextending the "Slum Clearance Order" issued to areas near the Jama Masjid, the massacre that occurred at Turkman Gate was simply an overextension of a zealous city employee Jagmohan, who believed the area represented the "ghetto mentality" of the people it inhabited – largely Muslim. Shops were run over, houses were run over, and people were run over too. When inhabitants of the area went to get help from their representatives – they were asked to fill in quotas for the sterilisation programme. The ordeal carried on for days with truck full of debris being removed and relocation camps being set up across the Yamuna. Resentment rose among the people of the neighbourhood who were subject to the double atrocities of slum clearance and forced sterilisation. Matters reached its crescendo on April 19th – the locals clashed with officials and a blood bath ensued. However, things did not end here and the gentrification of Turkman Gate continued.

The Turkman Gate riots remain a clear example of how biopolitics operated in post-colonial states like India. Given the complex fabric of India where community, religion, public policy and economy intersect in myriad ways – the garb of public policy to advance narrow understandings of urbanisation and family control were pursued relentlessly. Sanjay Gandhi, drunk on power, allowed families to be torn apart and lives to be bulldozed over. Forced evictions, the fear of sterilisation and the human cost of implementing policies without ethical considerations has led to Turkman Gate becoming the symbol of tyranny that it is.

Secrecy and the Shah Commission

The Emergency implemented by Prime Minister Gandhi saw a complete blanket over press activity, which included severe censorship and overall silence on the actions of the state. Information pertaining to policies and its implementation were missing from the public and thus, the awareness on the excesses committed by the likes of Sanjay


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Gandhi were brought to light only after the end of the emergency. National newspapers like the Times of India and Hindustan Times were controlled into producing narratives that were state-friendly and were thus, unable to expose the true nature of the family planning programmes implemented.

It was only with the established and enquiry by the Shah Commission set up by the Morarji Desai administration that the true extent of the horrors of the mass sterilisation drives were unmasked. Further studies revealed that coercion was not uniformly applied across the country. Some districts experienced higher instances of state-imposed sterilisation while some did not receive the same treatment. The political and social motivations in the disproportionate targeting of marginalised groups that reduced their bodies to mere numbers in the name of policy is proof that demographic studies and transitions backed by public policy are not devoid of political motivations.

Consequences and Fear of Population Growth

Multiple studies have indicated that a direct increase in violence was noted in those districts that saw forced sterilisation being implemented with the heaviest of hands. The psychological trauma of undergoing such violating medical procedures exacerbated instances of rape, violent crime and murder. The trauma of forced vasectomies and the sense of a reduced masculinity that it created led to an increase in aggressive behaviour among men. Forced sterilisation also contributed significantly to India's disproportionate sex ratios, often reinforcing gender-based violence against women and discrimination.

The mass sterilisation campaigns and its forced implementation often against the will of the individual was a direct manifestation of the Indian state's deep fear of an uncontrolled population. The selective targeting of particular communities, especially its minorities, was done to promote the interests of its majority community and was not rooted in ethical family planning and population control. These coercive public health policies often weaponised by states to promote the interests of the majority communities have lasting consequences for society. The most egregious part was the role played by Sanjay Gandhi in the events that unfolded, whose credentials were simply his proximity to Prime Minister Gandhi as her son.

A similar instance of state-controlled measures in targeting specific bodies was noticed in the United States of America in Tuskegee. A medical programme was run from 1932 to 1972. A racist study on the onset of latent Syphilis on black bodies was conducted by the United States government. The study targeted 600 poor, black male farmers and sharecroppers in Alabama to study the progression of Syphilis and were not administered penicillin even when it was discovered. The study was allowed to continue for 40 years and was only terminated after public backlash on its exposure. Similar experiments were conducted in Nazi Germany, Japan, Guatemala, South Africa and other nations.

Economic and developmental concerns were often used to justify the Emergency-era forced sterilisation campaigns. However, the lack of autonomy and the manner in which the state was able to reduce its citizens to a mere number was startling – the horrors of which are felt till today. The selective targeting of specific communities is a direct reflection of the inherent logic of the Indian state and society. The ethical breaches of the quest to implement state-driven population control measures shows a direct correlation between demographic control and Indian governance. The ability of the state to be able to categorise certain bodies as desirable and certain bodies as dispensable makes it a powerful tool in the hands of oppressive and authoritarian regimes. Coercive state interventions have lasting social and political consequences. ■

Old Age isn't a Modern Phenomenon – Many People Lived Long Enough to Grow Old in the Olden Days, too

