Can More be Done?

India was one of the first countries to establish a national population policy and family planning program to reduce the heavy social and economic burden of rampant population growth. And yet, according to United Nations predictions, by the year 2050 India could have more people than China. Can more be done to further slow the growth?

A recent Indian government survey suggests that it can. Specifically, the 1985 USAID-supported survey highlights three measures that could contribute significantly to the success of population policy and family planning goals. They are:

- **Increase the age at marriage for women:** Discouraging teenage marriage usually reduces the number of children a woman will bear over the period of her life in which she is fertile.

- **Lengthen the interval between births:** Persuading parents to space their children further apart results in smaller family size and may improve the health of both mothers and children.

- **Improve communications:** People are not always aware of the adverse effects of young age at marriage and short birth intervals. Improved communications—especially between government functionaries at the grass-roots level and the people they serve—are vital if social attitudes and individual knowledge and practices concerning marriage and childbearing are to change.

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Early Age at Marriage

It is quite common in India (and in other South Asian countries) for girls to marry while still very young. However, the medical risks and economic and social burdens of marrying too soon are many. During their early teens, most girls become physiologically capable of having babies.
But medical evidence shows that young motherhood can result in physical and emotional health problems for mother and child. And government, which often must bear the social and medical costs, may be left literally holding the baby.

The younger a girl’s age at marriage:
- the younger she’s likely to get pregnant, therefore:
- the more babies she can have over her lifetime, therefore:
- the higher the country’s population growth rate.

Percentage of currently married women who preferred a LARGE FAMILY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SC/ST (Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe)</th>
<th>Non SC/ST</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bharuch</td>
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<td>Panchmahal</td>
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In two of the districts in Gujarat surveyed, many currently married women thought that large families were desirable, but in other districts the majority favored smaller families. Overall, the government’s promotion of smaller family-size ideals has been relatively successful.

Teenage marriage disadvantages girls and society in other ways, too. It almost invariably takes them out of school, cutting short their education and intellectual growth and making it harder to achieve government goals to broaden the role of women in development. Encouraging and assisting girls to stay longer in school can benefit both the individual and society in many ways. Not least, it helps delay marriage and childbearing, thus lowering the birth rate.

Birth Intervals

Simple arithmetic shows that a woman who gives birth once every two years can have many more babies over a lifetime than a woman who spaces her children over a longer period. In some parts of India, the survey shows that short birth intervals are the norm. Intervals of less than three years between pregnancies were common in the districts surveyed. In one district almost 80 percent of the women had babies at less than three-year intervals.

The answer to short birth intervals is child spacing through contraceptive methods. But current knowledge about the pill and the IUD is very low. Women (and their husbands) should be given information about the available methods and encouraged to adopt them.

Percentage of currently married women who preferred AGE AT FIRST PREGNANCY to be below 18 years (Parbhani, Maharashtra)

In the Parbhani district of Maharashtra, more than 80 percent of the currently married women were pregnant by the time they were eighteen; and about half thought this a good thing. This attitude was shared by many female health workers, highlighting the lack of awareness that early first pregnancies cause health problems for mother and child and are a factor contributing to high fertility.

Getting the Message Across

One of the survey’s most startling findings was that health service providers, community leaders, and development functionaries at or near
the grass roots in the districts surveyed were not themselves fully aware of the consequences of early marriage and short birth intervals. Sometimes, in fact, they were found to be less well informed than the population they serve. For many inhabitants of the districts surveyed, especially those not reached by the mass media, such functionaries are the sole link with government. It is essential that they know tribal to communicate, and how to communicate it.

The Indian government has already begun to retrain its health workers and other functionaries to enhance their role as communicators. This should do much to counter the attitudes, practices, and lack of knowledge that contribute to India's population growth.

Of the mass media, radio's reach is the most extensive, though it does not extend everywhere. Perhaps more use could be made of this medium also for getting messages across to the people.

**Conclusion**

Indian officials have worked and are working hard to solve their country's population and development problems, including the issues of young motherhood, childspacing, and communications highlighted here. The valuable lessons uncovered by the Indian government survey can also be profitably applied in other developing countries seeking to curb their population growth.

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**Percentage of currently married women who LISTENED TO THE RADIO**

![Graph showing percentage of currently married women who listened to the radio by district and SC/ST status.]

Communication is a key factor in imparting knowledge and shaping attitudes. In most project districts, radio was the mass medium that reached the largest number of currently married women. In some districts—Sirs in Haryana, for example—the reach was almost 100 percent, though it was much lower in others.
For More Information...

*Asia-Pacific Population and Policy* brings condensed reports based on research conducted at the East-West Population Institute or by Institute researchers to the attention of policymakers and others perhaps unfamiliar with the terminology of population specialists. More detailed information about the topic of the present report can be found in *The Communication Needs Assessment: An Executive Summary*, prepared by N.R. Yadav, Saramma Thomas Mathai, and James A. Palmore. Published in 1985 by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Write:

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