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A Two-Child Policy Won't Take India Closer to

'Vikas' Kanika Sharma, Mohit Gandhi, Navneet Wadkar and Sayan Das

20/5 min
Mar/2018 read

Multiple petitions in court are seeking a two-child cap on Indian families. This is a misplaced demand.



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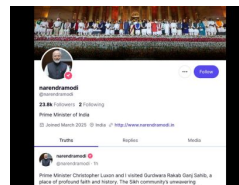
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A girl wrapped in a shawl looks on as she waits along with her mother for a train at a railway station on a cold winter morning in New Delhi, India. Photo: Reuters/Saumya Khandelwal

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This month, the **Supreme Court rejected a public interest litigation** (PIL) which asked the court to make it mandatory for Indian parents to only have two children. The court said this was a policy matter, and not for them to intervene.

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The rejected PIL was not alone. **At least five other similar PILs** had suddenly sprung up in the court this month, asking for a “two-child policy” in India. The PILs stem from the basic idea that overpopulation is responsible for the problems of resource shortage, environmental degradation, unemployment, poverty and disease.

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These clichéd claims of the PIL amount to pop-sociology and its core arguments need to be demystified.

Does overpopulation lead to the shortage of resources?

It appears to be simple math that portions of a *roti* shared by two people will be larger than if the same *roti* is shared by four people. And so, if the numbers are capped, resources available per head would increase.

But this assumes that the size of the *roti* is necessarily fixed and that the *roti* is always shared equally among people, whatever their number.

The first assumption has been disproved by history

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The hollowness of the second assumption becomes evident just by scratching the social realities of the world we live in. A major ~~CULTURE~~ ^{SOCIETY} share of resources is consumed by a minor share of the population – those residing in developed countries and the elites living in developing countries. The US, with less than 1% of the world's population, **eats up a quarter** of the global fossil fuel resources. Closer home, the richest 1% of India **enjoy more than half** of the country's total wealth.

Is then the scarcity, which we see all around us and are scared about because there are more mouths to feed? Or is it because some mouths are shamelessly wide?

While the rising numbers are readily used as a threat, we rarely seem to have problems with the blatant over-consumption by a few.

Are urgent and aggressive steps to control population required for India?

It is indeed a fact that population of India is growing and will continue to grow for the next couple of decades. This is because, as compared to the past, there is a **higher** proportion of people in the

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removed, it will lead the population to stabilize in the long run. As per National Family Health Survey **data**, the country-level TFR in India is 2.23, which is not hugely above the desired level of 2.1.

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Twenty states/UTs have achieved the replacement-level TFR, another five have got it below 2.2, with the remaining 11 states (including Bihar, UP, MP, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh) having a higher rate. Though these 11 states/UTs account for **42%** of country's population, they are already showing a **fall** in their TFRs.

There is certainly no 'population bomb' ticking which will catch us unaware and which needs to be urgently diffused. In fact, the ongoing measures need to be made more comprehensive and of improved quality.

The list of states having a higher TFR mentioned above makes evident the clear divide between the north and south of the country. Not only in terms of fertility, South Indian states have better health indicators in general. Incidentally, these are also the states where other social indicators like the literacy rate, especially among females, are better than rest of the country.

The Union government, or rather the states with a higher TFR, should, therefore, focus on overall social development instead of coercive population control measures. They should provide an enabling

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could force couples to go for sex selective abortions as there are only two 'attorneys'. A significant proportion of such women, especially those from lower socio-economic strata, would be forced to go for unsafe abortions because of issues of access and affordability.

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Besides being inhumane, this is bound to create gender imbalances.

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A **study**, conducted between 2001 and 2004 to explore the consequences of two-child norms in five states (Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, MP, Odisha and Rajasthan), found an increase in cases of desertion and bigamy, neglect and death of female infants, cases of pre-natal sex determination and induced abortion of female foetus, child given away for adoption etc.

The experience in China, whose one-child policy is often cited as a reference point, shows that this indeed **happens**. Closer home, these effects are already evident in villages of states like Haryana and Punjab, leading to an unethical but thriving **bride business**.

And then, it's not only a son that people want. The son has to be able-bodied, and should not die young from disease or accident. If any of this happens, the couple would want to be given an exemption. We would then need a bureaucracy to verify the claims for exemptions, which opens the door for

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government aid and subsidies to the family. This may include free and compulsory education to that third child, and maybe also his/her coverage under the public-funded health insurance scheme. It also says that these “errant” parents should be punished by depriving them of the opportunity to contest elections and apply for jobs.

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These measures which the petition proposed would be contrary to the constitutional Right to Education (Article 21A, Article 45 and 51A) and Right to Life (Article 21) and also the [United Nation’s Convention on Rights of Child](#). The discriminatory petitions would create two sets of citizens, and thereby violate the constitutional Right to Equality.

A study conducted in [five states](#) shows that the two-child norm was responsible for the largest number of disqualified candidates in *panchayat* elections. Of these, Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs formed an overwhelming 80%. This contravenes the 73rd amendment, which aims to give political representation to people from marginalised communities in democratic processes.

India was a participant in the [International Conference on Population and Development \(1994\)](#) and a signatory to its programme of action. Consequently, India withdrew its target-based family planning approach in [1996](#), at least on paper. India’s own National Population Policy (2000) reiterates government’s

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violating the principle of voluntary informed choice, human rights and rights of future child. The **Economic Survey (2016)** boasts of a higher working-age population as an economic advantage over countries like China, where the strict population control measure has led to an ageing population. All these commitments and pronouncements cannot be ignored.

'Vikas' is the best contraception

China may have been successful in slowing down its population growth, but there were social costs incurred which later posed threats to its economy leading to the **withdrawal** of the one-child policy in 2016. On the other hand, Thailand, and our own states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have had fertility trajectories similar to China, but without any such restrictive policy.

India's then health minister, at the World Population Conference 40 years ago, said '**Development is the best contraceptive**' and called for a more balanced approach to population control. There is a need to implement this wisdom and focus on health, education and livelihood for all. A stabilised population will be an obvious outcome of such comprehensive socio-economic development.

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