

NATIONAL WELL-BEING AND THE COUNTS THAT MATTER

As decennial census operations are limited, India needs new ways to know its cumulative human capital and potential

Since India's crimes data recording system is not built to capture subtleties, we do not know what proportion of pregnancies in India start off without the consent of the woman, even though the veil of marriage may cover it legally and culturally. While physical and mental violence can be ascertained by a sensitive clinician, the intergenerational impact of a regretful and anxiety-loaded pregnancy is inadequately quantified by current clinical or epidemiological tools. Measuring and tracking matters of import is critical to individual, community as well as national well-being.

Parameters that are valuable

If we equally value all Indians, we should not stick to decennial census operations alone and count ourselves the way we do — on lines that tell us how we can be sorted and addressed in the political economy; rather, we should do so to understand what our cumulative human capital and potential look like. What is valuable is measured frequently, at different life stages, and at disaggregated levels: birthweights; the heights and weights of our children when they enter school; school completion rates; perhaps the age, height and weight of a first-time pregnant woman; and most definitely, the number of women in the formal workforce who are on a par with men in terms of earning.

Underage marriage of girls must become history. Ensuring secondary school completion of every child, especially girls in rural areas, has far-reaching impact, and needs to be pursued single-mindedly. Provisioning separate, functional toilets and sanitary pads for girls, and teaching boys biology and gender differences (of their own and female) are key enablers to ensuring gender parity in school completion rates. Teaching school-leaving girls and boys the notion of consent, and also the basics of contraception, will ensure that the start of every pregnancy will be a desired and happy one.

Births in the country

Not every pregnancy ends up in a live birth — evocatively captured by the six-word allegedly Hemingway novel: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn”. A desired pregnancy is to be supported by a fully functional health-care system, able to anticipate complications before time and facilitating a safe delivery. Current stillbirth numbers in India are hard to pin down, but after accounting for background losses and abortions, there still remains a distressingly large number of still births, sometimes mis-recorded as early neonatal deaths.

Despite the trend towards nuclear families, pregnancies in India still are familial events — outcomes are eagerly anticipated by more than just the parents, and stillbirths are a rude end to many fond wishes. A young, short and under-schooled woman is more likely to have a bad pregnancy outcome, or, a smaller than expected baby.

A birth weight is much more than a number — it is a complex outcome, telling of how well the woman and her family eats, her status among them, and also of any particular condition that the individual mother or newborn child has. Tracking average birthweights by district and subdistrict on a regular basis is a fair proxy for food security, the status of women and the delivery of primary health care. For a nation with plans to assign digital health IDs to everyone, this is not a tall ask — what is additionally required is the making of this moving average data live and visible to the people and their government. It should also put to rest all debate about whether some Indians are born more equal than others.

Height-weight proportions

A good start is a great advantage, but easily squandered if subsequent growth and development are blighted by the lack of adequate nutrition, first exclusively from the mother's

breast, then through locally available weaning and complementary foods; and repeated bouts of vaccine preventable or easily treatable illnesses. Parental hopes of a child growing up, going to school and becoming successful hit a major hurdle if the height-weight proportions at age five are not normal. Ensuring this marker is recorded for every child who enters school will also allow for a correlation with birthweights at the district level — giving a better understanding of multi-dimensional property.

If India is to be truly taking advantage of its large birth cohort in the form of a demographic dividend, then the correlate of birthweight and five-year height-weight needs to be reviewed at the highest political levels regularly. It reflects the physical and cognitive nurture of human capital that the country can bank on for its future. Every child born in India is to be considered a ratna – a jewel and handled as such; some of them will go on to get the formal Bharat Ratna tag eventually.

Improved learning

Schooling is a socio-economic and gender parity springboard if school completion rates show no gender, rural-urban or parental income divides. Consequently, India may not only bring down its maternal mortality ratios but also improve neonatal and under five mortality rates, through delayed marriages and exercising of reproductive choices by its empowered young women.

Grading cognitively ill-equipped or ill-taught children on standardised tests is as much a waste of effort as letting large numbers of young people graduate through courses which are hopelessly out of sync with the expectations of the job interview board. The recently unveiled new education policy seeks to remedy this. It will be a while before we can measure any of the talked about, and hopefully intended, outputs or impact of this policy.

