

BOOK REVIEWS

TIM DYSON, ROBERT CASSEN, AND LEELA VISARIA (EDS.)

Twenty-First Century India: Population, Economy, Human Development, and the Environment

New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. xxii + 414 p. \$175.00; \$45.00 (pbk.).

The potential emergence of an “unbound” India—economically resurgent and muscular—may become one of the most important stories of the first half of the century. *Twenty-First Century India* attempts to take stock of the challenges facing India in population, the economy, human development, and the environment. This makes it a very timely publication.

The problem is that the book’s editors have taken on too big a task. The chapters on demographic topics—mortality and health, fertility, migration and urbanization—are strong. By contrast, roughly the other half of the book, on economic and environmental issues, is uneven. Some chapters, for instance those on education and employment, are valuable overviews of the literature on these topics; others are less compelling.

Tim Dyson’s chapter, “India’s population—The future,” is one of the finest in the book. It is clear-headed and gives much food for thought. While it suffers from the limitation of working without most of the 2001 census data, I agree with the author that, given the stability of population projections between census years, this is not a major problem. I would, however, have liked to see more attention paid to the implications of rapidly changing age structures. This will be one the major demographic themes of the next few decades since the sharp movement away from a pyramidal age structure will radically change the nature of family, kinship, and marriage systems and perhaps reduce the size of dowries. India’s population is set to stabilize over the next quarter-century at between 1.4 and 1.5 billion, with a rapidly declining dependency ratio. If the young people newly entering the labor force can find jobs, this may be a good thing in the short run, but their smaller numbers could present a major problem in the next 40 years if adequate plans are not made to care for an increasingly large old-age population.

A chapter by Dyson and the late Pravin Visaria on migration and urbanization is also packed with interesting insights. The underlying theme is one of “increasing dynamism and complexity.” The authors make the critical point that many areas that are now classified as rural, particularly in the South, have urban characteristics and therefore may need to be reclassified. They predict that about half of India’s population will be living in urban areas by 2026 but that the rate of urban population growth will continue to fall over that period because of declining urban birth rates. Another noteworthy prediction is that urban growth is most likely to occur in corridors that form along transportation routes linking the major cities. Big-city growth will come not so much from rural-to-urban migration as from the relocation of people from smaller urban centers to larger ones. These and many other interesting observations in the chapter are not well known to development scholars and policymakers and deserve greater consideration.

Leela Visaria's chapter on mortality and health transitions also offers an excellent overview. As someone who has only peripheral familiarity with these issues, I learned a great deal from her chapter and I expect that it will become a standard reference. The same can be said for her chapter on "The continuing fertility transition." One limitation with both chapters, however, is the relative lack of attention to the historical literature—for instance, the work of David Arnold on colonial health interventions. More could also have been said about failed fertility policies and state control over women's reproductive decisions—central themes in the feminist literature.

The lack of attention to the work of professional historians is particularly lamentable in Dyson's chapter on "India's population—The past." In the third paragraph he writes, "Before the advent of agriculture, say around 12,000 years ago, the subcontinent was inhabited solely by hunter-gatherers and the population density was extremely low." This claim has the schoolboy essay's characteristic of being both obvious and unverifiable. He then informs us that the Aryan migrations had "long-lasting consequences for the region's demography." This, Dyson argues, is mainly because the Aryans believed in tightly controlling their women while Dravidians, who were pushed south by the Aryans, allowed women greater social freedom. We thus have the basis for the widely cited Dyson–Moore hypothesis that demographic and gender differences between North and South India are largely caused by differences in kinship structure. Yet contemporary historians have seriously questioned the Aryan–Dravidian migration narrative, which was last accepted as received wisdom in the early 1970s. (See Edwin Bryant's *Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture* for a synthesis of the debate.) The Dyson–Moore hypothesis is being unpacked by social scientists of all stripes. It is only when Dyson's chapter reaches the period after 1871, when good census data become available, that it begins to hum and India's demographic present is placed within its colonial context. However, I would have welcomed more reflection on the nature of censuses and the adverse consequences of the British Raj's tendency to count and categorize—for instance in the "creation" of caste categories, as the ethno-historian Nicholas Dirks has pointed out in such works as *Castes of Mind*.

Among chapters on human development and the economy, "Education and literacy" by Geeta Gandhi Kingdon and coauthors stands out. The chapter links education and population trends—examining the impact of literacy on population growth and describing the challenges the educational system faced in satisfying the demand from upcoming cohorts. An extensive discussion of the famous Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) highlights the constraints in delivering good public schooling that have led to a sharp rise in the numbers of private schools, especially in some poorly performing states like Uttar Pradesh. The authors conclude that even if "universal elementary education is rapidly achieved, education of decent quality for all will remain a challenging goal" (p. 157).

