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India and the Global Population Surge: Exploring Sustainable Solutions

[*1]Arijmand Shahid Tramboo, [2]Dr. Omar Fayaz Khan, [3]Dr. Ubair Nisar and [4]Dr. Bilal Ahmad Sheikh

[*1]Research Scholar, Institute of Business & Policy Research, SKUAST-K Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, India

[2, 3]Assistant Professor, Institute of Business & Policy Research, SKUAST-K Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, India.

[4]Vocational Trainer, Board of School Education, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Abstract

While the population is growing at an alarming rate globally, with estimates by the United Nations expected to grow from 7.6 billion in the current year to 8.6 billion in 2030, 9.8 billion in 2050, and 11.2 billion at the turn of the 21st century. Driven by about 83 million people every year, such rapid growth raises the question: does population growth act as a driver to socio-economic progress or it pose a significant challenge to sustainability? This review critically examines the multifaceted dimensions of this debate, with a particular emphasis on India, which is poised as the world's most populous nation. The paper begins by assessing global and regional population trends, highlighting the contrasting experiences of rapidly growing low-income nations and aging developed countries. It then focuses on India's demographic profile, characterized by a large youth population, declining fertility rates, and increasing urbanization, to explore how these dynamics influence the country's pursuit of sustainable development. Key challenges associated with population growth including environmental degradation, resource scarcity, infrastructural stress, and social inequality are examined in detail. In addressing these challenges, the review proposes a set of policy measures aimed at fostering sustainable development within the framework of demographic change. These include enhancing access to education and healthcare, promoting gender equity, investing in sustainable urban infrastructure, and adopting efficient natural resource management strategies. The paper argues that, while rapid population growth presents substantial obstacles, it also offers opportunities for inclusive development and economic resilience when supported by forward-looking and equity-oriented policies.

Keywords: Population, India, Sustainable.

1. Introduction

The world's population continues to grow at an unprecedented pace. According to UN estimates, the population will increase from the current 7.6 billion to 8.6 billion by 2030, 9.8 billion by 2050, and an astounding 11.2 billion by the end of the century. Around 83 million people are added to the world's population annually; this upward trend is anticipated to continue even as fertility rates gradually decline (United Nations Report). This growth is not consistent at all. The least developed nations, which already struggle to provide for their citizens' basic needs, tend to have the fastest-growing populations. By 2050, the population of these nations is expected to have nearly tripled, from 668 million in 2000 to 1.86 billion (Vass, 2001) [26]. Infrastructure, natural resources, and public services are all severely strained by this fast growth. A complex combination of opportunities and challenges are presented by urbanization, which frequently coexists with population growth. Cities can spur innovation and economic growth, but they are also major hubs for pollution, infectious disease transmission, and environmental deterioration (Vass, 2001; Bloomberg, 2019; Michel, 2020) [26, 4 18]. The consequences of poor planning or postponed reforms can include irreversible environmental damage and resource scarcity, endangering the health of the planet and human well-being.

The unprecedented growth leads to critical question: is population growth a driver of progress or an obstacle to sustainability? With a focus on India, this review delves into the complex aspects of this problem and looks at how the nation's transition to sustainable development is being influenced by changing demographic trends.

2. Methodology

The study takes a qualitative, review-based approach to understand how population growth affects sustainable development, with India as the main focus. It draws entirely on reliable secondary sources, including academic research, government records, and reports from global agencies like the UN, World Bank, and UNDP. Data comes from trusted databases such as the UN Population Division, Census of India, NSSO, World Bank, UNDP, and NITI Aayog, covering demographics, education, health, poverty, urbanization, and infrastructure.

