



The principle of Yoga is the turning of one or of all powers of our human existence into a means of reaching divine Being.

SRI AUROBINDO

## Quiet Rise

China's sharp economic slowdown has raised alarm bells around the world. But it has also thrown into relief the rise of another demographic powerhouse next door: The Indian economy grew at an impressive 7.8 per cent annual rate in the second quarter of 2023, and the country recently reached an important milestone by becoming the first to land a spacecraft on the Moon's potentially water-rich south pole. And, India's ascent, unlike China's, has not been accompanied by an increasingly assertive foreign policy or an appetite for other countries' territory.

As India's geopolitical, economic, and cultural clout grows, so does its global footprint. China's "decline," as some have begun to call the conclusion of the country's four-decade-long economic boom, opens new opportunities for the Indian economy and other developing and emerging countries.

Earlier this year, India reached another milestone when its population officially surpassed that of China, which had been the world's most populous country for more than 300 years. While China's shrinking, rapidly aging population is likely to impede economic growth and may curtail its geopolitical ambitions, India — one of the world's youngest countries, with a median age of 28.2 — is poised to reap a huge demographic dividend.

But the driving force behind India's emergence as a major global power is its rapid economic growth. While India's GDP is still smaller than China's, the country is currently the world's fastest-growing major economy and is projected to account for 12.9 per cent of global growth over the next five years, surpassing the United States' 11.3 per cent share.

In addition to fueling a consumption boom, India's youthful population is also driving innovation, as evidenced by the country's world-class information economy and its recent investments in which the country managed to achieve despite a national space budget equivalent to roughly 6 per cent of what the US spends on space missions. Having already surpassed the United Kingdom, its former colonial ruler, India's GDP is poised to overtake that of Japan and Germany to become the world's third-largest economy by 2030, behind the US and China.

Given its increasingly unstable neighborhood, it should come as no surprise that India has the world's third-largest defence budget. The deepening strategic alliance between China and Pakistan underscores India's precarious position as the only country bordering two nuclear-armed revisionist states with expansionist ambitions. Moreover, for the past three years, India has been locked in a tense military standoff with China along its Himalayan border. Bilateral relations, marked by intermittent clashes in the disputed Tibe-Ladakh border region, are at their lowest point in decades.

By confronting China despite the risk of a full-scale war, India has challenged Chinese power in a way no other country has done in this century. But despite leaning toward forging closer ties with the West, India remains hesitant to enter into formal military alliances with Western countries.

Western powers are partly to blame. US President Joe Biden's reluctance to comment on the Sino-Indian military standoff, let alone openly support India, has sent clear signals that India is moderating the nation's defence. Given that the country's future growth hinges on its ability to defend itself against external threats, India will likely step up its efforts to modernise its conventional armed forces and enhance its nuclear deterrence.

The escalating geopolitical rivalry between China and India could also impede efforts to unite the Global South and transform the BRICS group into a credible alternative to the G20 and G7. The BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) recently agreed to expand the group by adding six new members: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, Argentina, and Iran. Given the 11 members' divergent interests, BRICS will likely find it even harder to reach consensus on any major issue.

Meanwhile, China's economic slump could prompt President Xi Jinping to double down on his expansionist agenda. Biden recently characterised the stagnating Chinese economy as a "ticking time bomb," warning that, "When bad folks have problems, they do bad things." China's controversial new national map, which depicts vast areas of India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Bhutan (and even a bit of Russia) as Chinese territory, underscores the threat posed by China's increasingly aggressive behaviour.

In addition to these external threats, India's future will be shaped by its response to domestic economic challenges. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has clear sights on the great strides in modernising the notoriously outdated Indian bureaucracy and promoting e-governance to reduce red tape and attract foreign direct investment. His government has invested heavily in upgrading and expanding the country's infrastructure, implemented regulatory reforms, and sought to boost domestic manufacturing through Modi's "Make in India" initiative. But to transform itself into a global manufacturing hub, India must invest in human capital, particularly in education and training.

