

India's population MS 16 a growing worry

India's population is growing fast, posing a threat to the country's sustained development. But there is a lack of political will to tackle it, writes MAHENDRA VED

TWO families in the housing complex where I live have roughly the same income.

While the wife in one family underwent a vasectomy after giving birth to two children, that of the other didn't and has eight. The contrast in their well-being in terms of money, health and children's education is apparent.

India's population grew from 345 million in 1951 to about 1,162 million last May. It is growing by around 16 to 17 million every year.

New data shows that India will overtake China as the world's most populous nation by 2025 — five years earlier than estimated.

The issue of how many children one should have is very personal, very emotive, and most Indians do not talk about it, or not enough, anyway. They do precious little about it, considering the growing size and dimension of the Indian family.

Discussing the baby boom is not considered politically correct. Political parties mention it, if at all, only in passing in their poll manifestos. "Go out and multiply", faith-based parties advocate, to keep up the numbers of those of their faith compared with others.

Social and economic justifications and virtues are many. A family with daughter(s) wants a son. Although elders no longer bless the new bride with the traditional "may you bear a hundred children," the attitudes have not changed. Children are still "god-sent".

Statistics are reeled out and concerns expressed. After half a century of a halting, half-hearted effort at curbing it, people look furtively at the inverted red triangle, the symbol of the government's population control programme.

Despite the declining poverty rate, about 25 per cent of India's population (about 290 million people) still do not earn enough to afford even two square meals a day.

As India moves ahead economically, its massive population poses a threat to sustainable development and demands immediate attention.

The only "action", if one may call it that, is caused by the pressure of urban economics that forces people to have



A family planning class in New Dehli. India is set to be the world's most populous nation by 2025 if nothing is done about its explosive population growth.

smaller families. In rural areas, the situation has changed only marginally.

Population growth in India has important implications for socio-economic development and quality of life.

Amidst slogans of a "resurgent", and "incredible" India, its excessive population growth is reflected in widespread hunger, poverty, unemployment, lack of physical and health infrastructure and increasing scarcity of basic resources such as food, water and space in several areas, despite concerted development efforts.

The baby boom has contributed heavily to the development model being totally skewed, one that can only encourage disparities and inequalities.

The latest UN projections say India will have two billion people by 2101 if the population continues to grow at the current rate.

The comparison with China is inevitable. In 1979, China's fertility rate was 2.8, while that of Kerala state in south India was 3. By 2007, 28 years after it forced a coercive one-child policy on its people, China's fer-

tility rate stood at 1.7. Kerala reached the same figure but without treating its people like laboratory rats.

Kerala's success stands on three pillars: Education, Employment, Equality. On the ground, the three Es translate into a high literacy rate, regular income for families and confident women.

While Kerala's neighbouring states in the south have emulated this, the rest of India, particularly the north, has not kept pace.

There is a north-south divide on the population front. The disparities are evident in human development indicators in the more populous north.

India's flawed population policies were uncoordinated and haphazard in the Nehru years, when more hands at work were considered an economic asset. The graph really went up from 1961.

Experts blame the emphasis on sterilization, which was started in the late 1960s. Indians fell for terms like "population explosion", coined by the West which saw the growing population of India and China as a security threat during the Cold War days, says A.R.

Nanda, executive director of the Population Foundation of India, a non-governmental organisation for demographic studies.

The sterilisation programme went overboard during 1975-77 when India witnessed an internal emergency. Public fears, real or imaginary, mattered and Indira Gandhi's government was defeated in the subsequent general election.

This has since been seen, and cited, as the cause for removing any form of coercion in the population control programme. Indeed, the nomenclature has changed from "family planning" to "family welfare".

The first National Population Policy was drafted as late as 2000. Half a century was lost.

Nanda rightly points out that population growth cannot be controlled by coercive measures but with economic growth, education for all and empowerment of women.

But this has had the effect of throwing out the baby with the bath water. The population is booming at a faster pace than the three Es and infrastructure can cope with.

A recent "Global Economic Prospects" report projects that one quarter of India's population would be below the extreme poverty line, earning less than US\$1.25 (RM 4.25) a day, by 2015.

The official estimates provided by India's National Sample Survey show a poverty rate of 27.5 per cent in 2004-05.

The massive population base and its rapid growth continue to be a major challenge to socio-economic progress and sustainable development.

Noted economist A.K. Shiva Kumar says: "Take care of the people, and the population will take care of itself."

India needs a three-pronged attack. With a new surge in the field of education — the Indian Parliament passed the Right to Education Bill last year — a major part of the problem has been addressed. The next stage is healthcare, followed by the size of the family itself.

The road is long and full of obstacles. But it must be travelled.