

Population Growth and Socio-Development: The Indian Case

THERE was a time when the growth of population was considered a natural phenomenon and not amenable to social or even individual control, let alone planning. Populations grew and diminished, migrated abroad or stayed at home, conquered other nations or were conquered, fought each other or among themselves, got urbanised or stayed rural; and all that happened was considered largely a natural phenomenon and an involuntary process. Malthus came out with his law of population and the natural tendency of population to grow without restraint and get only limited by inadequate food supply and disease and starvation ; and then followed what was called the Iron Law of Wages, which always kept wages at the subsistence level because of the Malthusian law of population and its operation on the supply of labour. The Malthusian Law thus predicted a high birth rate and a high death rate, a population limited in its growth by the availability of food supplies, and a continuing future of a near-subsistence living for the vast masses of the people. No wonder then that Malthus has taken his place in economic and social history as the "Dismal Parson."

History has belied the Malthusian prophecy. In the developed and industrialised world of the West, population growth was accompanied by a rise in the level of living of the vast masses of the people, the death rate had fallen sharply, but the birth rate also fell sharply after some lapse of time, so that the population is restrained in its growth in spite of the

ability of available food supply to feed a much larger number of people. The theory of the demographic transition with its more optimistic undertones seems to have replaced the Malthusian Law with its pessimistic overtones regarding the future of humanity. Economic development, with the help of science and technology, and birth control, which made possible the planning and regulation of family size by individuals, have between them made population control, social and economic progress for the masses a fact of actual history, as far as the developed world is concerned,

And yet, in recent decades, we have seen an altogether new demographic phenomenon in the developing world which is helping to revive the Malthusian fears, if not the Malthusian theory of the growth of population. Population has been growing apace in the developing world, the death rate has fallen sharply but not the birth rate, and the pace of economic development with its potential of the demographic transition is being frustrated by the rapid growth of population and the resulting slow growth of per capita income from a base, which averages near the levels of poverty. India is an outstanding example of this new 'demographic phenomenon where between the two decades of 1951-61 and 1961-71, national income has increased by 102.8 per cent, but per capita 'income only by 34.0 per cent because population has grown by 51.8 per cent. It is evident that population growth has stood in the way of a significant improvement in the levels of living of the Indian people.

Before discussing 'the impact of population growth on socio-economic 'development in India and vice versa, it may be pertinent to make a brief reference to the experience of the developed world. There the decline in the death rate was not so rapid, the pace of economic development was much faster, and the effect of the decline in death rate on the growth of population was offset by the decline in the birth rate. The decline in the birth rate was not merely the result of the emergence of contraception and the availability of birth control techniques and materials but, much more, that of the strength of motivation for birth control and family planning : and this motivation seems to have been the socio-economic result of a rate of economic growth that was much faster than that of population growth. Low birth rate, low death rate, a high per capita income, small families and a slow growth of population, these seem to be the main features of the demographic picture in the developed countries. In fact, a number of developed countries are now importing from the less

developed countries labour who accept lower wages and also undertake manual and tiresome work.

The demographic history of the developed world shows that social and economic change resulting from economic development has had a major effect in slowing down the growth of population and as a result made possible larger social and economic opportunities for the individual members of the comparatively smaller populations. The cycle seems to run thus : a high rate of economic growth, increase in education, both in population covered and level of education imparted, emancipation of women leading to more education, increased female participation in non-household economic activity, rise in the age of marriage and in the proportion of the unmarried, rise in family incomes, social mobility, opportunities for not only occupational but also cultural activities not consistent with large families, resort to family planning and increasing number of small families, more of public and private expenditure on the development of human resource, increase in opportunities for the poor and a significant improvement in the level of living of the masses.

In the developing world, the picture presented above holds good for a small minority of population which belongs to the upper income group ; but for the vast majority of the people, the cycle has been one of a sharp fall in the death rate, an inconspicuous fall in the birth rate, a rapid rise in numbers, a marginal rise in the level of living for some and a continuance of absolute levels of poverty for the many among the masses, and non-emergence of the demographic transition that is associated with a significant rise in the level of living.

