

Book Reviews

India's Population—Aspects of Quality and Control by Asok Mitra, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1978.

The two-volume treatise on "India's Population—Aspects of Quality and Control" by Asok Mitra (AM hereafter) [1] is a patient, devoted and scholarly study. Gathering information from various scattered sources, the author presented a unified and valuable interpretation of the data and identified emerging trends.

However, some ideas get repeated and some contradictory statements are also found. It is felt that some more editorial discipline would have rendered the text more crisp and sharpened the focal issues. In the rest of the paper some of these remarks would be exemplified.

General Remarks

We take up first some of the statements made in the text. Consider "... In the Indian Union in 1951 there were 76.1 million women in the same age group compared to 80.6 million men. Females fell short of males by 4.5 millions. This situation should have induced many males to remain bachelors" (p. 48; here and hereafter, all page numbers refer to those in [1].) The inference is much too facile. Obviously, not all would be eager to get married. Where female population is chronically less, the society falls into polyandry; it will certainly not lead to celibacy in some males. The comment that 'there is no bar to older men marrying very young women' is out of place in the given context

Speaking about the women widowed or divorced in the age group 35 to 44, AM comments, "... If the major portion of women of these age groups were remarried to men not older or younger than 1 to 7 years, the fertility performance of the nation as a whole would have declined. But ... on account of the fact that most bachelors or widowers or divorced males would be more likely to marry women of much younger age groups as a matter of social preference and availability, the fertility performance of the nation goes up further." (p. 49, 51.) It cannot be true that a comparatively smaller number of men of

appropriate ages (1 to 7 year difference) would cause an increase in the fertility performance of the nation. That an increase in this number leads fertility performance to decline cannot also be true. Why does the fertility performance go up when men marry girls very much younger? AM also appears to be assuming that fertility depends on women's age only. It depends on a number of factors, including the age of the male.

It is not clear what AM means when he says, "... not only food, nutrition and medical care including better water and air are differentially much more available to the privileged section but that the benefits of protective and preventive public health to which the poorer sections are more or at least equally entitled, are also discriminatingly bestowed." (p. 259).

Preventive public health measures should be enforced with equal vigour whether it is with respect to poor section or the well-to-do. Infections do not respect economic classifications. How can one bestow a public health measure differentially and to the detriment of the poor? The fall-out from any inadequacy will not remain confined to the poor only. Referring to "about 2 million ... (out of about 12 to 13 million births per year) belonging to the more privileged section who can be expected to fend for themselves" AM comments "... it is this 2 million which take the lion's share of what should legitimately go to the other 11 million (p. 259-260)." The very assumption of a public health measure is that it is available to all without discrimination and that it is in the service of the entire community. It is not clear how, for example, a child can take more than its share of a protective health measure; obviously, a rich child does not swallow two doses of a drug where only one is prescribed!

Birth weight as a factor indicative of the possible survival and health of a baby (p. 261) needs more careful scrutiny. The averages for countries are not good-enough measures for comparison. Why, even in a single state, say Andhra Pradesh, people from some districts are tall and well-built and people from an adjoining district are short and not so well-built. It is quite likely that birth weight is related to the genetic ancestry of the baby and broad generalizations are likely to mislead.

The observation that "There is evidence, which needs to be quantified and built up from one decade to another of far heavier mortality and morbidity during and after famines and epidemics among the artisan classes" (p. 421), compared to small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers is unconvincing; no evidence was presented. It may be true that during famines both suffered the most; they being the poorest. It is not clear why and how the epidemics can have different consequences for the persons in the same geographic area and the same socio-economic bracket. One reason could be that the classes of agricultural labour and artisans are not mutually exclusive. The difference could be because they have been counted for one group rather than for the other.

AM advocates an "assured and sustained employment for the bulk of the population at however low levels of income and subsistence. That is one of the levers by which the need for a lower population growth at the national level can be equated with a desire for a lower family size at the household level." (p. 500).

Assured employment is also likely to be enforced employment, which does not normally motivate progress. Granting that such assurance can be given, as AM himself observed later, 'in our kind of poverty any social or economic improvement however small at the lower levels is fraught with pronatalist consequences' (p. 714). The situation has no potential to reverse the trend which occurs only after the household is able to acquire, retain and improve its accumulation of surplusses.

For several years now, the government has been extending assistance to the handloom sector. A fraction of the subsidy which seeps to the actual grass-root, which in this case is the family unit, helps them survive in squalor and abject povert. This is the most fertile environment for malnutrition for mothers and for increased birth-rates of unhealthy babies. Year after year, the total subsidy increases without any noticeable economic improvement of their lot. It may sound cruel but the only way to tackle the situation is to do away with the subsidy altogether and instead to invest in programmes to train them in skills and vocations that can hold out the prospect of employment at higher economic levels.