Unimaginative teaching of anaemic children is a double whammy, partially addressed through protein rich mid-day meals. Deworming, school toilets, sanitary pads and bicycles for girls are progressive policy steps in the right direction; adding remedial training and affirmative feedback for teachers will be transformative. With better cognitive capacities and supportive environment, the stress of learning reduces, and outcomes improve.

Improved learning should translate into better completion rates at post-secondary and baccalaureate levels but need not necessarily correspond to universal, meaningful employment. It is for the government and the corporate world to make opportunities and workplaces happen, irrespective of their gender. Right economic stimuli, anticipating potential workplace disruptions, supporting reskilling and retraining, and decriminalising entrepreneurial failure will go a long way in eliminating work and livelihood-related anxieties making their way back home as domestic violence. As a society, we need to understand and make leeway for failure, and not stigmatise it, whether at school in early childhood, during miscarriages of pregnancies, or when career and business decisions go awry. Stigma erodes self-worth and kills silently.

Timely data helps

Together, these measurements will tell us far more about where we are, and where we as a nation will go. The tools to get these measurements exist; we just have to see them in real time to be able to take corrective actions where needed. Public health is about people, their continued well-being, and not just about controlling disease outbreaks. Data helps; timely, disaggregated, multidimensional data helps immensely in ensuring collective well being, physical, mental and social. People are India's greatest possession and will remain so for the conceivable future, provided they are in a state of well-being. An ill-educated, anxious population is a tinderbox, capable of self-harm as well as being kindling for malice-driven mobilisation. Addressing this requires a whole of life and whole of society approach, and measuring the outcomes that matter, regularly. Hopefully the 2017 edition of the national health policy and the new education policy unveiled last month will be the twin rails that India rides towards a true demographic dividend.

Meanings of Difficult Words

- ❖ **well-being** (noun) – healthy state/condition.
- ❖ **decennial** (adjective) – recurring every ten years.
- ❖ **census** (noun) – an official survey (of a population).
- ❖ **cumulative** (adjective) – collective, aggregate, total.
- ❖ **human capital** (noun) – intangible collective resources (like skills, education, knowledge, experience, capacity & attributes) possessed by individuals and groups within a given population.
- ❖ **potential** (noun) – possibilities, potentiality, prospects.
- ❖ **subtlety** (noun) – precision, detail, minuteness.
- ❖ **proportion** (noun) – share, part, portion, ratio.
- ❖ **start off** (phrasal verb) – begin to happen.
- ❖ **consent** (noun) – agreement, assent, permission/approval.
- ❖ **veil** (noun) – layer, screen, shield, curtain.
- ❖ **ascertain** (verb) – find out, understand, recognize, get to know.
- ❖ **clinician** (noun) – physician, medical practitioner, doctor (of medicine).
- ❖ **intergenerational** (adjective) – relating to several generations.
- ❖ **regretful** (adjective) – sad, sorrowful, unhappy/ dismal.
- ❖ **epidemiological** (adjective) – relating to the study and analysis of the distribution, patterns and determinants of health and disease conditions in defined populations.
- ❖ **quantify** (verb) – measure the quantity of.
- ❖ **import** (noun) – importance, significance.
- ❖ **stick to** (verb) – abide by, hold to, comply with.
- ❖ **so (as) to** (phrase) – in order to.
- ❖ **disaggregated** (adjective) – separated, divided; relating to a disaggregated data; (disaggregated data is a data that has been broken down by detailed sub-categories, for example by marginalised group, gender, region or level of education).
- ❖ **perhaps** (adverb) – maybe, possibly.
- ❖ **workforce** (noun) – workers, employees.
- ❖ **on a par with** (phrase) – comparable with, equivalent to, as equal to.
- ❖ **far-reaching** (adjective) – widespread, sweeping, extensive, important, significant.
- ❖ **pursue** (verb) – engage in, conduct, follow.
- ❖ **single-mindedly** (adverb) – determinedly, resolutely, dedicatedly.
- ❖ **provision** (verb) – provide, give, furnish.
- ❖ **enabler** (noun) – something that makes something else possible; facilitator.
- ❖ **gender parity** (noun) – gender equality; It is the view that everyone should receive equal treatment and not be discriminated against based on their gender.
- ❖ **notion** (noun) – idea, belief, concept.
- ❖ **contraception** (noun) – artificial methods which are used to prevent pregnancy; birth control.
- ❖ **live birth** (noun) – a birth at which a child is born alive.
- ❖ **evocatively** (adverb) – expressively, poignantly, in a manner to bring memories, feelings.
- ❖ **allegedly** (adverb) – supposedly, purportedly, reportedly.
- ❖ **anticipate** (verb) – expect, foresee, predict.
- ❖ **facilitate** (verb) – make easy, make possible; assist, help/aid.
- ❖ **stillbirth** (noun) – the death or loss of a baby before or during delivery.
- ❖ **pin down** (phrasal verb) – identify something precisely.
- ❖ **account for** (phrasal verb) – constitute, make up, comprise, form.
- ❖ **abortion** (noun) – medical termination of pregnancy.
- ❖ **distressingly** (adverb) – upsettingly, worryingly, affectingly.
- ❖ **neonatal** (adjective) – relating to newborn children.
- ❖ **nuclear family** (noun) – a family group consisting of two parents and their children (one or more).
- ❖ **much more** (phrase) – a lot more.
- ❖ **food security** (noun) – it is defined as a condition that exists when “all people, at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

