

Harnessing India's Demographic and Gender Dividend

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Setting the Context

India, with its rich mix of cultures, traditions, and history, is currently the world's most populous nation and is home to over 1.4 billion people. Such vast demographic might easily be perceived as a daunting challenge, particularly in challenges like resource allocation, job creation, and infrastructural development. Yet, beneath the massive challenge is a treasure trove of opportunities.

The gender dividend, achievable through targeted empowerment of women and girls, can contribute to sustainable development. Women, constituting almost half of the nation's population, possess a myriad of skills, perspectives, and values. Empirical studies have consistently shown that societies which prioritise women's education and health and promote their economic and political participation tend to be more prosperous and just.

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The journey to harness this demographic and gender dividend is fraught with complexities. Socio-cultural norms, economic disparities, and the historical context play pivotal roles in shaping the narrative. On 28 August 2023, ORF organised a closed-door roundtable titled *Harnessing India's Demographic and Gender Dividend*, in partnership with the Economic Advisory Council to the PM and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), to emphasise the imperative to bridge research and policy gaps. The global implications of India's choices, especially at this juncture, cannot be overstated; as a nation, the decisions we make now will resonate within our borders and create ripple effects beyond.

Each individual in this massive geography represents untapped potential—a latent force for innovation, creativity, and problem-solving. The diversity in languages, skills, and backgrounds is a testament to the nation's richness. This demographic transition, especially with its burgeoning youth cohort, presents India with opportunities to harness its unique demographic dividend. Historically, countries like South Korea have reaped the benefits of a similar dividend, witnessing unprecedented economic growth by investing in health, education, and job creation during their demographic transition.

Furthermore, the role of education as a catalyst for growth has been a recurring theme in policy discussions. The potential returns from education, both in economic and socio-cultural terms, are immense. However, the current state of education, especially in technical and vocational areas, warrants introspection. Are we equipping our youth with the skills required for the 21st century? Or are we ensnaring them in outdated curricula that do not resonate with the demands of the global job market?

The discussion also shed light on the complex patterns of migration within the country. The reasons for these waves of migration, including marriage and the search for better educational and livelihood opportunities, provide insights into a nation's socio-economic fabric. These patterns, if studied and understood, can pave the way for more targeted policy interventions.

Indeed, India stands at a crossroads, and the choices made today will determine the trajectory for future generations. With its vast populace and diversity, the country has the potential to be a global powerhouse. This potential can only be realised, however, through informed, evidence-based policymaking, community engagement, and nurturing a shared vision for a prosperous future.

Education as a Catalyst for Growth

From ancient *gurukuls* to modern universities, India's educational journey is testament to the nation's evolving ethos. Throughout the annals of history, education has remained the cornerstone of societal advancement. Today, India has a significant youth population, and education assumes a paramount role in the fulfilment of its development goals. This goes beyond transferring knowledge from one generation to the next, to adopting the profound responsibility of sculpting the progress of the nation's future torchbearers.

The roundtable underscored the multifaceted role of education in shaping India's trajectory. In a rapidly globalising world, education is not concerned merely with achieving impressive literacy rates. Instead, the focus is on the quality, depth, and relevance of the education being provided. Anecdotal evidence and observations from the proceedings painted a concerning picture of many technical colleges in India. While they produce graduates in large numbers, a significant proportion of these students lack the requisite technical expertise to thrive in professional settings. This glaring misalignment between academic curricula and the needs of the real-world market poses a pressing concern that demands immediate redressal.

Beyond the confines of employment and job readiness, education plays a far more profound role in society. It moulds individuals' worldviews, instils values, fosters critical thinking, and promotes social cohesion. In a nation as diverse as India, which has a myriad of languages, cultures, and traditions, education serves as a unifying force. It can act as a bridge, celebrating the richness of diversity and fostering a shared sense of national identity and purpose.

However, access to quality education, a fundamental right, remains disparate across the expanse of the country. While urban centres, with their modern schools and colleges, offer a plethora of opportunities, many rural areas are lagging and often grapple with inadequate resources, outdated infrastructure, and limited access to digital tools. Socio-economic disparities further exacerbate these educational divides. Children from marginalised communities, often battling socio-economic constraints, experience higher dropout rates and are more likely to be deprived the opportunities to realise their full potential.