Now let us look at the Indian picture from the point of view of both social and economic development and population growth. Looked at historically, while our population has certainly been increasing in absolute terms "since the last decade of the 19th century, the rate of increase increased sharply after the advent of partial provincial autonomy in 1921 and much more sharply after the advent of Independence in 1947. Thus, during the 30 years 1891-1921, the increase was only about 5 per cent; it increased sharply to 30 per cent during the next thirty years 1921-1951, and much more sharply to nearly 53 per cent during the next twenty years, 1951-1971. The explanation for this demographic change is seen clearly from the following estimates of birth rate and death rate made by Mr.

S. P. Jain on the basis of Census Actuarial Reports and the Sample Registration data of the 1971 census :

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Birth Rate</i>	<i>Death Rate</i>	<i>Growth Rate over the decade</i>
1881-1890	48.9	41.3	7.6
1891-1900	45.8	44.4	1.4
1901-1910	49.2	42.6 -	6.6
1911-1920	48.1	47.2	0.9
1921-1930	46.4	36.3	10.1
1931-1940	45.2	31.2	14.0
1941-1950	39.9	27.4	12.5
1951-1960	41.7	22.8	18.9
1961-1970	39 or 38	17 or 16	22.0

It is the sharp fall in the death rate during the three decades 1921-1950 and the much sharper fall during the decade 1951-1970 that is responsible for the rapid growth of population during this period.

, Some salient features of the demographic situation in 1971 are presented below :

<i>Total population</i>	<i>Number (millions)</i>	<i>Percentage of total population 100.00</i>
	548.0	
Scheduled castes	80.0	14.6
Scheduled tribes	38.0	6.9
Female population	264.0	48.2
Age-group 0-14	230.4	42.0
Literate population (males)*	109.8	39.5
Literate population (females)*	49.3	18.7
Literate population (total)	158.1	29.5
Working population	180.4	32.9

(Table contd. on p.213)

*Percentage figures of literacy relate to the total population of males and females respectively.

Agricultural workers*	130.0	722
Urban, population	109.1	19.9
Population below poverty line (1968-69)	281.7	51.4
Population below poverty line—urban ⁰	44.7	41.0
Population below poverty line—rural ⁰	237.0	54.0

+Percentage figure relates to the total working population.

"Estimates of population below the poverty line are calculated on PD Bardhan's estimate for 1968-69, poverty being defined as Rs. 15 per head per month at 1960-61 prices for the rural sector and Rs. 18 for the urban sector. These are lower than the figure of Rs. 20 per head per month at 1960-61 prices accepted by the Planning Commission.

The growth of population creates both problems and opportunities in the social and economic fields. By increasing the labour force, it makes possible economies of scale in the training and utilisation of human resources, makes for larger production, enlarges the market, and contributes to economic development. This is on the assumption that the population in question inhabits a country with the needed natural resources such as land, water, minerals, forests, etc., is able to raise the capital resources required to provide the infra-structure along with the needed machinery and equipment, builds a social net-work that not only improves the quality of life but also increases the efficiency of labour, and has a political and economic system that generates the motivation, and provides the framework for an optimum economic and social development. In other words, where the population is both the resources and the motivation for securing a high degree of social and economic development, the growth of population would turn out to be a positive factor.

Where, however, these assumptions are not fulfilled and the pace of social and economic development remains inadequate, population growth may well create more problems than opportunities. Thus in a country where natural resources are inadequate, where the inadequacy is not compensated by imports, where the necessary infra-structure, investment, and social services net-work have not been undertaken, where the planning is faulty or implementation inefficient or where the people's motivation, energies, and hard work for development have not been adequately released, a high rate of increase in population is likely to prove counter-productive in terms of economic and social development. There the pace of economic growth remains less than its potential; the per capita income increases at a slow pace, unemployment shows an increasing trend over

time, and there is increasing social and economic dissatisfaction among the people.