- ❖ **proxy** (noun) – a figure that can be used to represent the value of something in a calculation.
- ❖ **blight** (verb) – disrupt, afflict, ruin, spoil, destroy.
- ❖ **nutrition** (noun) – the process in which necessary food is received/obtained by the living things to grow and be healthy.
- ❖ **primary health care** (noun) – it is a whole-of-society approach to health and well-being centred on the needs and preferences of individuals, families and communities. It addresses the broader determinants of health and focuses on the comprehensive and interrelated aspects of physical, mental and social health and well being.
- ❖ **tall ask** (noun) – difficult demand.
- ❖ **squander** (verb) – waste, mispend, misuse.
- ❖ **subsequent** (adjective) – following, ensuing, succeeding, successive.
- ❖ **weaning** (noun) – the process of gradually introducing an infant human or another mammal to what will be its adult diet while withdrawing the supply of its mother's milk; weaning simply refers to the termination of breast feeding.
- ❖ **bout** (noun) – spell, round, cycle.
- ❖ **vaccine** (noun) – a biological preparation that improves immunity to a particular disease.
- ❖ **hurdle** (noun) – obstacle, difficulty, problem, impediment.
- ❖ **correlation** (noun) – similarity, parallel, resemblance.
- ❖ **multi-dimensional** (adjective) – involving several dimensions (aspects/features).
- ❖ **cohort** (noun) – group; a group/division of people.
- ❖ **demographic dividend** (noun) – it is defined as a boost in economic productivity that occurs when there are growing numbers of people in the workforce relative to the number of dependents (or) it is the accelerated development that can arise when a population has a relatively large proportion of working-age people coupled with effective human capital investment.
- ❖ **correlate** (noun) – consequence, result, outcome, effect, repercussion.
- ❖ **reflect** (verb) – indicate, show, reveal, exhibit.
- ❖ **cognitive** (adjective) – mental, emotional, intellectual, rational.
- ❖ **nurture** (noun) – encouragement, promotion, fostering, development, boosting.
- ❖ **bank on** (phrasal verb) – rely on, depend on; anticipate, expect.
- ❖ **go on to** (phrasal verb) – proceed.
- ❖ **tag** (noun) – label, identification, identity.
- ❖ **eventually** (adverb) – in the end, in due course, after some time.
- ❖ **socio-economic** (equality) (noun) – it describes a theoretical circumstance or goal where all people have an equal social (position, rank, or importance) and economic (income, pay, and wealth) status.
- ❖ **springboard** (noun) – something which provides support or motivation to do a particular course of action.
- ❖ **consequently** (adverb) – as a result, therefore, for this reason, because of that.
- ❖ **bring down** (phrasal verb) – knock down, tear down, pull down, demolish/topple.
- ❖ **maternal mortality** (noun) – maternal death; the death of a woman while pregnant.
- ❖ **mortality** (noun) – (in a particular time/for a cause) the rate/number of death.
- ❖ **empowered** (adjective) – authorized, allowed, entitled.
- ❖ **cognitively** (adverb) – reasonably, coherently, logically, sensibly.
- ❖ **ill-equipped** (adjective) – not ready, unready, off guard.
- ❖ **ill-taught** (adjective) – misguided, ill-advised.
- ❖ **standardised** (adjective) – systematized, regulated.
- ❖ **out of sync** (phrase) – out of agreement.
- ❖ **unveil** (verb) – present, disclose, make public.
- ❖ **seek** (verb) – try, aim, attempt.
- ❖ **remedy** (verb) – rectify, retrieve, solve.
- ❖ **anaemic** (adjective) – feeble, weak, poor.
- ❖ **double whammy** (noun) – (two fold) problem, difficulty, issue/setback.
- ❖ **deworming** (noun) – periodic treatment with anthelmintic medicine to destroy parasitic worms. (treatment to destroy worms in the intestine).
- ❖ **affirmative** (adjective) – supportive, reassuring, positive, favourable.
- ❖ **transformative** (adjective) – life-changing, forward-thinking, progressive.