SHARON DEWITTE

Every year I ask the college students in the course I teach about the 14th-century Black Death to imagine they are farmers or nuns or nobles in the Middle Ages. What would their lives have been like in the face of this terrifying disease that killed millions of people in just a few years? Setting aside how they envision what it would be like to confront the plague, these undergrads often figure that during the medieval period they would already be considered middle-aged or elderly at the age of 20. Rather than being in the prime of life, they think they'd soon be decrepit and dead. They're reflecting a common misperception that long lifespans in humans are very recent and that no one in the past lived much beyond their 30s. But that's just not true. I am a bioarchaeologist, which means that I study human skeletons excavated from archaeological sites to understand what life was like in the past. I'm especially interested in demography – mortality (deaths), fertility (births) and migration – and how it was linked with conditions and diseases such as the health Black Death hundreds or thousands of years ago. There's physical evidence that plenty of people in the past lived long lives – just as long as some people do today.

Bones record the length of a life One of the first steps in research about demography in the past is to estimate how old people were when they died. Bioarchaeologists do this using information about how your bones and teeth change as you get older. For example, I look for changes to joints in the pelvis that are common at older ages. Observations of these joints in people today whose ages we know allow us to estimate ages for people from archaeological sites with joints that look similar. A researcher can count the layers within a tooth that were added over time to determine how old a person lived to be. Another way to estimate age is to use a microscope to count the yearly additions of a mineralised tissue called cementum on teeth. It's similar to counting a tree's rings to see how many years it lived. Using approaches like these, many studies have documented the existence of people who lived long lives in the past. For example, by examining skeletal remains, anthropologist Meggan Bullock and colleagues found that in the city of Cholula, Mexico, between 900 and 1531, most people

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who made it to adulthood lived past the age of 50. And of course, there are many examples from historical records of people who lived very long lives in the past. For example, the sixth-century Roman Emperor Justinian I reportedly died at the age of 83. Analysis of the tooth development of an ancient anatomically modern Homo sapiens individual from Morocco suggests that our species has experienced long lifespans for at least the past 160,000 years.

Clearing up a maths misunderstanding Given physical and historical evidence that many people did live long lives in the past, why does the misperception that everyone was dead by the age of 30 or 40 persist? It stems from confusion about the difference between individual lifespans and life expectancy. Life expectancy is the average number of years of life remaining for people of a particular age. For example, life expectancy at birth (age 0) is the average length of life for newborns. Life expectancy at age 25 is how much longer people live on average given they've survived to age 25. In medieval England, life expectancy at birth for boys born to families that owned land was a mere 31.3 years. However, life expectancy at age 25 for landowners in medieval England was 25.7. This means that people in that era who celebrated their 25th birthday could expect to live until they were 50.7, on average – 25.7 more years. While 50 might not seem old by today's standards, remember that this is an average, so many people would have lived much longer, into their 70s, 80s and even older. Life expectancy is a population-level statistic that reflects the conditions and experiences of a huge variety of people with very different health conditions and behaviours, some who die at very young ages, some who live to be over 100 years old, and lots whose lifespans fall somewhere in between. Life expectancy is not a promise (or a threat!) about the lifespan of any single person. What some people don't realise is that low life expectancy at birth for any population usually reflects very high rates of infant mortality. That's a measure of deaths in the first year of life. Given that life expectancies reflect averages for a population, a high number of deaths at very young ages will skew calculations of life expectancy at birth towards younger ages. But typically, many people in those populations who make it past the vulnerable infant and early childhood years can expect to live relatively long lives. Advances in modern sanitation – which reduce the spread of diarrhoeal diseases that are a major killer of infants – and vaccinations can greatly increase life expectancies.

Comparing ages of populations in two countries You can find people of all ages in both Singapore and Afghanistan. But the two countries' very different infant mortality and life expectancy numbers mean their populations have different overall age patterns, too. More than 70% of the people in Afghanistan are under age 30. In Singapore, only 30% of the population is under age 30. In Afghanistan, life expectancy at birth is low, at just over 53 years, and infant mortality is high, at almost 105 deaths for every 1,000 children born. In Singapore, life expectancy at birth is much higher, at over 86 years, and infant mortality is very low – fewer than two infants die for every 1,000 who are born. In both countries, people do survive to very old ages. But in Afghanistan, because so many more people die at very young ages, proportionally fewer people survive to old age.

