

India's billionth: Forecast bleak

by [Vatsala Vedantam](#) in the [September 27, 2000](#) issue

This past May, India's population crossed the one billion mark, according to the country's registrar general and census commissioner. The billionth citizen of this ancient land entered a country with 40 political parties and 24 official languages, each spoken by more than a million people.

If the baby is lucky it is a boy. If a girl, she has a smaller chance of survival. Feticide, infanticide or, later, forced suicide are still the lot of many Indian girls. Kitchen fires sometimes burn too brightly as a result of all those "accidents." Sons bring prosperity to a household—if they are not among the 110 out of every 1,000 live births who do not live to celebrate their first birthday. Many children succumb to diarrhea, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, measles and malnutrition. India has the world's highest infant mortality rates. But it is one of the 183 member nations which have ratified the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

This child has been born into a land which suffers droughts, floods, earthquakes and other natural calamities with dreadful regularity and stoic acceptance. These disasters, which wipe out thousands of people, seem to be nature's own population control mechanisms. India's granaries overflow with food, but its distribution processes leave thousands starving. The country has made headlines lately with the resurgence of preventable diseases such as plague, malaria, dengue fever and tuberculosis. India allots less than 1 percent of its gross domestic product to health, while spending several times that on defense. So what? We now belong to that exclusive club whose members can flex their nuclear muscles at the world's most powerful nations.

In villages, 800 million have no access to safe drinking water. In cities, 7,000 citizens are cramped into every kilometer. We make do with half a million elementary schools even though we add 48,000 people to our population every day. But these matters do not unduly worry us or our national leaders, who want to keep us at our present rate of reproduction—18 million a year—because we are their precious vote banks. Whether their colors are saffron, white or green, they are all the same. We

keep them in power, and they keep us illiterate, ignorant and prolific.

The billionth citizen was no doubt born to parents who cannot read or write, and who walk several kilometers every day to collect drinking water and firewood. The birth of yet another daughter does not bring cheer into their drab lives. It only gives them one more mouth to feed and one more drain on their meager resources. She may be married off before she turns five in exchange for some rice. Many years ago, the Shardha Act was passed to prohibit such marriages. But the authors of such legislative measures do not know what hunger means. They do not understand that in times of drought and famine it is the children who rescue their parents.

In any case, her parents will not send her to school, notwithstanding India's universal primary education program. She will become the surrogate mother to her siblings while her parents go to work. Her brothers are wage earners too. They clean the floor in eateries where their employers give them the leftovers and their parents the wages. They don't mind, since without those leftovers they would either starve or be rummaging in garbage dumps for stale food scraps.

When they are older, the brothers will be sent to work in garages or filling stations. If their luck holds, they might find work in a match factory, where they work for 14 hours a day to augment the family income. The opportunities are endless in this land of a 390-million labor force. Parents are wise not to waste their children's precious childhoods in schools without buildings, blackboards or adequate teachers. Such an education would leave them unemployed and unemployable.

But some of India's children have a much more hopeful future. India's cities contain towering buildings, sleek corporate offices and five-star hotels. High tech parks jostle with specialty hospitals. Prestigious scientific institutions rub shoulders with savvy universities. In the cities that great Indian diaspora called the middle class lives and makes a fortune—luxury apartments flaunt the latest gizmos, and people ride in air-conditioned limousines and drink mineral water. The children of these people speak English and wear Levis and Nikes. They eat Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's hamburgers, indulge in imported whiskey and Gold Flake cigarettes. They are the new generation kids, the benefactors of a new liberal economic policy. They lap up the discarded goodies from other countries.

There are other fortunate ones, too, like the management gurus and the dot.com prodigies who are exploding on our information highway. They are going places with their software skills and Web-site wizardry. The brilliant sons and daughters win

distinctions at their universities, gain admission to Ivy League schools and do their country proud. Countries like America grab these professionals. May more and more of India's citizens have the opportunity to become part of that talented group.