- ❖ **stress** (noun) – pressure, burden, tension, strain, anxiety.
- ❖ **baccalaureate** (noun) – bachelor’s degree.
- ❖ **necessarily** (adverb) – inevitably, certainly, surely, undoubtedly.
- ❖ **correspond to** (verb) – relate to, conform to, correlate to.
- ❖ **irrespective of** (adjective) – notwithstanding, without regard for, regardless of.
- ❖ **stimuli** (noun) – stimulus, incentive, impetus/ fillip.
- ❖ **disruption** (noun) – radical/complete change.
- ❖ **entrepreneurial** (adjective) – enterprising; relating to the capacity and willingness to develop, organize and manage a business venture along with any of its risks in order to make a profit.
- ❖ **decriminalise** (verb) – make legal, legitimate, validate.
- ❖ **go a long way** (phrase) – achieve great success; to be helpful for a significant amount of time.
- ❖ **livelihood** (noun) – means of making a living with the basic necessities (food, water, shelter and clothing); means of support, subsistence, source of income.
- ❖ **anxiety** (noun) – concern/stress/tension, unease, apprehension, disquiet.
- ❖ **make (one’s) way back** (phrase) – to progress back toward one’s point of origin.
- ❖ **leeway** (noun) – freedom, scope/ flexibility, latitude/elbow room.
- ❖ **stigmatise** (verb) – condemn, denounce, criticize; discredit, dishonour, disgrace.
- ❖ **awry** (adjective) – amiss, wrong.
- ❖ **stigma** (noun) – shame, disgrace, dishonour, discredit; Stigma occurs when society labels someone as disgraced or less desirable. Stigma involves three elements; a lack of knowledge (ignorance), negative attitudes (prejudice) and people behaving in ways that disadvantage the stigmatised person (discrimination).
- ❖ **miscarriage** (noun) – spontaneous abortion, stillbirth.
- ❖ **erode** (verb) – (gradually) deteriorate, destroy, spoil.
- ❖ **self-worth** (noun) – self-esteem, confidence, self-respect.
- ❖ **far more** (phrase) – a lot more, much more.
- ❖ **public health** (noun) – the branch of medicine handling public health; public health is also the science of protecting and improving the health of people and their communities through education, policy making and research for disease and injury prevention.
- ❖ **outbreak** (noun) – sudden appearance/ occurrence, outburst, flare-up.
- ❖ **timely** (adjective) – at the right time, prompt, punctual.
- ❖ **immensely** (adverb) – extremely, exceedingly, especially.
- ❖ **possession** (noun) – asset, thing, article.
- ❖ **conceivable** (adjective) – imaginable, credible, possible, admissible.
- ❖ **provided** (conjunction) – if, on condition that, given.
- ❖ **ill-educated** (adjective) – untaught, illiterate, unlettered, ill-informed, ignorant.
- ❖ **anxious** (adjective) – worried, concerned, distressed, bothered.
- ❖ **tinderbox** (noun) – The word ‘tinder’ is normally used to refer to any highly inflammable object material, like dry grass, wood, straw, etc. that can be used to start a fire quickly. Tinderbox is a small metal box that contained tinder and all the other things required to light a fire. It (figuratively) means something catches fire & burn down very quickly.
- ❖ **malice** (noun) – ill will, hostility, hatred, evil intentions.
- ❖ **mobilisation** (noun) – the act of bringing people/resources together for a particular cause.