Living a long life has long been possible It's incorrect to view long lives as a remarkable and unique characteristic of the "modern" era. Knowing that people often did have long lives in the past might help you feel more connected with the past. For example, you can imagine multi-generational households and gatherings, with grandparents in Neolithic China or Medieval England bouncing their grandchildren on their knees and telling them stories about their own childhoods decades before. You might have more in common with people who lived long ago than you had realised. ■

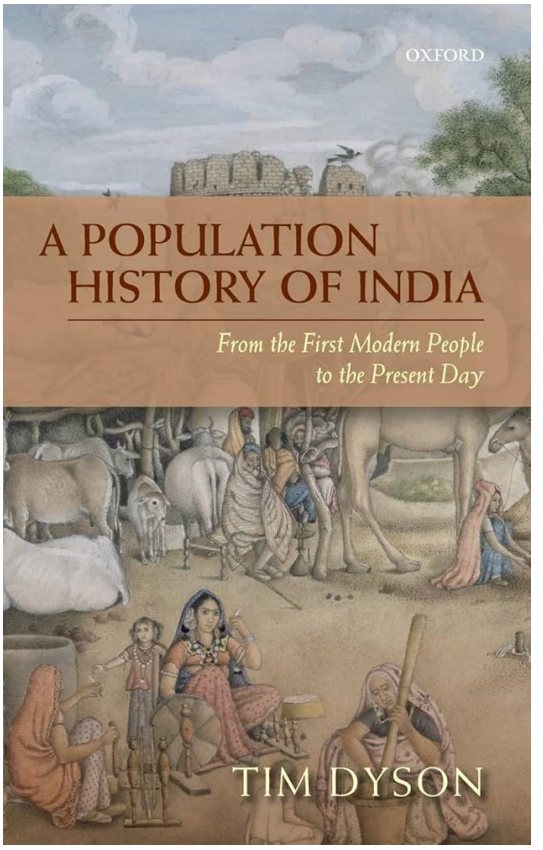
book review.

Neeti Goutam

Tim Dyson, in his book, "Population History of India: From the First Modern People to the Present Day," wrote a gripping analysis of what the population was like in the era of the first modern people, i.e., the Homo sapiens, to the population in the year 2016. The author looked at the various historical evidence and speculations from 80,000 years ago to the present day. The population dynamics included birth and death rates, fertility levels, marriage structure, governance, epidemics, population rise, disease patterns, legal and social structures, and the entrance of new populations to the Indian subcontinent.

The book beautifully captures the diversities in the data given by various historians and scholars and why some numbers make sense while others do not. The data justifications that Dyson has given reflect an excellent study on the subject matter.

The initial chapters discuss the arrival of modern human beings, "Homo sapiens," who originated in South Africa and reached the northwest of the Indian subcontinent around 60,000-80,000 years ago in very small groups. These groups survived by gathering and hunting in various environments: coastal areas, mountains, hills, plateaus, and river valleys with their extended families. The regions of their arrival included the Ganges Basin, Satpura, the Vindhyas, Deccan, and parts of Sri Lanka. Some areas had hostile environments like dense forests and mountains; over time, some groups became obsolete due to uncertain events like floods, droughts, and forest fires. Regions with



Population History of India: From the First Modern People to the Present Day, 330 pages
OUP Oxford

plentiful food led to population growth among those groups. Over time, they learned the use of fire (9,500 years ago), practised burial of the dead, and developed hunting techniques. According to Colin McEvedy's estimates, roughly 200,000 people lived during that period. The birth and death rates were nearly equal, and life expectancy was around 30 years.

Around 8,500 years ago, people began agricultural practices (Neolithic Revolution), increasing the population to around 500,000. Hunter-gatherers had a slightly longer lifespan than the agricultural population because of their diverse diet; their movement from one place to another led to more opportunities in terms of food and survival. The spread of agricultural activities in the Indus Valley and the Ganges Basin around 5,000 years ago led to a population increase. With the advent

of this new civilisation, urban living centres began to emerge. Harappa, a major city in the Indus Valley civilisation, had its mature age around 4,600-3,900 years ago. The land was accompanied by the main rivers of the Indus system: Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, and Satluj. The population then was around 4 to 6 million, according to estimates by McEvedy and Jones. With more land and food resources, the population grew, but after a point, it started to concentrate because the food was sourced back to only cereal harvests. Thus, food became less secure. In addition, there were human diseases like diarrhoea, measles, polio, water-borne diseases, tuberculosis, influenza, and sanitation problems.

Thus, from a mainly agriculture-dominant population, people favoured a combination of agricultural and demographic expansion, and many migrated to the Ganges Basin. With this, the advent of Arya-speaking people emerged in the subcontinent, largely from the northwestern region.

The basis of this migration was more fertile soil, rich in agriculture, an increased farming population, rivers providing transport and supplies, and the emergence of new cities. Small kingdoms started to emerge, culminating in the rise of the Mauryan Empire (200 BCE to 1000 CE). One of the main cities of the empire, Pataliputra, had a population of 100,000. One interesting fact about the empire was that information on people was available in the Mauryan inscriptions in three languages carved on rocks and pillars. Then, the Chief Minister of Chandragupta Maurya, Kautilya, documented population data in the Arthashastra. The numbers in the text reflect the complex civilisations that emerged at that time. Aryan settlements were mostly along the riverside cities like Mathura, Delhi (Indraprastha), Vaishali, Pataliputra, Chamba, etc.