The family planning programmes fail in consequence to give satisfactory dividends, with population continuing to grow at a rapid pace and the birth rate failing to respond to the fall in the death rate. This is precisely what has been happening in India with the difference that a dualism develops in the demographic picture with a small segment of the population enjoying a high state of economic and social development and experiencing demographic transition in the same way as in the developed countries, while the vast majority of the population continues to labour within the Malthusian or neo-Malthusian trap.

We may now take a broad view of the Indian picture in respect of population growth and social and economic development and see if we can draw any conclusions regarding the right mix of economic, social and demographic policy that would lead to a significant and sustained improvement in the level of living and the quality of life of the vast masses of the Indian people.

To begin with, there has been a significant change in the age composition of the Indian population, with children and young people growing faster than the older age-groups and thus constituting a larger proportion in the population than before. This has significant social and economic effects on the pace of development. As the dependency ratio of the population rises, more people have to be fed who are non-earners and make no contribution to production, leading, to that extent, to a fall in the rate of savings and, therefore, in non-inflationary investment. This affects the growth rate of the economy and slows down the pace of economic development. The growth in the number of children also means that more expenditure has to be incurred on health and medical facilities, and, even more important, a substantial expenditure has to be incurred on increased facilities for primary education.

In a country like India, these facts do not find immediate recognition because of the low basic level of child health facilities. Even today, after 25 years of Independence and the constitutional directive regarding compulsory education upto the age of 14, we are nowhere near that goal. But the fact does remain that if we had a small rate of growth in the number

of children, we would have been able to give more effective health and nutritional facilities to our children and also been able to fulfil the constitutional directive on elementary education without incurring any additional expenditure. This lag in our elementary education has added to the illiteracy rate among the adolescents and young adults who play such a strategic role in the social, cultural and economic life of a developing and modernising society. The sudden spurt in population we have had in the last two decades has meant a much higher rate of growth in the number of children and young people with the socio-economic consequences indicated earlier.

Another unfortunate accompaniment of the rapid growth of population has been the growing number of illiterate people in the country. The literacy rate has made some advance over the last two decades but it has failed to cover even 30 per cent of the total population in 1971 according to the latest census data. Even if we define literacy as being the ability to read and write without any educational level and exclude the population in the age-group 0-4, the number of illiterate people in India in 1971 was as many as 309 millions. The following table gives some details of this phenomenon of illiteracy in India.

POPULATION EXCLUDING AGE-GROUP 0-4

(in millions)

	<i>Total Population</i>			<i>Rural Population</i>			<i>Urban Population</i>		
	<i>No.</i>	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Illiterate</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Males	248.5	132.7	54.7	191.2	117.1	61.2	51.3	15.6	30.4
Females	224.6	176.3	78.5	181.3	153.8	84.8	43.3	22.5	52.0
Total	473.1	309.0	66.1	372.5	270.9	72.7	94.6	38.1	40.3

It is clear from the table that while illiteracy is extensive in India, it is much more so in the case of rural as against urban areas and among females as against males. The worst position is among females in rural areas, where nearly 85 per cent of them are illiterate, even after excluding the age-group 0-4. The effect of illiteracy in India is thus not only to slow down economic and social development in national terms but also to produce a dual society in the country in respect of not only economic but also social and cultural development; and this dualism not only

Requires continuity from the slower pace of educational development in rural areas but also gets aggravated from the brain drain that takes from the rural areas to the urban areas.

The dualism that is developing in India in socio-economic terms between rural and urban areas is accentuated by the effect it has on population growth and the difficulties it creates in reaching the demographic transition so essential for dealing with the population problem. The differential behaviour of the birth rate in the rural and urban areas is clearly brought out by the recently available Sample Registration data, which gives a triennial average for the period 1970-72 of a rural birth rate of 38.5 per thousand as against an urban birth rate of 29.6 per thousand. The rural birth rate is thus higher than the urban birth rate by 8.9 per thousand or by about 30 per cent. The rural growth rate is not correspondingly higher, however, because of the higher death rate per thousand in rural areas. But this is not likely to continue. The death rate in the rural areas is bound to reach near-urban levels in the not-distant future but it is not likely to be accompanied even by an equivalent reduction in the birth rate because of the slower pace of socio-economic development in the rural areas ; and even if it does, the rate of growth will still be in the neighbourhood of about 2 per cent a year, leading to an increase in rural population by many millions and thereby slowing down the pace of development and so delaying the advent of the demographic transition or an era of slower rates of population growth. The link between population and development will continue to be negative engendering a vicious circle that may well culminate in the Malthusian or neo-Malthusian catharsis.

