

Demographic transition and change in women's lives

The passage of World Population Day (July 11) is also a time to look at how India's demographic journey has changed the lives of its citizens, particularly its women. India's population grew from about 340 million at Independence to 1.4 billion. This growth was fuelled by the gift of life that receding starvation, improved public health, and medical miracles brought to India. In 1941, male life expectancy was about 56 years; only 50% of boys survived to age 28. Today, life expectancy for men is 69 years, and nearly 50% live to see the ripe old age of 75. This rapid decline in mortality took parents by surprise, who no longer needed to have four children to ensure that at least two would survive, causing population growth until fertility decline caught up with the mortality decline, and the Total Fertility Rate fell from 5.7 in 1950 to 2.1 in 2019.

These statistics mask the tectonic shift in the lives of people as they learn to adjust to a longer lifespan and fewer children. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the lives of Indian women. Women's childhood, adulthood, and old age have been transformed over the course of demographic transition, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

Change for Indian women

As families began having fewer children, ensuring at least one son became more difficult. With four children, the chance of not having a son was barely 6%, but with two children, it grew to 25%. Social norms and patrilineal kinship patterns combined with lack of financial security reinforce a preference for sons. The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) found that 85% of women respondents expected to rely on their sons for old age support, while only 11% expected support from their daughters. Hence, parents who want to ensure that they have at least one son among their one or two child family, resorted to sex-selective abortion, and, in some cases, the neglect of sick daughters. Consequently, the number of girls per 100 boys, ages under five



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Women's childhood, adulthood, and old age have all been transformed in India's demographic journey

dropped from 96 to 91 between 1950 and 2019.

With a fertility decline, active mothering occupies a smaller proportion of women's lives, creating space for education and employment. Good data on this only goes back 30 years, but my research with Sojin Yu, based on the National Family Health Survey, finds that the number of years women spend caring for children under five declined from 14 years in 1992-93 to eight in 2018-20; the years spent caring for children ages six to 15 dropped from 20 to 14 years. These changes are only partly accompanied by changes in the life course of women. While women's educational attainment increased, with over 70% of girls enrolling in secondary education, early marriage and childbearing remain the predominant forces defining women's lives. As a recent article by Park, Hathi, Broussard, and Spears documents, the average age at first birth has hardly budged about 20 for women born in the 1940s and still remains well below 22 years for those born in the 1980s.

Early motherhood, perhaps, explains why lower fertility does not translate into higher labour force participation for women. Women need to establish secure connections to the labour market and gain work experience if they are to get skilled jobs. By the time peak childcare demands end, they have missed the window for occupations that require specific skills; only unskilled work is open to them.

Demographic shifts also affect women's lives at older ages. With rising life expectancy, the proportion of the female population aged 65 and above increased from 5% to 11% between 1950 and 2022, and is projected to reach 21% by 2050. While the proportion of older men will also increase, aging for women has unique implications. Women generally marry men who are older and are more likely to outlive their husbands. The 2011 Census shows that while only 18% of men above age 65 are widowed, about 55% of the women are widowed. For widowed women, the lack of access to savings and property results in dependence on children,

mainly sons, bringing the vicious cycle of son preference to full circle.

Harnessing gender dividend

Changing patriarchal norms may take a long time. Meanwhile, enhancing women's access to employment and assets will reduce their reliance on sons and could break the vicious cycle of gendered disadvantage, stretching from childhood to old age. However, unlike East Asian nations where demographic transformation has led to delayed and often foregone marriage and childbearing, early marriage and childbearing remain central to Indian women's lives. Hence, any efforts at improving women's labour force participation must be accompanied by access to safe and affordable childcare.

A World Bank evaluation based on a randomised controlled trial in Madhya Pradesh found that the expansion of Anganwadis to include a crèche led to an increase in the work participation of mothers. Arguably, the most striking example of the importance of childcare is documented in a study based in urban China by Du and Dong; it found that as state support for childcare declined, employment rates for mothers fell from 88% to 66%.

What are the practical strategies for enhancing childcare access? One relatively low-hanging fruit would be to make staffing crèche an acceptable form of work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). At present, NREGS is being used to build physical infrastructure but there is no reason it cannot be used to develop social infrastructure where NREGS workers can help staff crèches. The burgeoning self-help group movement can be harnessed to set up neighbourhood child-care centres in urban and rural areas. Obtaining the much hoped for demographic dividend cannot be done without fully harnessing the gender dividend. Improving access to childcare is an important component of achieving this.

The views expressed are personal

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Citizen action for clean politicians, cleaner politics

What does a comprehensive look at the background of all the 4,001 sitting Members of the Legislative Assemblies across India tell us about the state of Indian politics? Can India's aspirations to be a globally respected economic and cultural power be fulfilled with the kind of politics it has?

