

Daily Editorial Analysis 11 July 2025

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Population Decline and an Ill-Informed Chorus

Context:

- Public discourse on population has evolved from fears of uncontrolled growth and resource strain to concerns over rapidly declining fertility rates.
- The article highlights how public discussions on population have evolved—from concerns about unchecked growth and environmental impact to current anxieties over declining fertility rates, reflecting changing demographic priorities.

Contrasting Views on Population Trends

- While voices like Elon Musk warn of imminent population decline and “civilisation dwindling to nothing,” global data suggests otherwise.
- According to the UN World Population Prospects (WPP) 2024, the world population is projected to rise from 8.2 billion in 2024 to a peak of 10.3 billion by the 2080s, before gradually declining.

Misinterpretations and Analytical Gaps

- Much of the alarm over falling fertility rates is analytically flawed. Two key points are often overlooked:
 - **Projections Are Not Predictions**
 - Population projections depend on assumptions about future birth and death rates. The further into the future, the greater the uncertainty.
 - **Population Momentum**
 - Even with below-replacement fertility rates ($TFR < 2.1$), populations can continue growing for decades.
 - This is due to a large share of the population still being in reproductive age. Shrinking does not happen instantly or in a straight line.

The Real Fertility Crisis: Barriers to Desired Family Size

- According to the UNFPA’s 2025 report, many individuals worldwide face obstacles in having the number of children they desire.
- Among 14,000 people surveyed across 14 countries:
 - 1 in 5 felt unable to have their preferred number of children.

- 23% experienced delays in having children, and 40% ultimately gave up on their desire for more children.

- **Key Barriers Identified**

- Across both high- and low-fertility countries, common factors limiting family size include:
 - Infertility: 13% (India)
 - Financial limitations: 38% (India), 58% (South Korea)
 - Housing limitations: 22% (India), 31% (South Korea)
 - Lack of quality childcare: 18%
 - Unemployment: 21%

- **Case Study: South Korea's Fertility Efforts**

- Despite spending over \$200 billion in 20 years to boost fertility, South Korea saw a slight 7.3% rise in births in early 2025, linked to increased marriages and a more positive view of family life.
- Yet, financial and housing constraints remain dominant concerns.

Rethinking Fertility Policies: Focus on Choice and Support, Not Control

- The fear of falling birth rates has often unfairly targeted women, curbing reproductive rights and pushing them into traditional childbearing roles.
- However, most people still want around two children on average but face barriers in achieving that.
- **Problems with Target-Driven Pronatalism**
 - Measures like baby bonuses and one-time benefits:
 - Reinforce outdated gender roles.
 - Overlook men's role in parenting.
 - Often fail to create lasting fertility changes.

Conclusion: Societal and Workforce Changes

- Instead of coercing women into motherhood, countries should:
 - Promote gender-equal workforce participation.
 - Remove penalties for working mothers.
 - Stop linking population policies to religion or nationalism. Instead, focus on creating a society where families get real help and support.

Yamuna River Rejuvenation

Context:

- The newly elected government in Delhi, aligned with the Centre, is **prioritising the cleaning of the Yamuna River**.
- This initiative aligns with and supplements the **Namami Gange Programme (NGP)**, potentially offering a replicable model for **river rejuvenation** by promoting Centre-state synergy and improved urban

governance.

Namami Gange Programme (NGP) - A Paradigm Shift in River Rejuvenation:

- **From regulatory to executive framework:**

- The NGP, launched in **2014**, marks a shift from regulatory pollution control (under the Ministry of Environment) to **an executive mission-based rejuvenation strategy** under the Ministry of Jal Shakti.
- This executive approach reflects a change from pollution abatement to **improving ecological health of rivers**.

- **Adoption of river basin approach:**

- The programme is based on a river basin planning model, with inputs from IITs.
- Such **integrated approaches** were seen earlier in successful **European models** like the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (**ICPR**), established in 1950 to restore the River Rhine.

Institutional and Legal Innovations under NGP:

- **Structural reforms and coordination mechanism:**

- The 2016 River Ganga Authorities Order created **a multi-layered governance system**:
 - **National Ganga Council (NGC)** headed by the Prime Minister
 - **Empowered Task Force** under Union Minister of Jal Shakti
 - **Executive Council** under NMCG Director General
- Recognised the role of **subnational governments** through state and district-level Ganga Committees.

- **Challenges in subnational participation:**

- Despite structural provisions, states' legal, financial, and institutional responses have been underwhelming.
- **Lack of ownership** from basin states poses risks to the long-term sustainability of the programme.

Delhi's Yamuna Project - A Microcosm for Larger River Reforms:

- **Urban governance and pollution control:**

- Nearly 80% of Yamuna's pollution load originates from Delhi, primarily due to **uncaptured and untreated sewage**.
- This highlights the **critical role of urban governance in river restoration**.

- **Potential as a scalable model:**

- Yamuna's interstate river status necessitates **interstate cooperation**, making Delhi's approach a test case for federal collaboration.
- It can help identify motivations and drivers for effective subnational mobilisation under NGP.

Learning from Global Best Practices:

- **Europe's** slow but effective institutional evolution (ICPR), post events like the Sandoz disaster, led to the **Water Framework Directive**.
- India's NGP can follow a similar route by **mobilising internal subnational responses through institutional partnerships**.

Conclusion:

- Delhi's Yamuna cleaning initiative offers a critical opportunity for **reciprocal learning** under the NGP, helping to address the **current gaps in state participation, urban sewage management, and interstate cooperation**.
- If leveraged correctly, this can lead to **a robust, multi-tiered policy and institutional ecosystem for river rejuvenation in India**, with broader implications for environmental federalism, urban development, and sustainable water governance.

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