A comparative lens is used, contrasting fast-growing nations

***Corresponding Author:** Arijmand Shahid Tramboo

like India, Nigeria, and Bangladesh with aging economies such as Japan, Germany, and Italy, to place India's demographic trends in a global context. The analysis focuses on key themes environmental stress, resource shortages, urban challenges, and social inequalities while also reviewing national policies like the National Population Policy and Smart Cities Mission, alongside global frameworks such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Population Trends

3.1. Global Population Trends

The world's population is changing dramatically, with regional variations in trends. Some nations are seeing rapid population growth, while others are seeing declines or stagnation. Global policy planning, social welfare, and economic development are all significantly impacted by these changes. Four unique regional patterns emerge when demographic changes between 2005 and 2010 are mapped. The world's poorest countries, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, exhibit the fastest annual growth rates, which surpass 2%. Parts of North Africa, western Latin America, and nations like India and Indonesia are experiencing moderate growth of 1% to 2% annually. On the other hand, many middle-income countries and advanced economies, such as China and Brazil, have low or stagnant growth (0–1%). In the meantime, some regions of Eastern Europe, and Western Europe are already experiencing population decline (Ezeh *et al.,* 2012) [10]. These patterns show a startling disparity: while the poorest parts of the world are growing quickly, the populations of many wealthier nations are stagnating or even declining. These changes create a variety of issues and policy requirements by driving significant changes in migration, urbanization, and age distribution.

Table 1: Five most populous Countries in the year 2025

	Country	Population (2025)	Yearly Change	Net Change	Density (P/Km²)	World Share
1	India	1,463,865,525	0.89%	12,929,734	492	17.78%
2	China	1,416,096,094	−0.23%	−3,225,184	151	17.20%
3	United States	347,275,807	0.54%	1,849,236	38	4.22%
4	Indonesia	285,721,236	0.79%	2,233,305	158	3.47%
5	Pakistan	255,219,554	1.57%	3,950,390	331	3.10%

Source: *World Population Prospects: The 2024 Revision*

As illustrated in Table 1, in 2025, the five most populous countries will be India, China, the United States, Indonesia, Pakistan and will exhibit distinct demographic profiles and trends. With a population of over 1.46 billion, India is expected to take the lead, thanks to its moderate fertility rate and comparatively youthful population. With a population of about 1.42 billion, China is facing population decline as a result of an aging population and one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. The United States, with a population of 347 million, is expected to grow modestly, primarily supported by positive net migration and a balanced age structure. Indonesia, home to 285 million people, demonstrates stable population growth and a youthful, increasingly urban population. In contrast, Pakistan, with 255 million people, is characterized by the highest growth rate, highest fertility, and the youngest median age among the five, highlighting both development opportunities and substantial policy challenges. Collectively, these demographic trends reflect the diverse and evolving dynamics of global population change.

3.2. Population Growth in India

As the world's most populous country, India is experiencing significant social, economic, and environmental pressures due to its rapidly growing population. Regional differences, changes in demographic trends, and changing age distributions all have an impact on this expansion, which offers the nation both opportunities and difficulties for its future growth.

i). Current Status and Trends

- **Population Size & Growth:** India's population is expected to reach around 1.35 billion by 2021 and could climb to 1.47 billion by 2031. However, the pace of growth is gradually slowing down. The yearly population growth rate dropped from 1.95% between 1991 and 2001 to a projected 0.87% between 2021 and 2031 (Hiremath, 2018; Chauhan *et al*., 2019; Ram & Ram, 2021) [14, 5, 20].
- **Regional Variation:** There's a noticeable divide between different parts of the country. Southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, along with a few northern states such as Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, are seeing slower population growth and an aging population. On the other hand, states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan continue to experience high fertility rates and faster population increases (Hiremath, 2018; Chauhan *et al*., 2019; Ram & Ram, 2021; Roy *et al.,* 2024) [14, 5, 20, 21].
- **Urban Rural differences:** According to Adhikar *et al.,* study a major contrast exists between urban and rural areas. People living in cities, especially those with higher education, tend to have fewer children on average fewer than 1.5 per woman. In contrast, rural communities, particularly those with lower education levels, still have much higher fertility rates, with women having more than four children on average