Yet, there are silver linings. The roundtable highlighted the transformative power of education. The potential returns from strategic investments in education are manifold and reverberate throughout the socio-economic fabric of the nation. An educated, skilled workforce is a beacon of innovation, productivity, and economic resurgence. The stellar transformations of nations like South Korea and Japan are exemplars; their strategic focus on education during periods of crucial demographic transition enabled them to metamorphose from primarily agrarian economies to global technological and economic powerhouses.

In the Indian context, the ripple effects of education are not confined to economic realms. The societal implications are profound. Women's education emerges as a particularly potent catalyst for change. Educated women, empowered with knowledge and skills, have better health outcomes, make informed choices about their reproductive health, and exhibit heightened agency in personal and professional spheres. This empowerment has cascading generational impacts, ensuring their offspring undeniable gains from improved nutrition, holistic education, and enhanced life prospects.

To chart a way forward, India must reimagine its educational landscape. This requires a symphony of collaborative efforts that will bring together policymakers, educators, industry stalwarts, and civil society. The road ahead should be paved with global best practices, technological integration, and a relentless focus on inclusivity and equity. By championing these guiding principles, India stands poised to harness education as a most potent catalyst for unprecedented growth and societal advancement.

Harnessing Human Capital

India has vast potential, driven by a young and dynamic population that represents a significant proportion of the world's future workforce. With around 380 million individuals aged between 10 and 24, the country is at a pivotal juncture and is poised to make a global mark with its human capital. However, the journey from potential to proficiency is laden with complexities. The roundtable discussion underscored the transformative role of education, the importance of bridging the urban-rural divide, and the global appetite for India's best practices. These insights provide a renewed perspective on the nuances of human capital in India, emphasising that it is not just about the numbers but also the quality, diversity, and adaptability of the workforce.

The discussion also highlighted the gender dynamics at play. The achievements and challenges faced by women in various fields, especially in science and technology, are testament to the strides made and the journey ahead. Recognising the role of women as equal stakeholders in the nation's progress is integral to truly harnessing the collective potential of the population. As India navigates its path, it is essential to factor in these insights, ensuring that the strategy for human capital development is holistic, inclusive, and forward-looking.

In the process of nation-building, human capital is the most vibrant and dynamic thread, embodying the collective skills, knowledge, experiences, and competencies of a population. For a country as multifaceted as India, the reservoir of human capital is immense and potentially unparalleled. However, tapping into this vast reservoir and converting its potential into tangible outcomes demands a profound understanding and a well-crafted strategic approach.

The insights from the roundtable highlighted the evolving nature of human capital in the 21st century. Traditional paradigms, which often focus narrowly on technical prowess or vocational training, no longer suffice. In our modern, interconnected world, where boundaries between disciplines have blurred, attributes such as critical thinking, adaptability, cultural awareness, and emotional intelligence are paramount.

In this regard, educational institutions, from primary schools to universities, bear the mantle of responsibility. Their role is no longer limited to churning out graduates but expands into nurturing well-rounded citizens capable of navigating the complexities of today's world. While technical and vocational training remains critical, the imperative is to broaden the educational horizon through integrating soft skills, fostering ethical grounding, and promoting interdisciplinary learning within curricula. In an age marked by challenges like climate change, political upheavals, technological disruptions, and public health crises, solutions demand a multifaceted approach. A technocrat with a keen understanding of sociology, or a medical professional adept at behavioural psychology, can provide groundbreaking solutions.

However, the path is not devoid of obstacles. A recurrent theme in the discussion was the palpable skills gap in the contemporary job market. Many graduates, armed with degrees and academic accolades, find themselves ill-equipped for the dynamic demands of modern professions. This disparity, if left unchecked, could lead to a multitude of socio-economic issues including underemployment, wage disparities, and stunted economic growth.

Beyond the confines of academic institutions, workplaces stand as vital arenas for human capital development. A conducive work environment, characterised by on-the-job training, mentorship programmes, continuous learning opportunities, and a culture of innovation, can be transformative. It is crucial for organisations across the public and private sectors to invest holistically in their human resources. After all, the growth trajectory of an organisation is intrinsically linked to the growth and well-being of its employees.

The discussion also highlighted the gender dynamics within human capital. Women often grapple with systemic barriers that curtail their full participation in the economic landscape. Societal norms, disparities in access to education and healthcare, and workplace biases are but a few of these challenges. Addressing these barriers is not just a moral and social imperative; it is an economic one. An empowered woman contributes exponentially to the economy, society, and her immediate community.

