

South Asia in Transition

Lesson 4: Population, Health, Environment, and Conflict Update

Issues of population, health, environment, and conflict continue to challenge economic development and human life in South Asia. Since 2006, when *South Asia in Transition* was published, there have been improvements in some areas and setbacks in others. This update examines these changes.

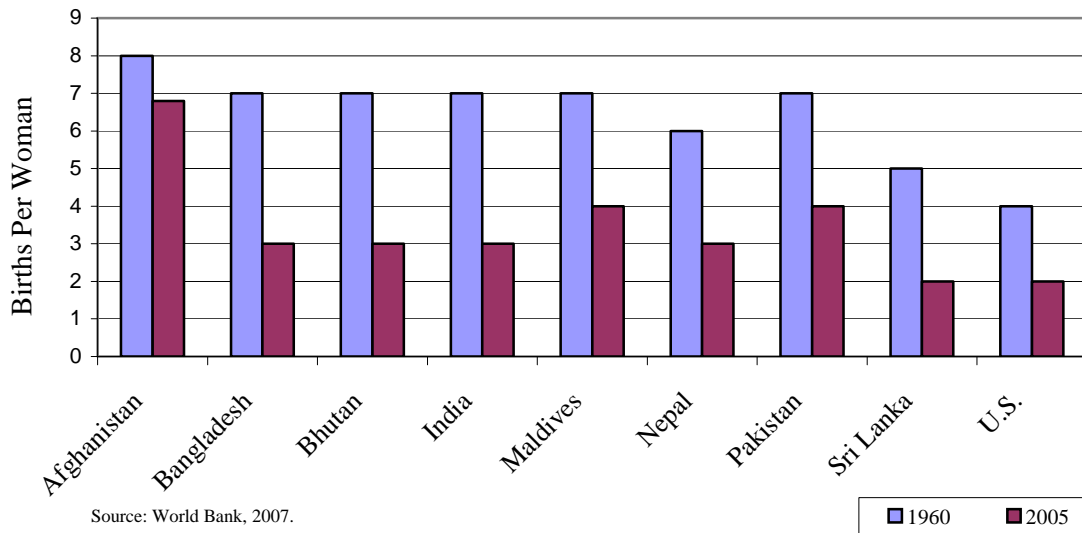
POPULATION ISSUES IN SOUTH ASIA

As explained in *South Asia in Transition*, South Asian states are following a population growth pattern known as the demographic transition. Here, we focus on additional discussion of the Indian case.

Many scholars place India's population in the early 1800s at roughly 200 million, and it remained more or less static throughout the nineteenth century. By 1900, India's population had increased to only 238 million.¹ High birth rates were counterbalanced by high death rates, reflecting, in part, periodic famines and outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, smallpox, and malaria. The year 1921 marked the shift from a relatively static population size to one of steady increase. Health care had improved significantly, epidemics and famines became less prevalent, and India experienced a staggering population expansion. Death rates fell but birth rates remained high.

India's population growth rate peaked in the 1970s, but because of its demographic momentum, the growth in absolute numbers has not yet peaked, even though the birth rate has fallen from 40 births per 1000 population in the early 1970s to 24 per 1000 in 2005.² India's total fertility rate (children per woman) is now 3.0 (see Chart 1), and its population is roughly 1.1 billion. Depending on the rate at which the birth rate continues to fall, India's population in 2050 will range between 1.3 and 1.9 billion.³ As is often the case in the developing world, the birth rate is declining more slowly in India's poorer states (the impoverished and densely populated northern states, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan) than in its richer states, highlighting the linkage between poverty and population growth.

Chart 1
Fertility Rates in South Asia and the United States



[Click here for larger view of chart](#)

HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE IN SOUTH ASIA

All the states of South Asia, despite their considerable efforts and some impressive achievements, face major hurdles in providing their citizens with adequate health care, and reducing the prevalence of diseases within their borders. Indeed, malnutrition, disease, and inadequate health services join with poverty, overcrowding, class and gender discrimination, and poor governance to undermine and complicate economic development, social relationships, and human conditions in South Asia. Here, we focus on the growing role of the private sector in India’s health care system, describe how recent flooding has exacerbated the diarrheal disease problem in several South Asian countries, and discuss how terrorizing health officials has become a deadly new tool of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

In India, there is increasing recognition that improved health care not only improves the quality of life for individuals, but also leads to better economic performance. The healthcare industry in India today is valued at \$35 billion, and this figure is expected to grow to \$75 billion in the next five years. The private sector accounts for more than 80 percent of this spending, and the best doctors and facilities provide world-class health care to those who can afford it, which includes the wealthy and many in the expanding middle class.⁴

Foreign patients also avail themselves of this high-quality health care, as the cost for complicated health procedures in India, such as heart operations, is considerably cheaper than in many industrialized countries. India has joined such countries as Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia as a top site for medical value travel in Asia. In 2006, 230,000 patients from abroad were treated in Indian hospitals.⁵ However, the vast majority of

Indians cannot afford top-quality, private healthcare and continue to rely on the overburdened public health services or alternative, poorly trained, health practitioners in the unorganized sector.