K A P. studies published in 1982 concerned selected population of the armed forces which is a small a typical group. It is surprizing that it could draw 'a large proportion of the man-power specially trained in demography' (p. 630). It is unfortunate if it drew from family planning personnel. However, it is difficult to understand why family planning studies should get 'stultified' because of '... the lack of significant structural change either in the social, technological, or economic state of the country since 1951 as well as of significant change in the structure of the population such as has happened in Japan' (p. 631).

Obviously, studies are meant to discover similarities and variations and to draw useful conclusions and projections. I should think that differences between India and such other countries as Japan should have made the studies much more important and exciting. It is difficult to agree with AM that it should have 'robbed a great part of our KAP and family planning studies of exciting concern,' whereas, it could have fascinated the students.

It also appears that the phrase 'structural change' was used in different senses at different places in the text, for example, on pages 439, 519, 631, 712.

AM comments, "the sluggishness in the growth of primary and secondary education deprives a very much numerically larger section of the population in the lower income societal brackets of the fruits of any formal education while the acceleration in the growth of university education means that a very

small privileged section of the population receives the plums and is heavily subsidized in their education by the vast majority of the populace." (p. 611, 612).

The sluggishness as AM himself noted was a result of the need for the children to work in order to subsidize family income. When they can hardly subsist where is the question of the unprivileged section subsidizing anything. Higher education generates wealth, part of which is invested in the development of education including higher education.

I do not see how and why intelligentsia alienates itself 'from the interests of the masses' (p. 625); for, it is the intelligentsia itself which has to provide direction and assistance to the masses for their upliftment. The talk of 'antagonistic class interests' in this context is untenable.

Specific Issues : The Status of Women

AM holds that the key to population reduction lies primarily on the substantial improvement in the status of women. However, the observation, "more than even education, employment outside of home has status-raising effects all across the board in almost each index itemized by Mukherjee" (p. 291) would not be valid for the wealthy or for the very poor. About the wife or daughter of a wealthy person in employment, one may hear such comments as : 'why is the lady so greedy to grab a job which could have helped a needy person.' Actually, thus, it has a potential to bring down the status. At the lower end, all members including women and children have to work, merely to subsist.

AM opines 'higher ages at marriage particularly for women, will vastly augment the ranks of family planning acceptors' (p. 369.). I hope and wish that this would be the case. AM does not, however, provide any support to the argument. Legislative measures to push up the minimum age for marriage are unsuccessful for many reasons and perhaps they are useless in the context of family planning. The increase in the median age of marriage (p. 309) noticed now may not go up much further. Other considerations also have their influence. For example, the first child-birth after the age of 25 is more risky both for the mother and for the child. Higher minimum age for marriage would reduce the age-differential between couples and I am not sure that it is desirable beyond a certain level.

Mysore Population Study advances the following as a possible reason for Muslim fertility being higher than that for Hindus : "The separation of the husband and wife after confinement is of much shorter duration for Muslims than for Hindus. . . . Apart from the taboo on sex relations for prolonged periods during lactation, Hindu tradition enjoins abstinences on large number of religious days". The separation in both cases does not extend so much to cut into the period in which the next conception may take place. Fertility is not proportional to the number of intercourses. The taboos and abstinences

tend to intensify the urge or desire rather than suppress it. Usually such tradition bound persons are averse to interfere with the natural reproductive process and end up by having more children.

About the association of sex-ratio with population growth, repeatedly highlighted by AM, it is not clear how the position accorded to women in society influences their numbers, having conceded that there has been no evidence of female infanticide (p. 389). Evidence provided in the book does not prove that the female child was so much more neglected to let it slip into death. As the female child is biologically hardier (p. 391) naturally it is brought to the doctors later in case of illness; no discrimination need be implied.

The opening statement of the chapter on the steady decline of sex-ratio over the last hundred years (p. 371) is not borne out by the Table-II 3.1 of the next two pages. Only in the case of Orissa there has been a steady decrease from 1901 but even here the ratio increased upto 1901. In all other states the ratio fluctuated. Considering the data from 1921, the decrease was steady also in Madhya Pradesh. Comparing tables-III 3.1 and II 2.2, we do not see any relationship between the sex-ratio and the rural growth in population. No relationship is observable when we compare sex-ratios with birth and death rates, during different years, sex-wise birth rates, death rates due to specific diseases etc. given in part-II.