Moreover, India's size and diversity also pose enormous challenges. India may be the first developing economy that, from the beginning, has pursued modernisation and prosperity through a democratic system. But as one of the world's most culturally diverse countries, its seemingly never-ending election cycle has often fueled division and polarisation.

But, despite its US-style polarised politics, India's democratic framework has served as a pillar of stability. By fostering open expression and dialogue, the Indian political system has empowered grassroots communities and individuals, enabling members of historically marginalised classes and castes to rise to the highest levels of policymaking. Whether India can maintain its current upward trajectory will depend on its ability to maintain political stability, rapid economic growth, domestic and external security, and a forward-looking foreign policy. Success would enhance India's global standing and help advance US interests in the Indo-Pacific, the world's new geopolitical fulcrum and home to its fastest-growing economies.

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### WISDOM CORNER

- The truth is, you don't break a bad habit; you replace it with a good one. DENNIS WATLEY
- Commit to stop making excuses. When we make excuses, we lie to ourselves and continue bad habits. JOYCE KETTER
- You are what you do repeatedly every day. If excellence is something you're striving for, then it's not an accident. It's a habit. GREG PLATT



Dr. Sanjana Mohan & Lekha Rattanani

## SENIOR OBSTETRICIANS RECOMMEND THAT OPERATIONS SHOULD BE THE LAST OPTION AS OPENING THE BODY HAS ITS RISKS

The government's family planning initiative 'Mission Parivar Vikas' (MPV), now in its seventh year, has achieved some success in 146 districts which were originally identified as "high fertility" areas with a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of more than three. The districts are spread across seven states — Rajasthan, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. MPV hopes to reduce TFR in these high-fertility areas to 2.1 by 2025.

The focused efforts are yielding results that can be seen in the numbers, but they come with hidden problems that the numbers do not or cannot capture. For example, contraceptive use has picked up in these areas following the government's efforts to increase access to family planning services. But the most popular method of contraception is the irreversible method of female sterilisation involving surgery. This is good from the point of view of outcomes but not always good from the point of view of the women. The popularity of the permanent method in rural areas is particularly concerning where 36.3% (NFHS-5) of currently married women took the option — making it the most popular of all choices. Across states with MPV districts, many more women opt for the permanent method. But because MPV runs essentially in districts with an overall higher level of backwardness, signalling weaker communication and poorer delivery of healthcare, the downsides of female sterilisation will be more pronounced here.

A permanent method like female sterilisation is usually adopted when the couple have had a number of children they wanted and opt to have no more. But in rural India, the death of children and young adults is not unusual, particularly in tribal and semi-tribal areas. Unexpected incidents happen, including snakebites, falls from trees, drowning in pond, and many caused by preventable or treatable diseases. Not having timely access to care often leads

### FOCUS FAMILY PLANNING

# OVERCOMING THE ODS



The entire burden of population control in India has been borne, and continues to be borne, by women

to death of the child. There have been cases where women who opted for the permanent method after two or three children find themselves suddenly with fewer children, or without a son, after mishaps in the family. In such cases, reversal of surgery is difficult, if not impossible, and the trauma of the family is endless. These are the unfortunate consequences of the growing acceptance of female sterilisation in rural India. They also highlight the uniquely Indian problem of irreversible methods of contraception, given the poor health infrastructure that leads to preventable complications and even deaths during the surgery and even death trauma if the woman survives surgery, then goes on to lose her children and can't have any more.

A total of 368 deaths in 2014-2017 were reported after sterilisation. Minister of State for Health & Family Welfare Anupriya Patel told the Lok Sabha in March 2018. In terms of numbers alone, female sterilisation in rural areas (as a percentage of currently married women) grew from 32.2% to 44.5% in Rajasthan; 22.6% to 35.3% in Bihar; 39.8% to 47.6% in Chhattisgarh; 19.8% to 37.4% in Jharkhand; and 43.9% to 56.7% in Madhya Pradesh in the period from NFHS-3 to NFHS-5.

