

Population Control: Beyond State Policy

by

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Overpopulation as the source of many problems plaguing the world, particularly the Third World, has by now acquired the status of a truism in the minds of most people. And those who think in this vein, almost invariably the better off and the well-fed, blame the breeding habits of the poor for overpopulation. From this premise, they go on to advocate that governments must implement strong policies to curb population growth.

The appropriate size of population for a country, or indeed for our planet as a whole, is a fuzzy concept. Simply to assume that the Third World is overpopulated is a sign of lazy thinking. Whether a country is overpopulated or not depends on the resources available to its people and the consumption pattern of different segments among the people. For the same resource base, if it is populated by people consuming at high levels, even if the size of that population is small, the country is overpopulated. Thus, Western countries are heavily overpopulated in that they consume well beyond what their own resource bases would provide. The reason why they do not have the "problem" of overpopulation is because they have easy access

to the resources of other countries. It is not that they depend on the food being produced in other countries; the food produced in Western countries depends critically on petroleum (for agricultural machinery) and its derivatives (fertilisers, pesticides, and so on) from other countries.

The rich and the middle classes in Third World countries, who blame the breeding habits of the poor, consume much more than their fair share of the country's resources. Yet they believe that everyone would be so much better off if only there were not so many poor around eating up the available resources. Very often, despite their smaller numbers, *they* are the ones who create the problem of "overpopulation". Their common defence

that they can "afford" to consume at high levels is no more than sophistry because they partake a high share from a pool of resources which is limited at any given time.

In Western countries, it is often the inability to grasp large numbers which gives rise to the notion that the Third World is over populated. Most Western countries have populations well below the one hundred million mark; in most cases one can count it in tens of millions or even less. So when confronted with much larger figures, the immediate reaction is to imagine "teeming millions" of "milling", "jostling" and "disorderly" masses of humanity. The fear is that these masses will poach on their goodies and will create trouble for their orderly world. However, given the fact that the rich and middle classes, within countries and globally, will continue to control and consume a much larger proportion of resources, there is and will continue to be a "problem of overpopulation". The poor will starve or suffer from severe malnutrition, be diseased, take to crime and may even rise in rebellion. It is the last three consequences which the better off fear the most. Diseases among the poor have the nasty habit of spreading to the rich. Crime threatens their power as well.



Hence the almost unanimous demand for a state policy to curb population growth, obviously, of the poor. (I can "afford" many children but the country cannot afford the same number of theirs. The government must do something about it!)

A supplementary truism which has gained currency over the last four or five decades is that the poor breed more because they are superstitious and ignorant. Superstition (God has given children; He will take care of them) makes them have as many children as come along naturally. But even if the poor were not to want many children, they do not know how to control the births. Such reasoning makes the policy-line simple: strike at the superstition and make the parents understand the responsibility for their fertility; at the same time give them the information and the methods for controlling births.

Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is that the size of the family simply does not lend itself to policy-making by the state. No government policy, short of extreme coercion, can influence what is essentially a very private matter. Government efforts to *increase* the population in several European countries through a range of incentives have not succeeded. Even coercion does not work. The erstwhile Romanian government not only banned all contraceptives from Romania in a desperate attempt to increase the population but forced all women of

reproductive age to undergo monthly gynaecological tests to ensure that they were not secretly preventing pregnancies or getting abortions done. That policy largely failed. Contraceptives were smuggled into Romania at high risk and abortions could be obtained from sympathetic or corrupt doctors at a price. Romania's population did go up but not as much as Ceausescu desired. Moreover, many unwanted babies were abandoned by parents and had to be sent to orphanages. In the Soviet Union, a woman who gave birth to seven children was honoured with the title Of "Heroine Mother of the Soviet Union"; few heroines emerged.

It works just as badly for decreasing the population. It is just as difficult to decrease the population as to increase it. The draconian measures implemented in China have succeeded only in urban centres. Urban popula-

tions grow more slowly over years anyway but for different reasons and in any case, the "one child" policy is the most unpopular policy in China and is proving unworkable, particularly in the countryside. In Chinese villages, many births go unreported with helpful officials turning a blind eye. Some prefer to pay the penalties for having more children. Forced abortions have been reported but are certainly not the norm. The Chinese press is full of complaints about family planning being ignored by the rural people.

For the middle classes and above, children are a net liability until they reach a productive age and even thereafter they are often not an asset. But for the poor, most often, they are a net asset, helping around the house, gathering fuel or working at odd jobs to bring in some supplementary income. Older children look after the young ones and the grown up ones promise an insurance for old age.