ii). State-wise and Regional Patterns

- **Population Concentration:** Six states have consistently held more than half of India's total population, both in 1971 and again in 2011. States like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan alone made up 37% of the population in 2011 and this share is expected to rise to 45% by 2061 (Hiremath, 2018; Ram & Ram, 2021) [14, 20]. This shows how certain regions continue to carry a much heavier demographic weight than others.
- **Aging Population:** India's population is also getting older. The number of people aged 60 and above is expected to increase by 5% between 2011 and 2031. Meanwhile, the working-age group (15–59 years) is projected to grow by 6% during the same period. Southern states are likely to become "aged societies" where a significant portion of the population is elderly much earlier than many northern states (Sarif *et al.,* 2023; Sarif & Hemalatha, 2023; Roy *et al.,* 2024) [22, 23, 21].

4. Threats Posed by Rising Population

Global supply and demand trends show that there is a serious concern about the growing gap between the availability of limited resources and the rising demand worldwide. Degradation of the environment, price volatility, and resource exhaustion are the outcomes of increased competition for these resources (Di Maio & Rem, 2015) [8]. The demand for natural resources may reach levels that require two to three Earths by 2030 and 2050, according to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) [25].

The excessive use of raw materials and the planet's limited ability to handle the waste that results are two major barriers to attaining sustainable development (Compagnoni & Stadler, 2021) [6].

Key Threats from Rising Population

i). **Depletion and Over-extraction:** Groundwater, a vital supply of water for agriculture and drinking, is being drawn out more quickly than it can be refilled. According to studies, by 2100, up to 37% of the world's major aquifers could be seriously depleted. Approximately 40% of the world's population may experience severe water scarcity if these trends continue (Gleeson *et al*., 2012; Bierkens & Wada, 2019; Costantini *et al*., 2023) [12, 2, 7]. In many parts of the world, this is about access to life itself, not just water. The world's energy demand is predicted to increase by 25% by 2045 due to the acceleration of population and economic growth, further taxing available resources and exacerbating the sustainability crisis (OPEC, 2023) [19].

ii). **Land Subsidence:** Excessive groundwater extraction destabilizes the land above in addition to draining subterranean reserves. The ground gradually sinks due to a phenomenon called land subsidence, which frequently goes unnoticed at first. Subtle effects include the possibility of severe flooding, building damage, water pipe disruption, and road cracking caused by sinking land. Research indicates that about 19% of people on Earth are at high risk of land subsidence, particularly in agricultural and urban areas with high population densities (Herrera *et al*., 2020) [13].

iii). **Climate Change and Environmental Degradation:** Urban growth and industrial activity are fuelling unprecedented environmental challenges. Global carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions reached 36.8 billion tonnes in 2022, largely driven by expanding human populations and their increasing reliance on fossil fuels (IEA, 2023) [16]. This not only accelerates climate change but also deteriorates the air we breathe. Air pollution, particularly in urban areas, is now a major public health crisis. The World Health Organization reports that over 7 million people die prematurely every year due to exposure to polluted air most of them in rapidly growing cities (WHO, 2022) [27].

Beyond the obvious problems like climate change, land degradation, and water scarcity, a rapidly expanding population brings with it a number of other significant problems. These include mounting strain on healthcare systems, rising rates of unemployment, particularly among young people, increased demand for housing and transportation, and escalating food insecurity. Managing a population this size also makes it difficult to guarantee that all areas have fair access to social services, high-quality education, and economic opportunities. China implemented the One-Child Policy, a stringent population control measure, in 1979 to curb its population growth. Although it was successful in reducing population growth, it had long-term, unforeseen repercussions, such as a rapidly aging population, a declining labor force, gender imbalances brought on by the preference for male offspring, and serious psychological and social effects. Recognizing these issues, China officially ended the policy in 2015, and has since shifted toward encouraging families to have more children. However, applying a similar one-size-fits-all policy in a country like India is neither feasible nor advisable. India is characterized by immense regional, cultural, and socio-economic diversity. In some states, fertility rates are already below replacement level, while others continue to experience high birth rates. Implementing a rigid population control policy across such a varied landscape could lead to deep inequalities and social tensions.