All candidates now follow stipulations following a Supreme Court of India judgment, filing self-sworn affidavits which record the details of criminal cases they have, if any. Of the 4,001 sitting MLAs, 1,777 of them, or 44%, have a criminal case. The current Lok Sabha also has 43% Members of Parliament (MP) with criminal cases. In 2004, the percentage was around 22%, and has now doubled. Many people feel that the cases are either trivial ones or politically motivated. The point that these are not frivolous first information reports needs to be emphasised. These are cases registered after a due process of investigation, filing of charge sheets, a preliminary hearing of the case and being formally charged in a court of law. Even if we say that the cases are foisted by rival political parties, it shows that political parties are selectively using the law and the system needs to change. The law and order system was put in place by political parties and they need to change it. However, facts show that most cases were filed when the party to which the MLA or MPs belonged to was in power. So, the cases are not all politically motivated.

The data is an eye-opener

If we dig deeper and look at serious criminal cases – which on conviction would lead to a jail sentence of five years or more – there are 1,136 or 28% of such MLAs today. There are 47 MLAs with murder cases, 181 with attempt to murder cases, another 114 with cases related to crimes against women, and 14 with rape cases. States/Union Territories with the highest number of serious criminal cases are Delhi 53%, Bihar 59%, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Telangana 39% each, and Uttar Pradesh 38%.

No political party is free of this malaise. If one focuses only on those parties with at least 40 such MLAs, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leads



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The potential of India can be realised when its citizens firmly reject growing criminality in the political system

with 479 MLAs with criminal cases, and 337 with serious criminal cases. The next largest party, the Indian National Congress (INC), has 334 MLAs with criminal cases, and 194 with serious criminal cases.

The other parties including the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Trinamool Congress, Aam Aadmi Party, YSR Congress, Samajwadi Party, Bharat Rashtra Samithi (formerly the Telangana Rashtra Samithi), Rashtriya Janata Dal, Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Biju Janata Dal have a lower number of such MLAs but with a higher percentage of offences – between 42% to 76% for criminal cases, and 32% to 43% for serious criminal cases. The other parties such as the Nationalist Congress Party, Shiv Sena, Janata Dal (United) or JD(U), Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have far fewer seats, and so the number of their MLAs with criminal cases is also much lower.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha, the BJP had 116 MPs with a criminal record, the INC 29, DMK 10, Trinamool Congress 9, and JD(U) 13. When it came to serious criminal cases, the BJP has 87 MPs, INC 19, DMK 6, Trinamool Congress 4, and JD(U) 8. Even Union Ministers are tainted. In the case of their first swearing in during 2019, there were 22 Ministers out of 56 with criminal cases and a total of 61 cases against these 22 Ministers, all from the ruling party. The chances of those with a criminal record winning was over 15%. In comparison, it was 4.7% for those with a clean record. This shows that people with a criminal record are more likely to get elected. No other country has so many people with known criminal records in its Parliament or State Assemblies.

Net worth and election spend

Gender representation is low with only 9% of elected women MLAs. Most MLAs are college graduates or more (66%). The average assets of MLAs was ₹13.63 crore, and of those with a criminal case, at ₹16.36 crore. Winning depends on the wealth of a candidate, with 30% of those with assets of ₹5 crore or more being elected, while only 8% of those with assets of ₹2 crore or less were elected.

In contrast, 75% of Indian citizens reported

wealth of ₹8 lakh or less, and a total of 98% reported wealth of ₹80 lakh or less.

The spend on elections now is at an all-time high. Clothes, mobiles, cooking equipment, liquor and cash are distributed to entice voters, thus violating the law. Estimates show that the expenditure in the Lok Sabha elections is more than that in the United States presidential elections. It is well known that candidates spend crores of rupees and violate the spending limit of ₹40 lakh for MLAs and ₹70 lakh for MPs (enhanced to ₹90 lakh in 2022), which is the limit the Election Commission of India (ECI) has set in consultation with political parties. Public money is spent to promise freebies such as free water, electricity, travel, and food to name a few.

The number of MLAs and MPs with criminal records has risen only because their party leaders continue to distribute more tickets to such candidates. In the so-called advanced countries, there is no such system of distributing tickets. Candidates are selected either by a first-round primary, as in the U.S., or by a more open and democratic process, as in many European countries.

In summary, India has a system where there are a very significant number of elected representatives with a serious criminal record. Such people are more likely to win than others. Electoral laws are flouted while spending money. So far, the ECI has taken very little action on this. Political leaders continue to distribute tickets to such people. Winning is the means by which to recover the money spent and accumulate it for the next election. Media management, especially through social media, passes off as good governance.

The catalyst

We will see more of this in the next Lok Sabha election in 2024. Every party fears that it will lose if it undertakes reforms. Media management can impact public perception for some time. Eventually, more and more Indians will get to know the truth. Perhaps that is the moment when change will happen. That is when the potential of the country will be realised. Citizen action can speed up this process.

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