Diarrheal diseases continue to be a major problem in South Asia, linked to inadequate sewage disposal, a lack of safe drinking water, and malnutrition. In 2007, heavy monsoon rains, so necessary to agriculture in most of South Asia, brought severe flooding to Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, exacerbating the problem. There were outbreaks of diarrhea and other waterborne diseases in these countries because safe drinking water was difficult to find in the flooded areas. Bangladesh was also hit by a devastating cyclone in November 2007, killing thousands and again leading to a rise in the levels of diarrheal diseases because of a lack of safe drinking water. Many tube wells, which normally provide safe water, were submerged, leaving only flood water for the people to use.

Afghanistan has made progress in rebuilding its healthcare system since the fall of the Taliban in December 2001. There has been a 24 percent decline in the infant mortality rate, proper diagnoses and treatment of thousands of new cases of tuberculosis every year, and a doubling of routine polio immunization rates.⁶ Still, the country's recovering health-care system has come under considerable strain as the insurgency of the Taliban and al Qaeda has advanced over the last two years. The insurgents target medical workers, many of whom have been killed, including one who was found beheaded. Clinics are running out of medicines because their delivery has been disrupted by the violence. In the heavily infiltrated Helmand province in the south, 11 of 440 health workers were killed in 2007, and almost half of the health facilities have been closed.⁷ The culprits, the Taliban, then tell the villagers that the government is at fault because it cannot provide them with health services.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Air Pollution in South Asia

In recognition that environmental and economic issues are linked and that climate change affects all nations and people, the 2007 G-8 summit, the annual meeting of the major industrialized nations, invited India and other leading countries in the developing world to attend. The central theme of the summit, "Growth and Responsibility," focused on the global economy and climate change. In the preparatory work for the G-8 summit, the environmental ministers of the attending countries concluded that climate change is already taking place in South Asia, that the poorest people are the most at risk, and that the effects of higher temperatures, more variable precipitation, more extreme weather events, and a rising sea level will continue to intensify in South Asia. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's recently released fourth report discusses the following future impacts of climate change on South Asia:

- projected increase in Himalayan melting will expand flooding and affect water resources within the next two to three decades;

- climate change will compound pressures on natural resources and the environment because of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and economic development;
- crop yields could decrease by 30 percent by the mid-century;
- mortality due to diarrhea mainly associated with floods and droughts will rise;
- the rise of the sea level will exacerbate storm surges, floods, erosion and other coastal hazards.⁸

A recent study by a research team at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in California argues that the Asian Brown Cloud, the blanket of smog that covers much of Asia, is causing Himalayan glaciers to melt at a rate much higher than can be explained solely by global warming. According to the scientists, the Brown Cloud—comprised of gases and suspended particles known as aerosols—are absorbing the sun’s heat and pushing up temperatures at the altitude of the Himalayan glaciers; they claim that the cloud accounts for half of the rise in temperature around these glaciers. The scientists also point out that unlike greenhouse gases that cause global warming and can remain in the atmosphere for 200 years, aerosols drop to the ground after two or three weeks. Consequently, if the Asian countries can find alternatives to fuels such as coal, diesel, wood, and dung, the problem of rising temperatures in the Himalayas can be substantially reduced in a relatively short period of time.

While a number of major cities in South Asia face air pollution problems, Pakistan’s economic planners have concluded that air pollution in Pakistan’s major cities is among the highest in the world. The government’s annual “Pakistan Economic Survey,” released in June 2006, held that dust and smoke particles are twice the world average and five times higher than in industrialized countries. The key reasons reportedly were an increase in the demand for energy and the unprecedented growth in the number of vehicles in the country. The same report said that the annual per capita water availability level had dropped close to the scarcity threshold for water, in large part because of the increasing levels of pollution in drinking water and in water supplies for agriculture.