The period between 1000 and 1707 started with the rule of Muslim armies and ended with Aurangzeb's death. Afghan warriors led by Turks, Mohammad Ghazni, and then his successors from 1000-1026 began reaching the northern part and most of the Indian subcontinent. One of his successors, Mohammad Ghori, attacked and established the Delhi Sultanate in 1210. It was also the period of the Slave Dynasty, and the rulers were harsh towards their people. It lasted until 1526 when the final ruler, Ibrahim Lodi, was killed by Babur. The Delhi Sultanate ruled most of the north, from Punjab to Bengal. Babur's grandson, Akbar, established his empire from 1556 to 1605. He was known for his respect towards non-Muslim communities and the abolition of the jizya tax imposed on them. After his successor Aurangzeb took the throne in 1658, his rule lasted for 50 years. The population during this period was around 100–145 million.

The chapter also discusses the arrival of Europeans to the Indian subcontinent through the Kerala coast in search of spices and other resources. The population during this period was estimated to be between 125-145 million. The decline of the Mughal Empire began from 1701 to 1821, with the rise of British rule. The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 led to internal struggles and the downfall of the Mughal Empire. In the early 18th century, the Marathas gained power against the Mughals. Meanwhile, the period witnessed warfare and military conflicts between the Mughals, Marathas, and British forces. This period also saw a rise in famines, the most prominent being the Bengal Famine of 1769-70. Severe crop failure in 1768 in Bihar, followed by continued failure, led to starvation. The number of deaths from the famine remains unknown. The population during this period also suffered from diseases like cholera, malaria, and smallpox. People in non-agricultural areas suffered the most from the famine, as they had no access to food supplies. However, the author's claim that 10 million people were affected by it is considered an exaggeration. The exact population figure for the 1800s remains uncertain, with estimates ranging from 159 million to 200 million.

Thomas Robert Malthus, appointed to the

faculty of East India College, London, argued that colonial administration reduced warfare, female infanticide, and disease. However, with this, the population could grow more, making famine a check on population growth. The period from 1827-1871 saw the unification of legal codes, the construction of railways, and the creation of new towns. The British exploited Indian goods, transporting them to Europe, while India imported cheap factory-made textiles. Another major factor that led to the Rebellion of 1857-58 was the British East India Company's loss of control over Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow, leading to Crown rule replacing company rule. The population in 1857 under British rule was estimated at 180 million, but when adjusted for territories not under their control, it rose to 224 million.

The period of 1821-1871 also saw advancements in data collection processes. Some of the earliest population records were taken from temple lists, genealogical scripts, and household counts known as the Khanasumari, maintained by Maratha officials.

Here is the revised version with UK English spellings, improved grammar, and better readability while preserving the original meaning:

The Madras Presidency took the lead in conducting an internal census, followed by Bombay and the Central Provinces. This period also saw the introduction of vital registration for births and deaths. Life expectancy during the 1830s was extremely low, averaging 25 years, particularly for those living in Delhi, including the British population. The general population had a young age structure, and the sex ratio was skewed in favour of males. Female infanticide was widely practised during this period, and it was only after the 1870s that efforts led to its abolition.

The famines between 1821 and 1871 were different from earlier ones in that they were less destructive. The reasons for this included the expansion of the railway network, which improved food supply distribution, and the construction of irrigation canals, reducing dependency on monsoon rains.

Despite these developments, the period 1871–1921 witnessed a demographic crisis due to famines, plague, and the 1918–19 influenza pandemic, which claimed more lives in India than in any other part of the world. However, overall mortality rates became more stable during this period. As Indian leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Dadabhai Naoroji advocated for independence, they also criticised British policies, which had a profound impact on the population. During this time, India's population grew from approximately 255 million to 305 million.

The 1880s were generally free from major disasters, resulting in steady population growth. However, the famines of 1896–97 and 1899–1900 caused a population decline. The 1918–19 influenza pandemic struck during the First World War, with over a million Indian men enlisted in the army. According to the Sanitary Commission for India Report (1918), many soldiers contracted influenza and brought the disease to Bombay in May 1918. The northern and western regions of the subcontinent were more severely affected than the east and south. Indian soldiers suffered particularly high mortality rates, with death rates recorded at 19.2 and 61.6 per 1,000 population for Muslims and low-caste Hindus, compared to 8.3 and 9.0 for Europeans and Parsis in 1918.