Rather than viewing population growth as a problem, India and many other nations are now considering it as a possible benefit if properly managed. Instead of limiting the population, the emphasis is now on investing in people, particularly the younger generation, through job creation, healthcare, education, and skill development. Enhancing human capital can turn a sizable population from a burden into a demographic dividend and growth engine. Population pressure can be turned into an economic advantage by investing in infrastructure and human resources, as shown by nations like South Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore. These nations prioritized developing robust educational systems, encouraging innovation, and generating employment that was in line with the demands of the global economy. However, a number of developed nations, including Germany, Italy, and Japan, are currently dealing with a new kind of population crisis declining birth rates and aging populations. These demographic shifts threaten labor supply, economic productivity, and the sustainability of pension systems. In contrast, countries with younger populations have a unique opportunity to drive global innovation and economic momentum, if they can harness and channel their demographic energy effectively. In summary, population growth comes with its set of challenges, but it also offers incredible potential. The key lies not in restricting population, but in empowering it through inclusive policies, regional development, and long-term investments in people.

5. Potential Benefits of Rising Population

i). Economic Development:

- **Increased Labor Force and GDP Growth:** A study by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) examining the impact of demographic change on economic growth in Asia found that 1% increase in the working-age population can lead to an increase in GDP per capita growth of between 0.5% and 1.5%. Example: East Asian countries, such as South Korea, experienced rapid growth in their working-age population between 1960 and 1990. During this period, South Korea's per capita GDP grew by approximately 7% annually, partly attributed to the increased labor supply and the resulting boost in productivity (Bloom *et al.,* 2000) [3].
- **Increased Demand and Consumption:** According to the World Bank, countries with larger populations tend to have larger domestic markets, which can drive economic growth. For instance, the United States, with a large and growing population, has a substantial domestic consumption that fuels its economy. Example: As India's population continues to grow, its domestic market is expanding rapidly. McKinsey estimates that India will account for 16% of global consumption by 2050, up from 12% in 1997, indicating the significant impact of population growth on domestic demand and economic activity (*Farrell & Lund, 2007)* [11].

ii). Agriculture Sector

The rising global population has acted as a powerful driver for innovation in agriculture. As the world's population grew 2.6

times between 1961 and 2020, agricultural output responded with a nearly fourfold increase. This remarkable progress was not by chance, it was the result of deliberate advancements, particularly during the Green Revolution. Triggered by the urgent need to produce more food, this period saw dramatic improvements in crop yields, especially for staple grains like wheat and rice, notably in Asia. Between 1960 and 2000, global grain yields grew at an average rate of 2.5% per year outpacing population growth and helping to avert widespread food shortages. These gains highlight how demographic pressures, when met with science and policy support, can unlock new levels of productivity in agriculture. (Evenson & Gollin, 2003) [9].

iii). Increased Innovation and Technological Advancements:

As the need for food, energy, water, and shelter increases, so does the urgency to develop smarter, more efficient, and more sustainable solutions. Historically, population growth has gone hand-in-hand with periods of intense innovation and technological progress. For instance, research shows a strong correlation between population size and innovation output. A study by Jones (1995) [17] in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* found that more people lead to more inventors, and more inventors mean more ideas and technologies. Furthermore, the rise of diverse populations brings together people with different backgrounds, knowledge systems, and experiences sparking creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. This diversity has been shown to boost innovation. According to a 2018 report by McKinsey & Company, companies with higher ethnic and cultural diversity on executive teams were 33% more likely to outperform their peers in profitability and innovation (Hunt *et al*., 2018) [15].

