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Controlling Population: A Double Edged Sword

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This article is based on **“The cautionary tale behind population control”** which was published in the hindustan times on 28/06/2021. It talks about the associated issues with population control in India.

Recently, two Indian state governments – Uttar Pradesh and Assam – have advocated aggressive population control measures. This proposal pertains to pursuing a two-child policy for entitlement to state government benefits.

With ongoing trends, India will overtake China as the most populous country by 2025 or perhaps sooner. The overwhelming population burden is causing a resource crunch on resources like hospitals, food grains, houses, or employment.

However, population control, grounded in classic economic theories, has been a double-edged sword. It has both advantages and costs.

Status of Population Growth in the India & World

- In over half of the world's nations, the rate of population growth is falling behind replacement rates, and, perhaps for the first time, the growth rate in the world's population is projected to be zero by the end of the century, according to United Nations (UN) data.
- Further, the Covid-19 pandemic may have fast-tracked the oncoming peak of a global population decline by at least a decade, according to a recent Bloomberg report.
The pandemic has slowed the already slowing global birth rates, from the United States (US) to China, experts estimate.
- According to the United Nations population projections, India's population will increase by a multiple of 1.09 between 2021 and 2031.
From 2060 onwards, India's population will start falling, which happens when fertility rate falls below replacement levels.

Population Control Theories

- **Malthusian Theory:** Malthus in his work, Principle of Population (1798) had predicted that the world's population would grow at a faster rate than the rate of food production.
 - According to him, the population tends to grow exponentially (geometric growth), he argued, but food supply grew in a slower arithmetic ratio.
 - However, Malthus was ultimately proved wrong as breakthroughs in agricultural technology made countries, such as India, net food surplus.
- **Big-Push Theory:** Harvard economist Harvey Leibenstein has demonstrated how population growth tends to erode incomes.
 - The main economic argument behind this theory was that if per capita income is low, then people are too poor to save.
 - Since investment is taken to be equal to savings, low savings would mean the economy doesn't grow.

Associated Issues With Population Control In India

While these theories increased our understanding of population economics, many of these theories were later found to have many flaws. This can be reflected in the following arguments.

- **High Population is Not Always Bad Economics:** A high population is not necessarily a bad thing for the economy. Population controlling measures will result in:
 - There would simply not be enough people to work for the economy,
 - A large non-productive aging population to support and the government may not have enough resources to support pensions
 - This would lead to de-industrialisation.
- **Distributional Aspects of Population:** In 1937, John Maynard Keynes gave a lecture on "Some Economic Consequences of a Declining Population".
His key worry was poor demand for investment in places where companies encounter a falling population of consumers.
- **China's Model:** China enforced a one-child norm in the 1980s, but with an increasing share of older people in its population (due to one-child policy), China abandoned the old policy and encouraged couples to have more children.
- **Religious Factor in India:** What makes population control an even more vexed issue in India is the religious polarisation around it.
The bogey of population explosion is often used (directly or indirectly) to target a particular minority in India. The population controlling measure will impact social harmony.
- **Impacting the Poor:** Total fertility rates (TFR) are higher among the poor and they come down as incomes increase.
Thus, entitlement based population control policy will end up hurting the poor, who need such help the most.

- **Patriarchy:** Patriarchy driven preference for a male child is an important driver of higher fertility rates.
Restricting to two child policy, is believed to have had an adverse effect on the sex ratio of the population through practices such as female foeticide etc.

Way Forward

- **Focus on Demographic Dividend:** India needs to focus on exploiting its demographic dividend rather than worry about it.
 - India is poised at a unique moment in history, where it can exploit its demographic advantage to realise its economic goals.
 - According to the government's population projections, 53.6% of India's population in 2021 is under the age of 29. More than a quarter of India's population is 14 years or younger.
 - Our policy makers will do well to focus on exploiting India's demographic dividend rather than worrying about it
- **Upgrading the Skill Set:** Presently, India is nowhere close to guaranteeing the best possible opportunities to young Indians.
 - For Instance, according to All India Survey on Higher Education data found that India's higher education sector is mired in deep structural inequalities.
 - This young population can become extremely productive or unproductive depending on the skill sets it acquires.
- **Focusing on Women:** Education of women also plays a role, both in case of fertility rates as well as age of mother at the time of birth of first child. Education helps in bringing down fertility and early birth among women

Conclusion

India is at a stage of demographic transition where mortality rates are declining and fertility rates would decline in the next two to three decades or so. This leads to a scope to cut population growth because India still has a positive growth rate, but our population policy should keep in mind the larger consequences of zero population growth.

Drishti Mains Question

Population control is a double-edged sword. India has scope to cut its population size, but it needs to avoid a trap that awaits it. Discuss.