THE EFFECTS OF CONFLICT IN SOUTH ASIA

Problems surrounding refugees and displaced persons, how children are affected by conflict, and the use of landmines continue to challenge South Asia. In fact, there have been significant turns for the worse in the conflicts in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan over the last two years. However, the Indian government’s search for peace in the Kashmir region has met with some success.

Sri Lanka. Since Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected president in late 2005, Sri Lankan government forces have gone on the offensive and have largely driven the main Tamil Tiger forces from the Eastern Province. The government has also increased its use of aerial bombing and artillery shelling in the country’s north. The Tigers, however, have not been cowed. In March and April 2007, the Tiger air force bombed a military airbase near the international airport outside of the capital city of Colombo. In October 2007, Tiger suicide bombers successfully infiltrated a strategic airbase in Anuradhapura and, in

conjunction with Tiger air strikes, killed and injured a number of government personnel, in addition to destroying several aircraft. In early November 2007, a government air strike on a Tiger hideout killed the second most important Tiger leader, S. P. Thamilselvan. And in January 2008, the Sri Lankan government officially pulled out of the 2002 ceasefire brokered by Norwegian mediators. Even though the Sri Lankan government is purported to believe that it can win the civil war militarily, most knowledgeable observers disagree.

Nepal. The Maoists in Nepal left the interim government in September 2007, forcing postponement of the election of a constituent assembly, which was to draft a new constitution and establish a new governing structure for the country (see Lesson 2 update). As a result, opportunistic violence has flared, with hard-line Maoists disobeying their leaders' orders and again using weapons, and historically disenfranchised groups asserting their demands with guns. The delay of the election may strengthen the king, whose autocratic rule ended in April 2006, when the political parties and the Maoists joined in a populist movement that forced him to hand over power. It may also cause the army, which earlier had supported the king, to reemerge from the barracks. In early 2008, the fate of Nepal's experiment with democracy was unclear.

Afghanistan. As discussed in the update for Lesson 2, "Politics and Government," Taliban and al Qaeda forces have engaged in more vigorous fighting against the Karzai government and its supportive NATO forces over the last two years.

India. More hopeful developments have occurred in the way in which the Indian government is prosecuting its war against insurgents in Kashmir. In addition to the improved relations between India and Pakistan, which have resulted in less Pakistani support for the insurgents, the Indian military has adopted a new doctrine to counter terrorism in Kashmir. It is now using small groups of soldiers on the ground, equipped with high technology and intelligence, to hunt down terrorists while avoiding alienation of the civilian population. In the past, the military used hundreds of troops to cordon off villages and conduct house-to-house searches. The new army doctrine is premised on the need to win the hearts and minds of the people in order to defeat the insurgents.

Refugees and the Internally Displaced

The problems surrounding refugees and the internally displaced continue to challenge South Asia, especially in Afghanistan, which is the world's leading country of origin for refugees. According the UN High Commission for Refugees, at the end of 2006, 2.1 million Afghan refugees were located in 71 different asylum countries; they represented 21 percent of the global refugee population.⁹ Pakistan has the largest number of these refugees, with Iran running a close second. Although many refugees have returned to Afghanistan, large numbers remain outside its borders.

Landmines

The fighting between Sri Lankan government forces and Tamil Tiger insurgents has disrupted the UN's major effort to locate and remove landmines in that country. In Afghanistan, the landmine situation has been worsened by Taliban forces seeding more mines in the southern part of the country. British and Canadian forces lead the NATO effort to battle the Taliban in the area.

Marion V. Creekmore

© The Southern Center for International Studies, 2008.

¹ Carl Haub and O.P. Sharma, "India's Population Reality: Reconciling Change and Tradition," *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 61, No. 3, September 2006 (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2006), p. 4.

² *Ibid*, p. 5.

³ *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁴ "Healthcare Outlook," Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Technopak Advisors Pvt. Ltd., 2007), p.2, <http://www.ksatechnopak.com/pdf/Technopak%20Healthcare%20Outlook%202007%20V01%201.pdf>, (accessed on December 20, 2007).

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁶ Praful C. Patel, "Bolstering the Gains in Afghan Health Care," *The World Bank*, 2007.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ "G8 2007 Summit: Focus on Climate Change," *The World Bank-South Asia*, 2007, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/0,,contentMDK:21356388~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:223547,00.html> (accessed December 20, 2007).

⁹ "2006 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons," *The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR*, June 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/4676a71d4.pdf> (accessed December 20, 2007).