The period 1921–1971 saw rapid population growth. Life expectancy steadily increased from 20–30 years in the 1920s, to 37 years by the 1950s, and 43–44 years by the 1960s. However, population growth was geographically uneven, with higher growth rates in the northern regions compared to the south.

In 1964–65, the Registrar General of India initiated the Sample Registration System (SRS) pilot, a dual-record system for births and deaths to maintain demographic surveillance.

Efforts towards family planning also emerged in this period. In 1930, the princely state of Mysore became the first to approve government birth control clinics in Mysore and Bangalore. The 1931 census report indicated a growing recognition of birth control. In 1943, the government established the Bhore Committee to assess the population's health status. Its 1946 report highlighted the importance of a strong and free healthcare system accessible to all. The creation of Primary Health Centres (PHCs) facilitated family planning services, vaccination programmes, and general healthcare.

During this period, mortality rates declined, but fertility remained high, at 6.5 live births per woman. In 1951–56, India became the first country to introduce a national family planning programme, leading to the establishment of several family planning clinics. By the 1960s, the concept of community health services took shape, with auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) educating people on family planning methods and organising sterilisation camps.

Between 1951 and 1971, per capita income increased, food prices were kept under control, and access to safe drinking water, sanitation, piped water, and modern sewage systems improved significantly.

Here is the revised version with only UK English spellings and necessary grammatical corrections, without improving readability or altering the original meaning:

During 1971–2016, poverty remained widespread as economic growth was low during the 1970s. In the 1990s, an important national survey focused on health: the National Family Health Survey in every major state to have data on households, fertility, diseases, mortality, and more. Fertility from 1971–2016 was much higher in the North than in the South. The population grew from 548 million to 1,210 million during the period. That led to better health and education levels with time. Fertility 1971–81 and 2001–11, the total fertility decreased from 5.4 to 3.0, pointing to the better health status of women and reduced risk of dying from causes linked to pregnancy and childbirth.

In the period before 1971, mortality improved slower in urban areas than in rural areas from 1971 to 2016. In 1970–75, life expectancy in urban areas was 58.9, and in rural areas 48.0. By 2011, the difference was lower, with 71.0% and 66.3% in urban and rural areas, respectively. There was a decrease in deaths caused by communicable diseases. However, there was a slow rise in deaths by noncommunicable diseases, causing a dual burden on health. In the 1950s–70s, only half of deaths were due to communicable diseases. By the 1990s, it had decreased to a quarter. However, there was progress in health care in the later period.

The population in 2016 was 1,327 million, 18 percent of the world's population, with the help of new technological revolution, medicinal care, lower mortality (also with aid from development and international organisations), and a better standard of living. The author concludes by saying that most of the population increase, which was mostly natural, happened in recent decades. The people who existed in the subcontinent and those who came from outside contributed to the country's diversity. As far as the population count is concerned, for most of history, it has grown very slowly. It was less than 0.1% per year. Then, after 1800–71, the growth rate was 0.35%, followed by 1.2% in 1921–47 and 2.0% in 1947–2016.

As stated above, these variations were caused by various factors: famines, wars, administration, epidemics, and poverty. While succumbing to these famines and calamities, the Indian subcontinent fared better than China and Europe, where climatic conditions were harsher, and global temperature changes posed greater challenges. However, major events did reduce the size of the population, and where weaker people succumbed to the situation more, promoting a high birth rate was stressed.

Another important point the author stressed

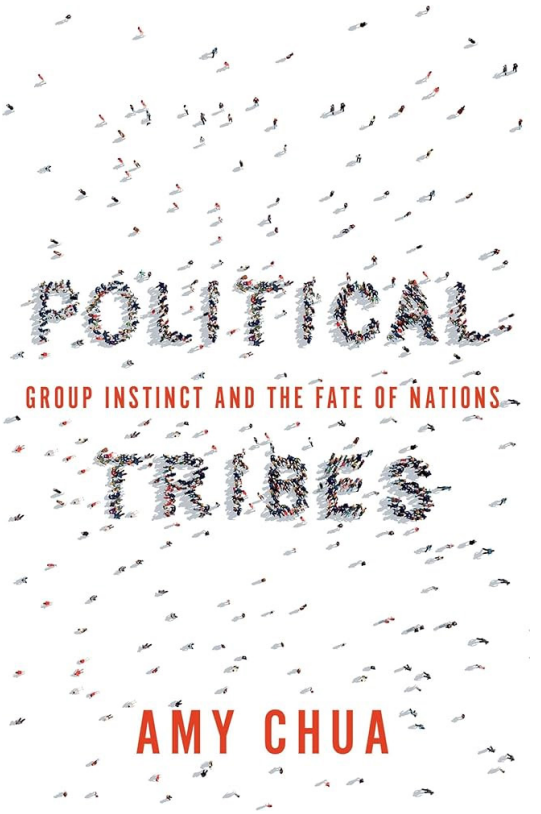
was the difference in population structures of the North and South of the Indian subcontinent. The northern belt, which came under the Indo-Gangetic plains, was more patriarchal; women bore children at early ages, and fertility was very high, with high mortality due to diseases and epidemics. This led to a slow recovery from population and other crises.

