



BOOK REVIEW

Science, Population and Development

Ed. Vasant Gowariker,

New Delhi, Unmesh Communications, 7992.

Reviewed by Shiv Vishwanathan

Science, Population and Development was visualised as the focal theme of the Indian Science Congress of 1990. Edited with a long overview by Vasant Gowarikar, it is a collection of 21 essays and a supplement where a sampling of the elite respond to the issues of the seminar. The list of luminaries include Pushpa Bhargav, Dileep Padgaonkar, V.R. Krishna Iyer, Kamal Nath, Raunaq Singh, C. Subramanian Sharda Prasad and Vijay Mallya. The chapter on responses is utterly bland with the usual rhetorical statements. What is significant are the 21 essays organised into five sections. The book is too variegated to summarise but some conclusions and observations are significant.

First is the repeated yen for technological fixes that dominates such programmes. Technology not only becomes a substitute for political reform but becomes essentially reductionistic. As a result of the Malthusian hysteria the complexity of health gets reduced to a one point programme of family planning. Such a pressure not only makes the bureaucracy coercive but a mediocre force.

The essays are also realistic about urbanisation. They honestly claim that urbanisation is inevitable and that

we must plan imaginatively on it. Fascinatingly some even show the urban squatter not as a pathological problem to be displaced but as an innovator. Given that 30 to 50 per cent of them construct their homes without the help of official science and technology, the book raises the question how the administration can be reorganised to help them. The recognition and exploration of this reciprocity is one of the more charming sections of this book.

The book oscillates between grand designs for interbasin transfers of water, fully planned transportation designs for cities and the more demanding issues of peoples' participation. It however stops short of a real discussion of this. It remains eventually a sensitive technocrat's response to population with a few dissenters thrown in. The second part of responses of elite sample should have been dropped and a seminar with ordinary people may have produced a more incisive narrative. In fact, part II conveys that the Indian elite is, as Ashis Nandy puts it, strangely knowledge proof.

In some ways, this book tells us more about scientists and their mindsets than about the sheer increase in numbers.

One of the authors cites the case of the six blind men and the elephant. The fable describes how each man touches a different part of the elephant and comes up with a different description. The problem of

population is seen like the elephant; the six blind men, the professionals reading the problem through the lenses of their own specialisation. In the story, the emphasis is too much on the elephant and too little on the blind men. Who were they and what constituted their blindness? Secondly the picture of the elephant gives the problem a fixity, a tangibility while the problem of population is more protean.

There are two ghosts that haunt any book on India's population. The first is the ghost of Malthus, the second the lumpen figure of Sanjay Gandhi. These ghosts are not too difficult to exorcise. It is easy to dismiss Malthus as bad economics or bad science. It is still easier to say, 'We are not like Sanjay Gandhi'. As a result of these exorcisms, the book seems to shrug of the excesses of the Emergency. The evil, the blatant excesses of the Emergency embodied in Sanjay Gandhi are easy to attack. It is this touch of immaculate innocence that I want to explore.

Karan Singh, epitome of urbane culture, is also a contributor to this book. This man was minister of health and family planning during the Emergency and yet lives untouched and uncontaminated. He coined the slogan 'Development is the best contraceptive', as a sibling to Indira Gandhi's 'Poverty is the real pollution'. Catchy slogans both, they revel in the half truths of the politician. Karan Singh is an important figure because we believe that liberals and

humanists, people who talk of Yoga and Aurobindo and dream of science and technology are somehow above the slum of excesses. There is a split between the minister as politician and the urbane ambassador of culture.

I picked Karan Singh because he is like us liberals and humanists. We are not ready to accept that we are carriers of violence. The career of the family planning programme reflects the general nature of planning. We have first the belief in magic bullets, that a magical piece of technology will solve the problem. When the first bullet fails, we feel there is nothing wrong with the gun. All we need are better bullets and better guns. We move across the spectrum of technological fixes from the Copper T, the IUD, oral pills to the Norplant, encouraged by a host of foreign agencies. When the technology does not deliver, we feel it is the people who are recalcitrant. People lag behind technology and to bridge the lag we have to compel them, thus ushering in the worst excesses of the Emergency. What we did not clearly see was that this violence was the logic of a frame, not merely the work of evil men. If technology fails and people are recalcitrant, then may be it is the bureaucracy that is inefficient. We inaugurate the quota raj, where each health worker has to deliver a certain quota of sterilisations and these body counts are touted as great public successes. If some family planning *dalals* force sterilisation on the unsuspecting tribals, then that is too bad. It is an unintended consequence of development. All this is beautifully chronicled in the book, especially in the insightful essays of Antia, Bannerji and Ashis Bose. These scholars realise that technological change needs social transformation with it, that demographic change needs land reform and literacy and other things. The dissenting voices of Antia,

Bannerji, Bose, Gopalan, and Roy capture this with facility, sensitivity and ease.

However, one is worried about the fate of dissent itself. Bose was head of the demographic unit at IEG, Bannerji of the Centre for Community Health and Medicine; Gopalan was Director of ICMR and now heads the Nutrition Foundation. Antia is an outstanding Volag leader. Their dissent mixes eclectically with the conventional family planning programmes yet fails to touch its core. Is such dissent to remain peripheral, ornamental, to be flourished by the bureaucracy to prove its openness?

There is insight and anger in this book but there is little grief or mourning for the mistakes of the Emergency for which the bureaucratic and scientific elite was also partly responsible.

Now in celebrating the new openness of demographic thought, can it dismiss its former mistakes as pathologies or the problems of an older paradigm? How can we guarantee the new policy does not carry the older seeds of violence? When each new theory is hawked as superior to the old and then tested on the people, how do people protect themselves? An important word is missing from the title of this book and that is *democracy*. The absence is visible. It is the democratisation of science and technology that this book does not face head on.

I can't help but feel that women are treated instrumentally through large sections of the book, as targets, instruments, but rarely as autonomous beings. The Emergency showed that men could not be the target of family planning programmes but women could. As Antia put it, "Since the attack on the manhood of the more aggressive male resulted in the overthrow of government, the attention is now entirely directed to the much harassed and helpless

female, a depraved approach which cannot be adequately condemned on human and moral grounds." It is the woman who suffers all the way, when health is reduced to family planning. Ironically it is the woman as PHC worker who is the most human element in the family planning programme. Even literacy is not something to be celebrated for itself, but something that increases scientific temper and lowers birthrates.

Nature as *complexity* is understood. Gopalan's fascinating observations on the health consequences of the Green Revolution is an outstanding example. The Green Revolution requires fertilizers but present-day fertilizers do not contain the necessary impurities.. The increasing use of such artificial fertilizers decreases the proportion of micronutrients (Zn, Cu, S.Mn) in the food. Doctors prescribe iron tablets for anaemia but iron therapy has an adverse affect on maternal zinc status and the absence of zinc contributes to growth retardation and infant mortality.

The question of a feminist science is ever raised. Feminism has been one of the most creative encounters within Baconian science and needs a hearing for it raises the question how woman's understanding of her body might lead to a more non-violent science, where the issues of birth, death and marriage are not read like production graphs but as parts of a cycle of life.

Among others, *Manushi* Is available at the following

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- Geeta Book Centre
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