The chapter on employment by Kirsty McNay, Jeemol Unni, and Robert Cassen concludes even more pessimistically, arguing that with a 50 percent increase in the working-age population by 2026, a "significant worsening of India's employment situation seems inevitable." I am not sure I agree: the relationship between population and employment is a complex one conditioned by the quality of the

labor force and its productive capacity; and it is possible, given the rapidly changing economic environment, that India's large working-age population could add to rather than subtract from the potential for growth.

The rest of the book is inconsistent, written in a variety of styles and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Cassen and McNay's chapter on "The condition of the people" takes a perfunctory look at the fundamentally important topic of poverty and well-being, which it tries to cover within the short space of 22 pages. Consequently, an important issue such as *The Great Indian Poverty Debate* (the title of a recent book edited by Angus Deaton and Valerie Kozel) about whether poverty and inequality increased or decreased in the 1990s, and by how much, is treated in two paragraphs. At the core of the debate is an error by the Indian National Sample Survey (NSS) that arbitrarily changed the method by which expenditure data were collected in 1999/2000, creating a series that was inconsistent with previous rounds. Resolving this challenging issue is central to answering the question whether India has made a major dent on poverty and deserved more attention in the chapter. As it stands, the chapter cannot compete with other recent treatments, including the second edition of *India: Development and Participation* by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen and the Deaton-Kozel volume.

The chapter on "Prospects for food supply and demand" by Amresh Hanchate and Dyson optimistically predicts that "there will be no radical transformation of India's food situation." This projection is partly based on the assumption that Indians will not increase their meat consumption as they become more prosperous. This assumption is crucial, because if meat consumption sharply increased, more land would have to be devoted to growing feed, which would fundamentally change the availability and distribution of nutrients. The authors base their assumption on an examination of household data from 1993 showing that the more prosperous states (Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab) had lower levels of meat consumption than less prosperous states, such as those in the South. They erroneously use this cross-sectional evidence to assert that sustained economic growth will not result in higher meat consumption. The problem with the argument is that it is now the South that has high rates of economic growth, which, following the authors' own logic, should sharply increase the demand for meat. This, and other complications in modeling food supply, make the chapter speculative at best.

The chapter on "The economy—Past and future" by Shankar Acharya, Cassen, and McNay is essentially out of date. It offers a good summary of past trends in growth rates and of the policies that led to the surge in India's economic growth in the early 1990s, but the country's economy is changing so fast that it is unfair to expect a book-chapter to keep up. For instance, the authors tell us that "While there is potential for sizeable productivity gains from major economic reforms, the realistic prospects for quickly translating this potential into reality are not high" (p. 219). They add, "On balance it might be reasonable to expect growth to fluctuate in the range of 4–6 per cent, perhaps averaging close to 5 per cent in the next five years" (pp. 219–220). We can assume, given that the book was published in 2004, that this chapter was written sometime between 2002 and 2003, which makes this a prediction for the period 2003–08. Indian growth rates have instead averaged about 7 percent over the last four years and are expected to rise to 8 percent for 2006–07.

[decrease?]

The chapter on “Modelling the environment” by Dennis Anderson reports findings from an econometric model of future trends in environmental pollution and energy use. Anderson freely admits serious inadequacies in data quality yet does not hesitate to plug these data into an elaborate dynamic general equilibrium model with endogenous energy pricing. This then produces precise simulations of the trends in emissions over the next 60 years under alternative growth and policy scenarios. At the very least, data inadequacies should have been built into the model so that the various simulations could have come with confidence intervals. What we have now has the flavor of an exercise whose outcome Keynes would have labeled “precisely wrong.”

On the other hand, the three chapters by Bhaskar Vira and coauthors on the urban environment, water, and common-pool resources are “vaguely right.” They are broad investigations of the challenges faced by India in each of these key areas. The chapter on demand for water is pessimistic. Vira et al. conclude by writing: “Overall, the trends are ominous.... More difficult decisions have to be made, and a greater sense of urgency is needed in implementing them. This is hardly a matter of future problems—most of them are already in evidence” (p. 327). On the urban environment the problem is largely one of governance and a lack of appreciation for environmental problems, leaving a sense that this set of problems is at least amenable to being solved. The chapter on common-pool resources argues that instead of seeing CPRs as safety nets that prevent people from falling into deprivation, they should be seen as potentially productive economic and social resources. All of this seems sensible.

This book is hard reading. It covers vast territory from a bewildering array of disciplinary perspectives. The introductory “Overview” and the concluding chapter on “Lessons and policies” spend more time summarizing the individual chapters than pulling them together into a coherent whole. Added to this are the inconsistent writing styles, ranging from the clear and concise to dry report-speak that, to me, has all the familiar charm of a World Bank PowerPoint presentation. Perhaps it would have been better to focus the book entirely on population issues. This is where it is at its strongest, though some important themes such as gender issues and population aging are missing. There is no question, however, that for anyone interested in understanding the *demographic* challenges facing India in the twenty-first century, it is worth selective reading.

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