On the contrary, with the ingress of people and influences from Punjab down to the Ganges, the regime was relatively healthier, with unused land and other resources. The southern regime (Dravidian culture), which prevailed below the Narmada River, was less patriarchal. Women had more favourable conditions, and marriage occurred at higher ages. Since excess female mortality was also reduced, there was greater flexibility.

With all this information, the author himself stated that incomplete data and often contradictory numbers are major issues in Indian demography. The book is one of the best reads for students and scholars of history and demography who want to learn about historical population data in India. The author remarks on population size and characteristics from 80,000 years ago to modern times. With so much data based on speculations and contradictions, being a demographer, he challenges them. He developed his understanding and considered the research of several historians and demographers from different periods in Indian history. ■

book review.

Mahnish Kashyap



Political Tribes: Group Instincts and the Fate of Nations, Penguin Press, 304 pages

Amy Chua's book, Political Tribes: Group Instincts and the Fate of Nations, explores the concept of tribalism and tries to link it with political landscapes, policies, and international relations. Tribalism means the strong and innate need for belongingness – to belong to a group and to have strong bonds within the group, and this often creates exclusionary tendencies towards people who do not belong to that group. For example, ethnicity is a strong group identity rooted in shared history, language, culture, and ancestry. The author analyses and critiques the historical oversight of the US foreign policy, where policymakers view international relations through the narrow lenses of ideological differences and nation-states while ignoring the importance of regional, religious, ethnic, or clan-based identities – a phenomenon that she calls "American Group Blindness."

American group blindness results from American exceptionalism, where there is a belief that the United States is unique and different from any other country because of its history, values, and political systems. This belief comes from the American identity, which is more tied to the land and its shared constitution rather than its ancestry, culture, and ethnicity – it is rooted in the Civil War and the Fourteenth Amendment.

The core argument of this book is simple. If policymakers fail to acknowledge and recognise the basic human instinct of tribalism, then it could lead to conflicts, political instability, and misguided domestic and foreign policies.

Amy Chua used the case study of the Vietnam War as an example of how the Americans misunderstood the complexities of tribalism within Vietnam. Vietnamese nationalism had a significant anti-Chinese sentiment because Chinese immigrants wielded enormous economic and political power in Vietnam. As the Americans ignored the local group dynamics and Vietnam's history when formulating its foreign policy, they could not navigate effectively through Vietnamese nationalism, historical grievances, and ethnic tensions. This led to miscalculated policies, which had a disastrous outcome for the United States. The author also gave the example of Afghanistan and its tribal dynamics to make the same argument.

Similarly, misunderstanding of the internal tribal and sectarian divisions of Iraq resulted in a lot of mistakes in Iraq, eventually leading to a lot of violence following the US-led

invasion. The explosive sectarian divisions between the Sunnis and the Shias ignited once the Americans imposed democracy. To add to this, the De-Baathification order led to the dismissal of several individuals who were affiliated with the Baath party – a critical error because it exacerbated Sunni fears of disenfranchisement and stripped a country that is already in ruins of the much-needed expertise from these professionals. Overnight, hospitals were without qualified doctors, and ministries were without bureaucrats.

Amy Chua also touches on the tribal dimensions of terrorism, where she challenges the prevailing notion that terrorists are primarily psychopaths – like serial killers. Terrorists do not exhibit the traits that individuals with psychopathic personality disorders show. She argues that the judgment of terrorists is affected because of group membership and the pressure to conform.

To further her argument, Amy Chua examines how the failure to acknowledge and address the underlying tribal politics and social divisions has led to a "tragic" situation in Venezuela. She writes about the tensions between democracy and the market-dominant minority in Venezuela, and as a result, the country is sliding towards autocratic governance. She then argues that US foreign policy towards Venezuela has been ineffective.

The tribal chasm in the US is quite apparent – economic inequality has fuelled tribalism and social division as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Materially, there are different realities for white people and people of colour. Whites never face the discrimination, racial profiling, and blatant racism that non-white Americans face. Amy Chua criticises the major liberal philosophical movements in the modern USA, which were group blind and universalist in nature, like John Rawls's theory of justice. Individual rights have been championed to protect the rights of individuals from marginalised groups indirectly – a form of trickle-down economics that perhaps never works.