The emphasis on mental well-being as an integral component of human capital was also a significant takeaway from the discussion. In the drive for economic progress, mental health often takes a backseat. Yet, its role in fostering productivity, creativity, resilience, and overall societal well-being cannot be overstated. A proactive approach, encompassing investments in mental health infrastructure, awareness campaigns, and stigma-free environments, is crucial.

The journey to harness India's vast human capital is complex and layered. It requires synergised efforts from all societal stakeholders, from policymakers and educators to industry stalwarts and community leaders. With a strategic focus on education, gender inclusivity, mental well-being, and continuous skill development, India stands poised to unlock the latent potential of its human capital. Such a transformation will propel India to economic zeniths and solidify the nation's position as a global leader in holistic development and innovation.

Labour-Force Participation in India: A Gendered Perspective

The roundtable illuminated the complex dynamics of India's labour landscape, emphasising the critical role of gender. The past decade has witnessed a concerning decline in India's labour-force participation, notably among women. This observation becomes even more perplexing when set against the backdrop of the rising educational achievements of Indian women as well as the steady economic growth of the nation. While men's participation rates remain relatively stable, the narrative is markedly different for women. Despite significant strides in education and increasing qualifications, Indian women remain conspicuously underrepresented in the workforce. The roundtable unearthed a multiplicity of factors that contribute to this disparity.

Socio-cultural dynamics play a significant role in shaping women's career trajectories. Traditional roles deeply entrenched in society often act as barriers, confining many women to household responsibilities and curtailing their professional aspirations. This challenge is not unique to India; globally, socio-cultural norms often act as invisible chains, binding women to conventionally defined roles. Professional barriers further exacerbate the gender divide in the labour market. Discrimination, biases, and a lack of equal opportunities often deter women from pursuing active and fulfilling careers. Panellists at the roundtable highlighted contexts where women were sidelined despite possessing superior qualifications.

Structural challenges cannot be overlooked. The roundtable brought to light the infrastructural impediments that women often face. An acute absence of childcare facilities, rigid work schedules, and concerns over safety in commuting and within workplaces emerge as formidable obstacles. As one participant noted, discussions about increasing women's labour-force participation risk becoming mere rhetoric without addressing these structural challenges.

The transformative power of education was a recurrent theme during the discussion. More than just academic milestones, education serves as a tool to challenge and reshape societal norms. By fostering environments that promote critical thinking and individual agency, education can play a pivotal role in creating spaces conducive to women's active engagement in the labour force. The challenge, as underscored by participants, lies in harnessing education not just as an end but as a mechanism for societal evolution. Beyond their academic mandates, educational institutions can serve as crucibles for change, challenging stereotypes and fostering a spirit of equality.

Addressing the gender imbalances in labour-force participation is not just a socio-cultural challenge but a policy imperative. The discussions revolved around actionable policy directions. Investment in the care sector emerged as a potent solution. By ensuring accessible and quality childcare, a significant burden can be lifted from women, enabling them to pursue careers without the constant juggle of professional and domestic responsibilities. Promoting entrepreneurship among women was another focal point. Initiatives aimed at bolstering women's entrepreneurship can be aimed at a vast reservoir of untapped potential, driving both economic growth and social justice. The roundtable also emphasised the need for workplace reforms. Policies that ensure safety, flexibility, and inclusivity can transform workplaces, making them more welcoming and conducive for women.

In conclusion, the roundtable underscored a salient point: India's path to economic prosperity is intertwined with its approach towards gender in the labour force. An inclusive and holistic strategy, which robustly integrates women into the workforce, is not just an economic imperative but a cornerstone for equitable growth, justice, and societal progress.

Migration Patterns and Policy Implications

Migration has been an integral part of the ebb and flow of civilisations, from ancient tribes in search of fertile lands, to modern professionals seeking global opportunities. Its drivers range from the quest for economic prosperity to the quest for a refuge from socio-political unrest. In the context of India, deciphering the nuances of migration patterns becomes essential for the holistic development and governance of the nation.

The roundtable delved into the labyrinth of India's internal migration landscape, offering a range of insights, experiences, and concerns. Contrary to simplistic views, migration in India is not a monolithic phenomenon; it is a multiplicity of stories, each with its unique drivers, challenges, and implications. Consider the aspirational student, embarking on a journey from a remote village in Bihar to the bustling academic corridors of a university in Bengaluru. Contrast this with the tale of a woman, uprooting her life after marriage, often navigating linguistic and cultural boundaries. These narratives, like countless others, weave together to form India's socio-economic fabric.