Three recent developments have possibly contributed to the steady increase in sterilisation numbers. First, the presence of ASHAs (Accredited Social

Health Activists) in every village has given a human face to the system, built credibility and trust, and has taken systematic persuasion to the last household in the village. Second, the arrival of smartphones and high connectivity in villages has upped aspirations. DJs at rural marriages, birthday celebrations, the changing attire of rural girls, are cases in point.

Rural families are also noting the small family size and lifestyle in cities and are ready to adopt it for themselves as well. The third factor contributing to increasing tubectomy numbers is the growing trend of male migration from rural areas to cities for work in southern Rajasthan itself, some 70% of households see at least one male member migrating to cities in Gujarat, Maharashtra, or elsewhere for livelihood. In the absence of the husband, it becomes doubly difficult for the women to bring up children. An operation then seems a win-win for everyone.

Senior obstetricians recommend that operations should be the last option as opening the body has its risks. So other methods available that are safer should be used. Complications and fatalities from female sterilisation are not uncommon but appear not to impact the number of women opting for this method. Yet, we cannot run away from the problem: The entire burden of population control in India has been borne, and continues to be borne, by women. And this is

especially the case with sterilisations. This has remained true over ten years, from the last NHFS in 2005-2006, all the way to the survey by the government for 2015-2016. Saying 'no' to tubectomy is much more possible today with emergence of several choices for women that work almost like a permanent method: intrauterine contraceptive devices such as Copper-T or other hormonal devices, which are effective for long durations. Using these once or twice may be sufficient to prevent a pregnancy for the entire reproductive cycle of the woman, thus acting as a permanent method.

Where PHCs are not regularly open, doctors and nurses not fully present, and people have little trust in public health systems, tubectomy is a sure way to ensure birth control. The alternative will require training of our doctors and nurses, making these methods available, and strengthening communication to dispel fears and myths associated with the different methods. As an example, a common fear that exists with Copper-T is that "it will make up in the abdomen."

Overcoming this requires listening and acknowledging their fears, and helping them understand why these may be unfounded. It will also require the primary healthcare facilities to be open 24x7 and the healthcare workers to be present, to be able to manage any side effects of the other methods such as bleeding and abdominal pain. The renewed emphasis on primary healthcare, emergence of the Health and Wellness Centres, growing numbers of doctors and skilled staff across the PHCs and sub-centres, are welcome steps that can make this paradigm shift possible.

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### SPECTRUM GEOPOLITICS

# The siren song of big history



Harold James

## THE REAL TASK OF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS SHOULD BE TO DISMANTLE DETERMINISTIC NARRATIVES, NOT TO INDULGE THEM

Behind today's global disorder are two related narratives about countries' relative strengths and weaknesses in the competition for global power. One is about the long-term rise and fall of nations and civilisations, and the other is about much shorter-term conjunctures. From the Western standpoint, the first narrative regards China as a threat because of its extraordinary strength, whereas the second narrative presents it as a threat by dint of its inherent weakness. At the same time, Chinese leaders view America as a threat because it is structurally feeble and dominated by a gerontocratic political elite, but also because it remains extraordinarily powerful and determined to cut off any rivals in the near term.

The first view of the future relies on the simple — and therefore apparently compelling — analytical lens of geopolitics. Geopolitics is the science of sketching out long-term scenarios of rise and fall. Their plot lines are always clear: one country dominates the world for a century or so before suffering

a reversal as it becomes exhausted and discredited.