Thus, it is not "superstition" but reason which explains the preference of the poor for larger families. They are as much governed by reason to have several as the better off classes are to have few.

Ignorance as the cause of having large families makes little sense. Regardless of how uneducated they may be, the poor are well aware of biological facts. Things would have been vastly different if reproduction were to be left purely to biology. Broadly speaking, a fertile woman has a reproductive span of some 30 years (15 to



45). Theoretically, she can conceive once every year; even if breast-feeding delays conception, she should be able to conceive every 18 months or so. If things were to be left purely to biological processes, every fertile woman should, in theory, conceive some 20 times during her life. But the fact is that at no time in historical memory, in not a single society has such an average been recorded. Rare, individual cases apart, the average number of conceptions has been much lower and that of births even lower. For that to happen, people have practised both social methods (keeping the couples apart) as well as biological/mechanical methods, however crude.

So, the popularly advanced reasons for “overpopulation” and the remedies suggested do not really wash. Even the reasons I have advanced above for the small size of middle class and rich families and the large size of poor families are not historically sustainable. The rise and shrinkage of populations seem to follow cycles in history which are extremely complex phenomena, little understood so far. In China, where population records have been maintained for more than a millennium, the population has cyclically risen and fallen. The quality of administration producing prosperity/poverty, famines/good crops, rebellions/stability, floods, have been advanced as explanations for the rise and fall, but not too satisfactorily. Similarly, the sudden rise of population in Europe from mid-nineteenth century onwards is yet to be satisfactorily explained. It is an illusion to think that there are policy “fixes” which governments can implement to regulate populations.

The final irony is that even if state policies can achieve a one-child norm (less than that, that is, two or three families sharing one child is clearly impossible) the population of an already “overpopulated” country will continue to grow for at least one-and-

a-half generations. This is because overpopulated countries invariably have a high proportion of persons in the reproductive age group. Draconian state policies can only slow down growth, not stop it. And the problem in such societies is the *existing* size of the population in relation to immediately available resources.

A very non-modern conclusion becomes inevitable: there is no immediate solution to the “problem” of overpopulation. (It is non-modern because modernity promises “solutions” to all “problems”.) And “solutions” for the future which are not workable create more problems. For instance, a one child norm, if applicable, would inevitably produce a gender imbalance (unless ruthlessly controlled through forced amniocentesis and forced abortions) with unforeseen consequences. That words like brother, sister, uncle and aunt will disappear from languages may be considered a minor matter but a top-heavy age structure because there are fewer children is surely a serious matter; it has already become a problem in “advanced” countries. And above all, humankind has never faced a situation in which an entire society is made up of persons brought up as single children. Human collectivities have lived through wars, floods, droughts, plagues and other natural calamities. But a collectivity in which every person is a single off-spring threatens to be an unprecedented man made calamity. Only siblinghood can teach truly human sharing; in its absence, there can only be contractual arrangements. A mind-boggling Brave New World for our children and grandchildren.

The truth is that there is no solution to the problem of planned control of populations. And that which has no solution must not be thought in terms of a problem to be solved. Natural death in this sense is not a “problem”; it is a part of the human condition. But humanity has always

attempted to do something to ameliorate things that are beyond solution. We try to prevent premature death, accidental death, cure non-terminal illnesses. Similarly, one can tackle factors attendant upon the gross imbalance between existing resources and the likely size of the population in the immediately foreseeable future. State policy can help but it is primarily a matter of social ethos. A far more equitable distribution of available resources while at the same time expanding the resource base are things which are amenable to policy-making. But the culture of sharing is something which only the society can nurture. Historical experience shows that food supply grows with the rise in population but with a time lag; population growth also slows down in response to depleting food resources but again with a time lag. The modern state can shorten the time lag. Today China grows enough food to feed 1.1 billion people on cultivable land which is 30 percent less than India’s. Japan is, incredibly, self-sufficient in rice production although only 6 percent of its land is under cultivation. There is no proven case of draconian state policies producing rapid decline in population except for a short period and that too in urban concentrations. I have already cited the Chinese example; the fate of Sanjay Gandhi’s policy in India is too recent to need any elaboration. What seems to work in reducing birth rates is a combination of state policy which enables people to obtain the “hardware” (contraceptives, pills) cheaply and easily and social “software” in the form of social responsibility and social awareness, old age security, primary health care and the like. In fact, when the society as a whole becomes aware of the link between the population size and the available resources, the people are motivated to seek the means for establishing a balance between the two. □