The author appears to believe that the normal sex-ratio should be 1000. There is no *a priori* reason why it should be so. The author notes that for every 100 births of females there are 104-107 male births. It is also conceded that female children are hardier. It is also seen from the tables that fatalities from diseases are smaller in female children. The only extra risk associated with females is that due to pregnancy and child birth, apart from possible differential thresholds of resistance to killer and wasting diseases at all ages. The death-rate differences between female and male population given in Table-III 3.7 do not show any relationship to the sex-ratio. In Orissa and Kerala the sex-ratios have been over 1000 for many years. Yet the two states differ vastly in respect of birth, death and growth rates and in respect of other demographic correlates.

When sex-ratio increased it was attributed to 'relatively high mortality among males', whereas when it fell one of the reasons mentioned was 'neglect' of women (p. 375). The WHO report stated that even with iron, folic acid and B₁₂ supplementation the Indian women continued to be anemic (p. 393). Scientists believed the reason to be lack of safe drinking water, unhygienic conditions etc. But without any justification AM adds, 'But the overriding reason must be the low social and economic status of women' (p. 396). This is an opinion expressed as a conclusion. It is not clear what AM means when he says 'cheapness of female lives and their expendable character' (p. 397). Women do face greater risks in adult life during the reproductive period, which could be fatal for women with poor health and where facilities for child birth

are crude and unhygienic. Poor children of all ages face greater risks and because of their low threshold of tolerance a greater proportion of them succumb to the risks. Surely, we do not describe the situation as 'cheapness of children's lives and their expendable character'. The reason is poverty rather than their being females. Similarly, it is not clear at all why and how 'high mortality among women automatically brings in its wake, high mortality among infants and very young children' (p. 397). In animals, if the mother dies when the offsprings are still in its care and too young to fend for themselves, they would run the risk of dying because of hunger or attack by other animals. But why does AM think that it automatically happens the same way among the human society too.

On the basis of Table-IV 8.8, AM states, 'The incidence of unemployment among women is much higher generally than among men in any discipline' (p. 616). This gives a distorted picture. Not all degree holders seek employment, the proportion being less in the case of women. A better ratio would be that of total job seekers to the unemployed among them, for men and women separately.

The Kerala Example

It appears that the euphoria generated by some success in Kerala is premature. Citing the example of Kerala, AM says, referring to the lower fertility rates there, 'These trends were generated without any spectacular improvement at all in per capita income of the economy as a whole. If anything, Kerala's average income is low even by Indian standards and its nutritional deficiency. . . is not above dispute'.

According to him one reason lies in achieving an infant mortality rate of 55 per thousand in the rural areas and 40 in urban areas. He asserts that the second reason is the bold land reforms set in motion as early as 1890. The land reforms did not appear to have done much good to the state as the average income continued to remain low, even by Indian standards. If the claim is true, there should have been a population decline right from 1890 or shortly there after. But the following tables 1 & 2 (given separately) do not justify such an assertion [2].

TABLE 1—GROWTH RATE PER THOUSAND BETWEEN 1901 AND 1981

	1901-11	1911-21	1921-31	1931-41	1941-51	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81
India	5.75	—31	11	14.22	13.31	21.55	24.79	24.74
A.P.	12.49	—13	12.99	12.75	14.02	15.65	20.90	22.76
Kerala	11.75	9.16	21.85	16.04	22.82	24.76	26.29	19
Karnataka	3.6	-1.09	9.38	11.09	19.36	21.57	24.22	26.43

TABLE 2—PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION AND PERCENTAGE OF AREA

	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	%Area
A.P.	8.00	8.51	8.52	8.68	8.55	8.62	8.20	7.95	7.82	8.42
Kerala	2.68	2.83	3.10	3.40	3.45	3.75	3.85	3.89	3.71	1.18
Karnataka	5.48	5.36	5.32	5.25	5.10	5.36	5.38	5.34	5.42	5.83

Although fertility rate in Kerala declined from 4.3 percent in 1969 to 3.8 percent in 1973, it is seen from Table 1, that the growth rate had been higher than all-India average by about 1.5 per thousand in the decade 1961-1971, whereas for Andhra Pradesh it is about 4 per thousand less than all-India average and for Karnataka, lower by about .5 for the same period. The decline in the growth rate of Kerala is impressive during 1971-1981 at about 5.75 less than all-India average. However the same Table also shows that after a fall of about 5.9 during 1951-1961 in Andhra Pradesh, the difference reduced to about 1.98 in 1971-1981. So, Kerala should be subjected to further observation before hazarding a conclusion. From Table-2, it appears that the density increased roughly by 1.4 between 1901 and 1981 and that it is over three times as dense as Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh. This could have been responsible to keep the growth under control.

