

Book Review

Sri Lanka: Re-emergence of Youth Bulge

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Introduction

Demographic and social phenomena are interconnected and often, even interdependent. Any significant change in the population composition of a country has social implications. Similarly, any major shift in society can also have demographic consequences.

This is also what social scientists in Sri Lanka have observed over the last 150 years since the first population census was conducted in the country in 1871. Yet, this is not just the experience of Sri Lanka, but in the rest of the world as well.

The book written by Professor Indralal de Silva, under the title mentioned above draws our attention to a demographic phenomenon that he has looked at closely, namely, the emergence and reemergence of a youth bulge in post-independence Sri Lanka, and its implications for economic and social development.

This book also provides a wealth of other information on diverse aspects of the Sri Lankan population, including demographic trends based on empirical data from population censuses, population projections, and other surveys conducted in recent years.

The data presented in the book helps us understand the significance of the youth bulge in particular, and other demographic phenomena in general. In this brief review of the book, I intend to make some comments on the phenomenon of the youth bulge in terms of its sociological implications.

As is well known, the size and the distribution of Sri Lanka's population have changed steadily and in a highly significant manner over the last century. Country's population increased tenfold since the time of the first census of 1871. 2.4 million population then was also not evenly distributed across the country and was largely concentrated in the southwestern region of the island, including the central hills.

But with the steadily increasing population, inhabitants of the island moved into all parts of the country, particularly the hitherto sparsely populated regions of the North-central and Southern regions.

Emergence of youth bulge

As the data shows, Sri Lanka's population at the time of independence, had already increased threefold to over 6 million, and this trend continued unabated to reach 12 million in 1971.

It is during this short period, the first youth bulge emerged as a significant demographic and social phenomenon, but what mattered most was not just the numerical expansion of the young population, but the social and spatial characteristics of this highly significant age cohort.

In the remaining part of this review, I wish to discuss how significant this numerical increase has been from a wider socio-political perspective.

As mentioned above, the youth bulge in Sri Lankan population was evident around the time of 1971 population census. It is also highly significant that the first violent youth uprising led by the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), a left leaning radical youth-led political party, was largely concentrated in Southern Sri Lanka. A great deal has been written about the social, economic and political background of the 1971 youth uprising. So, what I want to highlight is that the relatively large size of the youth population alone was not the reason for the uprising, but it is their social, economic, and political characteristics that determined their mobilization and participation in the uprising.

As the data on the age structure of the Sri Lankan population shows, the youth bulge that emerged after independence, persisted till the 1980s and the youth demand for not only decent work and better prospects for their future but also social and political reforms persisted over time without much change. As is well known, youth led uprisings in the country emerged not just in the South, but also in the Tamil speaking Northeast as well. What should be noted here is that it is not simply the youth bulge that contributed to the above developments. In fact, youth revolted against the Sri Lankan state from time to time, primarily due to the nature of economic, social, and political developments that took place in the country, preparing the ground for increasing unrest among young people, in particular, the underprivileged and the marginalized among them.

Professor De Silva, in his book provides data drawn from many sources on not only diverse demographic phenomena, but many other aspects of the young population

aged 15-29 years such as their education, socio-economic profile, employment, unemployment, etc. as well. In this regard, access to educational opportunities and preferred employment has been a critical factor because these shaped the life chances of Youth in Sri Lanka.

There has been considerable research and writing on youth by social scientists in the recent past (eg. Hettige, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2008, 2014, 2016; Mayer, 2000; Oberst, 1991; Obeyesekere, 1974; Lakshman, 1992). As is well known, the rapid expansion of the public education system in the country following political independence, particularly after the introduction of free education enabled more and more young people to acquire educational qualifications required for more stable and lucrative white-collar employment, particularly in the state sector. On the other hand, the changes in the education system and the slow expansion of employment opportunities gave rise to many issues that adversely affected the future prospects of young people leading to a widening gap between their rising aspirations on one hand and the opportunities available for them on the other. These and other developments also created unequal opportunities for education and employment among youth in the country, particularly between rural and urban areas. This tendency became more pronounced in the 1980's following economic liberalization that led to increasing educational inequality (Hettige, 1996).

Conclusion

A large youthful population in a country can be considered as a great asset in view of their potential contribution to economic and social development. Yet, as widespread youth unemployment and underemployment, as well as the increased discontent among youth have shown in the recent past, an aggrieved and agitated young population can lead to social and political instability, adversely affecting the development process itself. In fact, it is due to these developments that Sri Lanka has not been able to make best use of the youth bulge as a human resource for the benefit of both youth themselves as well as the country as a whole. Some of the data on education, employment and unemployment presented and analyzed in the book shed considerable light on this issue.

Last but not least, the large body of data presented and analyzed under different chapters in this book covers many demographic and other aspects of Sri Lanka. It is a rich source of information that can be used by researchers, teachers and students for educational and research purposes. As for policy makers, this book can be a useful source of information needed for policy analysis and policy development, in particular, long term economic and social planning. For instance, trends in internal and international migration of young people in Sri Lanka indicate the need for intersectoral

planning economic and social development. Yet, long term, inter-sectoral planning received little attention from successive governments in recent decades in comparison to the period immediately following the country's political independence.

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