From green technologies and artificial intelligence to breakthroughs in biotechnology and sustainable agriculture, population-driven innovation is helping address world's toughest problems turning pressure into progress.

6. Mitigating Challenges: Strategies & Solutions

In a diverse and rapidly developing country like India, is often viewed as a burden on limited resources. However, with thoughtful planning and innovative policies, this very growth can be harnessed to create sustainable, inclusive, and forward-looking systems. The following five pillars illustrate how India is tackling this challenge with a proactive, human-centered approach.

i). Sustainable Development: Naturally, as the population grows, so does the need for daily resources, housing, transportation, and energy. However, India is also being pushed in the direction of more sustainable options by this rising demand. Increased investment in renewable energy has resulted from the need for electricity as more people move into cities. For example, many cities have adopted solar energy under the Smart Cities Mission, as evidenced by the 15% increase in rooftop solar panel installations over the previous five years. This isn't just about technology; it's also about businesses switching to solar to save money, households selecting cleaner power, and cities lighting up more effectively. In a similar vein, transportation, a ubiquitous aspect of urban life has changed over time. Indian cities are starting to reverse the trend of increased traffic and pollution that typically comes with population growth. Emissions are being decreased by cleaner public transportation options such as electric buses, extended metro lines, and last-mile connectivity services. By altering how people move, rather than by lowering the population, cities like Bengaluru and Delhi have seen a 5% decrease in vehicle pollution. Another major pressure point, the housing industry, is also changing. Urban areas are seeing an increase in the number of green-certified buildings, which use up to 30% less energy and 20% less water. These structures give families better living conditions while also lessening the burden on the city's infrastructure. In this context, sustainable development means addressing people's expanding needs without sacrificing the standard of living for future generations.

ii). Behavioural and Policy Shifts for Resource Efficiency: Large-scale initiatives are not always the answer; many of them can be found in ordinary choices made by people and families. A new type of urban life that is more efficient, considerate, and aware of its effects is being progressively shaped in Indian cities by behavioral changes. Consider carpooling. What started out as a workable way to save fuel has now developed into a movement to lessen air pollution and traffic. Thousands of people have been able to transition from driving alone to shared mobility thanks to awareness campaigns and app-based ride-sharing platforms. The Odd-Even traffic rule in Delhi demonstrated that even short-term legislative changes could significantly enhance air quality and increase public awareness of urban pollution. Responsible consumption is also shaped by policy interventions. Some proposals, like taxing households that own more than two cars, may seem stringent, but they're rooted in the idea of fairness and sustainability ensuring that personal choices do not collectively harm public health or the environment. Industries, too, are being brought into this shift. In heavily populated zones, stricter emissions controls are being enforced. Real-time pollution monitoring and mandatory environmental certifications are helping ensure that businesses grow without damaging the environment. These shifts reflect a growing realization that sustainability isn't only the government's responsibility it's a shared mission between policymakers, citizens, and industries alike.

iii). Community-Centric Urban Innovations: India's urban transformation revolves around communities. They can bring about amazing change when given the right tools. Local projects in Indian cities are showing how grassroots creativity and community involvement can be used to combat population growth. Cycling is making a comeback as a useful, reasonably priced, and environmentally friendly form of transportation in addition to being a fitness fad. Dedicated bike lanes and pedestrian-friendly areas are being developed in cities like Pune and Chandigarh. In addition to lowering car usage, these areas improve city connectivity, inclusivity, and enjoyment for seniors, families, and students. Open green areas and public parks are also being reclaimed as vital pieces of urban infrastructure. Because they provide shade, clean air, and areas for socializing and recreation, they serve as the lungs of expanding cities. These spaces serve as quiet reminders that sustainability isn't just about technology or infrastructure it's about quality of life. Waste management, once a daunting challenge in densely populated areas, is being turned into an opportunity. In cities like Indore and regions of Kerala, decentralized composting units, waste segregation at

source, and waste-to-energy plants are helping communities take ownership of their waste. These systems work best when residents are involved, educated, and committed showing how solutions become sustainable when they are community-led.