The primary reason for the fall in the growth rate in Kerala appears to be its superior rate of literacy. For example, rural literacy rate in Kerala is 52.63 per cent whereas the corresponding figure for Andhra Pradesh is 10.88 percent. It is the high rate of literacy which demands and obtains better quality of life including better medical attention which results in reduced mortality rates in infants and children especially.

The Art of the Possible

Several comments made in this portion of the book appear to emanate from a certain ideological position. Leaving aside ideology we examine some issues from academic and logical point of view.

AM argues 'Substitution of labour for capital remains relatively more profitable to owners and entrepreneurs because of the abundant labour supply' (p. 725). There is nothing wrong with the practice as long as labour is paid reasonable wages. The 'servitude perpetuated through the manipulation of tenencies and usufructuary mortgages' (p. 726) becomes possible not because of abundance of labour but because of their poverty and illiteracy irrespective of their numerical strength.

It is not clear why 'plentiful labour supply' should always 'inhibit development of skills' (p. 728). Acute competition for work and the consequent

struggle for existence would spur the motivated individual to sharpen his skills in order to succeed in finding an employment and retaining it.

That the funds intended for welfare measures in the villages are being misused (p. 739) may be a fact in the present general atmosphere of corruption and mis-appropriation. But it is impossible to agree when AM makes it out that all exploiters belong to the 'propertied groups' in a village as if vice and virtue are monopolies of the rich and poor respectively. The statement that 'this inequity is blessed with legitimization all round from the government, the political groups and the intelligentsia at the national level' (p. 739) is untenable and uncharitable. AM comments, 'Minor irrigation or soil conservation—yes but for whom? Area development—yes but for whom? The cream of the benefits goes to the person who does not work for them' (p. 752). But the point is, the poor farmers also get the benefits. With some tenacity and planning he can riggle out of the vicious circle. Here education has a vital role to play.

AM further comments, 'Instead of expanding the scope for increased food production through water management, we are more concerned, against the advice of acknowledged experts, in securing a higher procurement price for grain, which we all know, will really benefit the rich farmer?' (p. 740). Water management becomes inevitable in view of the limited resources. Similarly, higher procurement price is also inescapable because of the spiralling costs of agriculture, even from the points of view of the poor and marginal farmers. In both cases the disparity in returns is inevitable especially in a situation where the farmer has to depend on external sources such as the government or the moneylender for the inputs.

AM remarks 'so long as unpaid family labour remains the mainstay of the great bulk of economic activity in the country, the one-or-two-child family will remain a far cry' (p. 719, 720). The cause does not appear to be the unpaid family labour component, but the very low and backward level of economic activity whose very nature demands the participation of family members for their survival.

AM expresses the view that we are trying to keep down the level of growth within manageable limits through birth control in order to cover up our lack of adequate imaginative development plans to keep pace with population growth. This will make it appear as if family planning is not otherwise valuable, a view with which I do not agree. For the health of the mother and the child and for general well being, family planning by spacing children so that the interval may at least be five years, is highly desirable, as I argued in an earlier paper [3].

I disagree with AM 'that the solution to the problem of employing India's rapidly expanding labour force lies in fullest utilization of irrigable land estimated at 52 percent of the total area under crops as against the present 22 percent' (p. 740), on at least four counts. First, the irrigable land is finite, however large, whereas, 'in the present dispensation' population is monotoni-

cally increasing. Second, in the light of the recent experiences of irrigation projects, especially the larger ones, that interfere with the underground water tables, rendering fertile lands saline in some cases and less capable of absorbing water in some other cases, a lot more careful collection of data, analysis and reassessment is called for. Third, the dryland farming is important in itself as it contributes to the production of pulses, oilseeds and chillies. Fourth, a portion of the irrigable land should also be reserved for cattle-fodder and for afforestation for domestic fuel needs. Also other environmental effects have to be properly considered in the light of our improved knowledge of the inter-links between many factors hitherto considered unrelated.

While one might agree with the importance of democratic decentralization (p. 744) one would wish AM had explained how to avoid the pattern of exploitation and diversion of money into private channels in the existing socio-political environment.

Concluding Remarks

Family planning has no chance of sustained success if it continues to harp upon the theme of one or two children per family and depending on sterilization and monetary compensation for its success. If the government is really keen and interested in family planning, it should not, for example, discriminate between persons using temporary methods during the reproductive period and the ones using the permanent methods. What is necessary is an imaginative policy to relate the benefits of a small family norm with advantages one could realize and understand immediately at the personal and household level. The policy should be free of discrimination against the poorer sections. Family planning movement should adopt the slogan of 5 or 6 years spacing between children.

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