A dominant theme that emerged from the discussion was the pull of economic opportunities. India's urban centres, with their high-rise buildings, burgeoning industries, and promise of a better life, act as magnets. Metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Delhi witness a constant stream of migrants, each seeking their slice of the 'urban dream'.

However, this meteoric urbanisation, while promising, is not without its challenges. From teeming slums shadowed by luxury apartments, to overburdened public transport systems, the strains of rapid urban influx are obvious.

Another facet of migration, which is deeply intertwined with India's socio-cultural ethos, revolves around marriage. The tradition, often seen as sacrosanct, dictates that women relocate after marriage, adapting to new households, communities, and often, entirely new cultural settings. While this form of migration is deeply rooted in tradition, its implications ripple across social, economic, and demographic terrains.

The gender dynamics of migration also emerged as a focal point in the discussion. Women, representing a significant chunk of internal migrants, navigate a path marked by unique challenges. From safety concerns in unfamiliar urban jungles to access to essential services like healthcare and education, their journey is shaped by societal norms, expectations, and often, systemic biases.

However, looking beyond individual narratives and data points reveals broader, more encompassing policy implications. Migration patterns, if studied meticulously, can act as barometers, reflecting the nation's socio-economic health. Regions plagued by large-scale outmigration might be battling underlying issues such as unemployment, infrastructural deficits, and educational gaps. On the other hand, urban hubs grappling with the challenges of in-migration might face pressures of overpopulation, housing crises, and strained civic amenities.

Addressing India's migration dynamics is more than a mere demographic endeavour; it is a pressing socio-economic imperative. The way forward demands a dual approach from policymakers. There is a need to invest in and uplift regions witnessing high outmigration, ensuring holistic development, job creation, and access to quality education and healthcare. Simultaneously, urban centres must be equipped to manage the challenges of in-migration, from infrastructural upgrades to social integration initiatives. With informed, evidence-driven policies and collaborative governance, India has the potential to turn its migration narratives from challenges to opportunities, sculpting a future marked by inclusivity, prosperity, and national cohesion.

Conclusion: Charting the Path Forward

As India stands at the precipice of a demographic revolution, the choices made today will reverberate to the future. The discussions, insights, and deliberations from the roundtable offer insight into the broader national discourse. Harnessing the demographic and gender dividend is not just an economic goal but a clarion call for a more inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable future. The potential of India's vast populace is both its greatest strength and its most daunting challenge. The youthful energy, diversity, and talent in the country present an unprecedented opportunity for growth. Yet, without strategic interventions, this potential could remain untapped, or worse, become a liability.

Education emerges as a pivotal pillar in this journey. Moving beyond traditional pedagogies and embracing a more holistic, interdisciplinary approach can pave the way for a more skilled, adaptable, and innovative workforce. As the global landscape undergoes rapid transformations, from technological advancements to climate challenges, India's education system must evolve in tandem.

Human capital, with its blend of skills, knowledge, and experiences, is the bedrock of any nation's progress. It is imperative to foster environments, both in educational institutions and workplaces, that nurture this capital. Gender inclusivity, mental well-being, and continuous skill development should be at the forefront of these efforts. Migration patterns, often

overlooked, offer invaluable insights into the socio-economic pulse of the nation. Addressing the challenges and harnessing the opportunities presented by migration can lead to more cohesive, integrated, and vibrant communities.

To be sure, India's stakes are high: its decisions, successes, and missteps in harnessing its demographic potential are under the global spotlight. The world sees promise in India's youthful dynamism and the transformative power of its women. Every step that is taken or not taken is a message to the world about the nation's commitment to its people and its place on the global stage. The question remains: Will India's strategic investments bear fruit and set a global benchmark, or will the country squander its once-in-a-lifetime demographic advantage?

The path forward is as complex as it is promising, requiring collaboration, innovation, and a shared vision. Policymakers, educators, industry leaders, and civil society must come together, draw inspiration from global best practices, leverage technological advancements, and stay rooted in the unique socio-cultural context of India. By doing so, India can truly harness its demographic and gender dividend, crafting a narrative of growth, prosperity, and global leadership for generations to come.



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