The author's views on the American Left and the American Right are interesting. She writes that at different times, both ideologies have stood for group-transcending values, but neither does that today. The American Left is getting distracted by its hyper-fixation on issues like cultural appropriation, so much so that they get into in-fighting with other left and progressive groups – a classic us-versus-them phenomenon could be seen within the left itself. As a result, today's left is more divided than ever. The American Right has been taken hostage by white identity politics, which marks a shift from its traditional position of colour blindness – the right no longer can claim itself to be the bastion of individualism. Conservatives started to believe that society glorifies all things that are non-white and demonises everything white, and this has provoked a reaction among them to "fight back." The tendency to define national identity in terms of "Anglo-Protestant culture" or "whiteness" will cause America to cease to be America. Amy Chua suggests that both the American Left and the American Right are being politically tribalist in nature, and they are playing with poison.

Democracy as we know it is not without its flaws, and Amy Chua highlights it by citing several examples where instead of neutralising conflicts, democracies sometimes exacerbate conflict where people start emphasising their differences, especially in societies where there are deep sectarian and ethnic divides. She argues that the US is not an exception to the political forces of tribalism, giving examples of the increasing divide between the identities of the rich and the poor, as well as the mobilisation of white identity politics by scapegoating the non-whites.

The US is in danger of losing its identity as a super-group because of tribalism seizing American politics. Political tribalism in the US is rooted in race, which is especially fraught because of the unprecedented demographic transformation that it is going through, placing a significant strain on the social fabric. Almost all the groups in the

US feel threatened, and as a result, they resort to tribalism, becoming more insular in the process. The author argues that the elites in the US are oblivious to such group identities that matter a lot to large segments of the American population. The elites often express their distaste for things associated with lower-income Americans. In fact, even in progressive elites, one can observe their relative obliviousness – they exhibit more compassion for the world's poor than America's poor.

Many ordinary Americans view the elite as a distant minority that controls the strings of power from afar – they are ignorant and uninterested in "real" Americans. The author argues that this very phenomenon helped Donald Trump come to power. The most important tribal identity missed by America's elite was the anti-establishment identity forming within the working class, which resonated with their support for Trump. Race has divided the American poor, and class has divided the American whites. The whites are divided in the sense that there is little to no interaction between rural/heartland/working-class whites and the urban/coastal whites. They start thinking of themselves as belonging to distinct and opposing political tribes.

Amy Chua's academic attempt to explore tribalism hints at a form of "Tribalist-Reductionism," similar to how critics would charge Marxists with class-reductionism. Her case studies about foreign interventions and arguments about political tribalism are not wrong, but she fails to consider the innate wrongness of invading another country to bring about "democracy." In her critique of American Exceptionalism, she herself becomes a victim of American Exceptionalism, where she does not see anything fundamentally wrong with invading another country to impose the ideology of the US. The overemphasis on tribalism downplays the underlying economic and strategic interests that were the key driving forces behind these interventions.

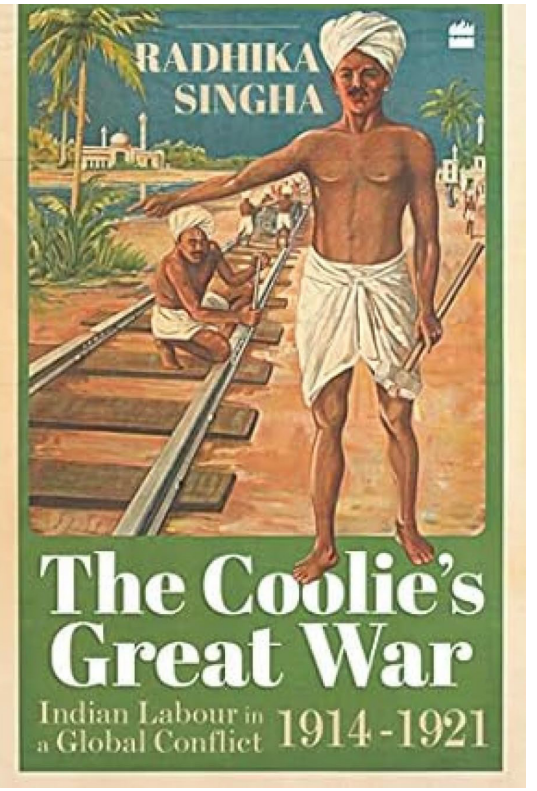
To fix the problem of political tribalism, Amy Chua suggested that it is very important to understand the power of group identity, bridge group divides, and use the tool of one-on-one human engagement to help people see each other as human beings and understand the political "other." However, her solutions are too simplistic considering the complexity of the problem, and they are presented with overconfidence and lack methodological rigour. ■

book review.