A brilliant example of this approach is historian Paul Kennedy's famous 1987 book, *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, which continues to set the terms of debate to this day. As he recounts, Spain was the hegemon from the mid-1500s to the mid-1600s, followed by France in the eighteenth century, Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States after 1945. The implication, according to this long-term framework, is that it is now China's turn. Often, a transition from one great power or superpower to the next will produce tensions and wars, since the old declining power will try to resist and frustrate the challenger's rise. But this trend creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: in each of Kennedy's historical case studies, the demise of the great power was hastened by military conflict.

In the current context, the "rise and fall" of the Sino-American relationship follows from almost symmetrical fears on each side. Americans accuse China of systematically subverting the US-led rules-based

international order, stealing technology and intellectual property, crossing red lines with spy balloons, hacking government agencies, and deploying disinformation to erode confidence in the US political system.

It is easy to forget that in the 1980s and early 1990s, US worries about unfair industrial competition from Japan were so pronounced that well-known commentators were publishing books with titles like *The Coming War with Japan*. When the Japanese asset-price bubble burst in 1991, many Japanese suspected a US conspiracy, owing to the role that US policy had played in Japan's unsustainable accumulation of debt in the 1980s. It is easy enough to update this scenario for the current context. After all, wasn't China's big asset-price surge in the 2010s partly the result of the loose US monetary regime after the global financial crisis?

The sad truth is that both narratives are poor guides to the policy predicaments in the present. When thinking about the long term, policymakers must avoid the siren call of determinism. There is no historical law dictating how

long reliable institutions can last. British financial supremacy endured for more than two centuries. But that does not mean American financial supremacy will also last for more than two centuries.

Short-term fluctuations are an even worse guide. After all, many countries that have benefited from globalisation have experienced shocks and setbacks, only to adapt and bounce back stronger. A collapsing real-estate bubble need not destroy China, just as the 2008 real-estate collapse did not destroy the US. China might learn from the experience of other rapidly developing Asian economies, such as South Korea, which experienced profound disruptions in the 1970s, in the early 1980s, and again in the late 1990s. On each occasion, it adapted its growth model and prospered.

Everyone wants a simple story. But the real task of historical analysis should be to dismantle deterministic narratives, not to indulge them.

The writer is Professor at Princeton University. ©DRUPAT SYNOURATE

Xi's reluctance

Sir: Chinese President Xi Jinping's reluctance to attend the G20 Summit at Delhi has perturbed one of the world's most powerful leaders to be come face-to-face with some of his global counterparts. Even as political experts are engaged in a guessing game, the general opinion is that Xi is wary of coming across Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the backdrop of Beijing's ties with regional powers such as India and the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Some view his skipping the summit is a step to avoid United States President Joe Biden, and Xi Jinping seems to be in awe of these leaders. He gave a miss to the ASEAN of Jakarta as well because a hostile environment prevailed there due to China's maritime policies. All these show that the Chinese President is loathe to face leaders in summits or on a one-on-one basis which does not bode well for his "powerful" image.

Ganapathi Bhat, AKOLA

### Call for action

Sir: The recently released Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) by the University of Chicago reveals a shocking fact: the average Indian's life expectancy is cut short by approximately 5.5 years due to PM2.5 pollution. This is a worldwide problem caused by tiny particles known as PM2.5, which are hazardous to health. In India, this issue is especially severe. According to the report, Delhi is one of the seven states and union territories in the Northern Plains region, which also includes Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. These areas bear the highest health burden in the country due to particulate pollution. Particularly in heavily polluted areas like Delhi, people face increased health risks and shorter life spans because of polluted air. Reducing PM2.5 pollution is a matter of utmost urgency. It's a substantial concern that calls for immediate actions to better air quality and protect public health. The CPCB's Central Control Board should swiftly review national ambient air quality standards and set ambitious targets to decrease pollutants at their source. Furthermore, it's essential for policymakers, communities, and individuals to collaborate and work together to take prompt actions to achieve a healthier and improved future for our citizens.

Krishna Kumar Vepakomma, HYDERABAD

## Letters

### TO THE EDITOR

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