iv). **Education and Empowerment:** The foundation of any sustainable future is an informed populace. In addition to raising awareness of environmental issues, more people are becoming educated and taking on roles as innovators, problem-solvers, and change agents. Public involvement in sustainability initiatives is notably higher in cities with higher literacy rates. Education is undoubtedly motivating people to take action, as evidenced by initiatives like school-led tree planting drives and zero-waste campaigns organized by local resident associations. In fact, compared to their less literate counterparts, cities with higher education indicators have witnessed a 15% increase in participation in environmental programs. A new generation of green professionals is also being produced by the educational system. Over the past ten years, there has been an 8% increase in enrolment in programs related to environmental science, climate studies, and sustainable engineering. This signals a shift in career aspirations, with many young Indians choosing to contribute to renewable energy, climate innovation, and sustainable urban planning. Perhaps most transformative is the role of women in shaping sustainable futures. In households where women have access to education and economic resources, more eco-friendly choices are being made such as cutting down on single-use plastics, choosing locally made goods, or conserving water and energy. As women become more empowered, their decisions influence broader community behavior, creating ripples of change that extend beyond the household.

v). **Urban Planning and Infrastructure:** To accommodate population growth without compromising sustainability, cities must evolve and that starts with smart, inclusive urban planning. Indian cities are beginning to recognize that infrastructure must not only support more people but also improve their quality of life. Water, a vital resource under growing pressure, is also being managed more intelligently. Through leak detection systems, smart meters, and efficient distribution networks, cities are reducing water losses by up to 20%. These systems ensure that water reaches more people, even as demand rises, without placing undue stress on natural sources. Green infrastructure such as rooftop gardens, tree-lined streets, and urban forests is also being incorporated into urban design. These not only beautify cities but also help reduce air pollution and lower urban temperatures by up to 2 degrees Celsius. As cities get warmer due to climate change, these green buffers are becoming essential for public health and resilience

7. Recommendations

The following policy recommendations aim to harness the benefits of population growth while addressing its challenges. Strengthening human capital through universal access to quality education particularly for females and comprehensive healthcare systems is essential for improving well-being and managing demographic transitions. Promoting gender equality by enhancing women's participation in the workforce, safeguarding reproductive rights, and ensuring representation in leadership will contribute to inclusive growth. Managing rapid urbanization requires the development of inclusive, resilient, and environmentally sustainable cities equipped with green technologies, efficient public services, and affordable housing. Responsible natural resource management through renewable energy adoption, sustainable agriculture, and strict environmental safeguards is critical to preserving ecosystems under rising demand. Economic strategies should focus on generating employment in high-potential sectors while expanding social protection to reduce inequality. Demographic data must guide region-specific strategies to ensure long-term resource allocation and public service delivery align with future population needs.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, when governed by policies that look to the future and place a high priority on sustainability, population growth can be a major driver of development. It can stimulate innovation, increase economic productivity, and improve the general caliber of human capital if it is handled well. For instance, according to the UN World Water Development Report (2019), population growth, economic expansion, and changing consumption patterns will be the main causes of the 20–30% increase in global water demand by 2050. The increasing strain on vital natural resources is highlighted by this forecast. However, empirical data points to a nearly linear relationship between economic output and population growth. A 15% rise in population could feasibly result in a 10–15% increase in GDP, illustrating the potential economic benefits of demographic expansion assuming appropriate institutional support and infrastructure are in place. Yet, the true challenge lies not in the demographic figures themselves, but in how societies choose to respond. Whether population growth becomes a driver of prosperity or a source of strain will ultimately depend on our collective ability to adopt inclusive, adaptive, and environmentally sustainable strategies. The future, therefore, hinges not just on numbers, but on the values and choices that shape them.

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