Sumedha Sharma

Radhika Singha's The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921 presents a critical re-examination of World War I from a perspective often overshadowed by Eurocentric narratives. While existing histories largely glorify the combatants, Singha shifts focus to the non-combatant Indian labourers who played a crucial role in supporting the Allied war effort. Her work uncovers the experiences of these workers, categorised into the Coolie Corps and Porter Corps, which included construction workers, porters, mule-drivers, stretcher-bearers, cooks, washermen, and sweepers. Through meticulous research, Singha brings to light the harsh, often inhumane, conditions they endured—challenging the conventional glorification of the war effort and critiquing the exploitation of colonial subjects.

The book begins with an exploration of colonial India's systematic mobilisation of labour for the war. The British administration recruited workers predominantly from rural, marginalised communities, referring to them derogatorily as "coolies." Singha provides a detailed account of their deployment across various war fronts, including Mesopotamia, France, Egypt, the Persian Gulf, East Africa, Gallipoli, Salonika, and Aden. She examines the coercive and manipulative tactics used by the colonial state to extract labour, preying on those with limited power to resist. British justifications of this recruitment as a "patriotic contribution" to the empire are deconstructed as thinly veiled exploitation,



The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914–1921,392 pages C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd

with the experiences of the labourers serving as a powerful counter-narrative.

Singha deliberately uses the term follower ranks instead of subalterns to highlight the distinctive role of these labourers, often engaged in care work that was arguably more humane than that of British soldiers. She details the critical yet undervalued work performed by Indian labourers—from constructing roads and railways to transporting supplies and tending to the wounded. However, their contributions were rarely acknowledged, and they were subjected to severe discrimination, including stark inequalities in wages, working conditions, and access to healthcare. Even within the follower ranks, a hierarchy existed, with mule-drivers and stretcher-bearers considered "higher followers" than menial workers.

The book also explores the unsanitary and hazardous conditions in which these labourers worked, leading to high mortality rates and

widespread disease. Singha examines how the loss of these workers further strained rural economies, exacerbating economic hardship for their families. Women and children were forced to assume greater responsibilities, leading to shifts in traditional gender roles. While such demographic shifts are often overlooked in historical records, Singha argues that they had significant and lasting social and economic consequences. Her analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how global conflicts shape local realities.

One of the book's key sections discusses the Indian labour and porter corps in Iraq, particularly the brutal conditions of the Jail Labour Porter Corps, which consisted of over 15,234 prisoners sent to Mesopotamia between October 1916 and July 1919. This force met the British demand for manpower at great human cost to India. The colonial administration disregarded religious and cultural sensitivities, including the proper cremation of bodies, further exposing the systemic dehumanisation of these workers.

Singha also transports readers to the battlefields of Europe, where Indian labourers faced not only the trauma of warfare but also the racialised hierarchies of the British empire. Most recruits came from the northeastern regions of Bihar, Orissa, and the Assam-Burma hill districts, where coercion rather than voluntary enlistment was the norm. Christian organisations such as the Salvation Army and the YMCA played an active role in recruitment, leading to a disproportionately high percentage of Christians in the Indian Labour Corps. By 1917, these recruitment drives encountered growing resistance. Singha details the challenges these labourers faced, from climate-related hardships to discrimination in food, recreation, and accommodation, which compounded their suffering.

The book also examines the long-term demographic implications of this mass mobilisation. Many Indian labourers settled in the regions where they were deployed, forming diasporic communities that played a significant role in the post-war world. Their experiences abroad shaped new political and social consciousness, laying the groundwork for later nationalist movements.

Singha's The Coolie's Great War is a seminal study that highlights an overlooked aspect of World War I, shedding light on themes of race, caste, and colonial exploitation. Her objective yet deeply empathetic account reconstructs the lived experiences of Indian labourers, drawing from war records and imperial documents while centring marginalised voices. More than just a historiographical contribution, the book is a powerful reminder of the intersections between war, labour, and demography.

The book concludes by examining the post-war period, as soldiers and followers returned home to an India irrevocably altered by their absence. While Europe underwent significant social and political changes following the repatriation of labourers, India experienced similar trends, albeit through the lens of colonial subjugation. The increased participation of ordinary people in political movements signalled a shift towards greater inclusivity, with formerly marginalised groups finding new avenues for political engagement. The sacrifices made by Indian migrant workers in the war reinforced their awareness of colonial exploitation, strengthening nationalist sentiments and influencing the strategies of Indian political leaders in the years to come.

In The Coolie's Great War, Radhika Singha masterfully weaves together archival research and historical analysis to offer a compelling critique of colonial labour exploitation during World War I. Her work serves as a vital corrective to mainstream war histories, ensuring that the contributions and sacrifices of non-combatant Indian labourers are neither forgotten nor marginalised. ■

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