

YOUTH CAN BE A CLEAR ADVANTAGE FOR INDIA

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It's close to five decade-long demographic opportunity that can be leveraged only with suitable policies and programmes

India's population is among the youngest in the ageing world. By 2022, the median age in India will be 28 years; in comparison it will be 37 in China and United States, 45 in Western Europe and 49 in Japan. India's population has numerically outstripped in its non-working age population. A demographic dividend, said to have commenced around 2004-05 is available for close to five decades. This is an extraordinary opportunity. However, there are two caveats to it:

- First, India's population heterogeneity ensures that this window of demographic dividend becomes available at different times in different States. While Kerala's population is already ageing, in Bihar the working age cohort is predicted to continue increasing till 2051. By 2031, the overall size of our vast working age population would have declined in 11 of the 22 major States.
- Second, harnessing the demographic dividend will depend upon the employability of the working age population, their health, education, vocational training and skills, besides appropriate land and labour policies, as well as good governance. India will gain from its demographic opportunity only if policies and programmes are aligned to this demographic

shift. Demography is not destiny.

As regards, it was the demographic dividend that powered respectively the Asian economies of Japan, China, and South Korea to spectacular growth. The Countries with a favorable demographic dividend benefit from the economic potential of their youth bulge when and where they succeed in providing good health, quality education, and decent employment to their entire population; and not to segments defined by socio-economic status, geography, or historical legacy.

Need for Skill Upgrade

- The Economic Survey 2019 calls for additional jobs to keep pace with the projected annual increases in working age population. We need a workforce that is well educated, and appropriately skilled.
- UNICEF 2019 reports that at least 47% of Indian youth are not on track to have the education and skills necessary for employment in 2030.
- The projected demographic dividend would turn into a demographic disaster if an unskilled, under-utilized, and frustrated young population undermines social harmony and economic growth.
- While over 95% of India's children attend primary school, the National Family Health Surveys (completed up to 2015-16) confirm that poor infrastructure in government schools, malnutrition, and scarcities of trained teachers have ensured poor learning outcomes.
- A coordinated incentive structure prompting States to adopt a broadly uniform public school system focusing on equity and quality will yield a knowledge society faster than privatizing school education can accomplish.
- Most districts now have excellent broadband connectivity. Irrespective of rural or urban setting, the public school system must ensure that every child completes high school education, and is pushed into appropriate skilling, training and vocational education in line with market demand. Let geography not trump demography.
- Modernize school curricula; systematically invest in teacher training so that they grow in their jobs to assume leadership roles, while moving beyond the tyranny of the syllabus. Deploy new technology to accelerate the pace of building human capital by putting in place virtual classrooms together with massive open online courses (MOOCS) to help prepare this huge work force for next-generation jobs. Investing in open digital universities would further help yield a higher educated workforce.

Helping out Women

- Growing female literacy is not translating into relevant and marketable skills. A comprehensive approach is needed to improve their prospects vis-à-vis gainful employment. Flexible entry and exit policies for women into virtual classrooms, and into modules for open digital training, and vocational education would help them access contemporary vocations.
- A mushrooming of job portals and organisations are providing employment for trained women, even from home. Equal pay for women will make it worth their while to stay longer in the workforce.

- The recent massive job losses across the automobile, real estate, and IT sectors, as well as in Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises is leading to an alarming fall in private consumption. And if prolonged, these could begin to jeopardize India's demographic dividend. Policies to restore the ailing economy would bring back the mojo on employment.

Healthcare Facilities

- In India, population health is caught between the rising demand for health services and competition for scarce resources. The National Sample Survey Office data on health shows that a deep-rooted downturn in the rural economy is making quality health-care unaffordable.
- People are availing of private hospitals less than they used to, and are moving towards public health systems. That is all very well except for the fact that the central budget 2020-21 lays emphasis on private provisioning of health care which will necessarily divert public investment away from public health infrastructure.
- The Ayushman Bharat Yojana links demand to tertiary in-patient care. This promotes earnings of under-utilized private hospitals, instead of modernizing and up-grading public health systems in each district.
- We need to assign 70% of health sector budgets to integrate and strengthen primary and integrated public health-care services and systems up to district hospital levels, include out-patient department and diagnostic services in every health insurance model adopted, and implement in 'mission mode' the Report of the High Level Group, 2019, submitted to the XV Finance Commission.

The policies that we adopt and their effective implementation will ensure that our demographic dividend, a time-limited opportunity, becomes a boon for India.

SOURCE: *The Hindu*