It may appear from what has been said above that the slow growth of urbanisation is responsible for the unsatisfactory nature of the socio-economic development that has accompanied population growth in India. That is not true. While urbanisation has got its good points in terms of availability of material goods and stimulation for lowering fertility and reducing the growth rate of population, it certainly does not necessarily improve the quality of life nor does it make either for an egalitarian society or the attainment of a state of full employment.

The so-called high standard of living associated with urban life in the development world has been found to have its feet of clay in pollution,

overcrowding, slums, and lonely living in a crowd that is making affluence an unlovely word for those who have them in abundance. Recent events have shown how unstable this seeming prosperity is not only in terms of recessions and inflations but even more in terms of dependence on natural resources that are not only dwindling but can also be operated under monopolistic or oligopolistic extra-national control.

For a country like India, where the pace of economic growth is inadequate, even the low level of urbanisation in percentage terms is having adverse effects on its socio-economic development. Apart from the dual society it is creating in the country, it is causing a distortion of investment that is unfavourable to the vast majority of its population who live in rural areas, increasing the social and economic cost of meeting the basic requirements of its urban population and thereby reducing the quantum of savings available for national investment, and distorting the production mix in favour of conventional and luxury goods because of the pull exerted by the effective demand emanating from the urban market.

While it is true that the urban ratio has increased from 17.6 per cent in 1951 to 19.9 per cent in 1971, it has also meant an absolute increase of 45.7 millions in the urban population during this period, with the much higher capital and recurring costs it has involved per head as compared with the national average. The dualism in Indian society has also encouraged a dangerous drain of talent, ambition and enterprise from the rural to the urban areas, encouraged an urban-oriented ideology of life and living, and generated a vicious circle of poverty-stricken ruralisation and expensive but not sufficiently productive urbanisation. And *this* is certainly not making either for social and economic stability or for generating demographic transition so badly needed for controlling the growth of India's population.

The combination of a rapid growth of population and inadequate and/ or distorted social and economic development has led to growing unemployment and unproductive - investment in human resources. Thus while wage employment increased from 6.3 million in 1950 to 21.2 millions in 1970, the number of applicants on the live register of the Employment Exchanges increased from 0.3 million in 1950 to 4.1 million in 1970. The latest figure for the number of applicants on the live register of Employment Exchanges (end of November 1973) was 8.3 millions. The waste of

investment in human resources is seen by the fact that while total number of applicants on the live register increased from 1.8 million in 1961 to 8.3 millions in 1973 or by 361 per cent, that of educated applicants rose from 0.6 million in 1961 to 3.5 millions in 1973 or by 483 per cent. Details are given in the following table :

	1961	1973 (as of June)	(figures in 000') Percentage increase in 1973 over 1961
Matriculates	464	1873	304
Higher Secondary passed including Intermediate	70	978	1400
Graduates and above	56	675	1105
Total	590	3525	497

It is seen from the table that the percentage rise in the applicants with qualifications above the matriculate but below the graduate level is 1400 and that for graduates and above is 1100. It is true that applicants on the live register are not all unemployed and that some of them register themselves for better prospects, but there is no doubt about the massive character of the increase that is taking place in educated unemployment. This has obvious consequences in creating social tensions and frustration among the young and in leading to a fall in the quality of life, apart from the economic waste it involves in lowering the returns from the investment in education.

Even this cursory review of population growth and socio-economic development in India during the last two decades indicates the negative relation that has developed between population growth and the quality of life and the vicious circle it has created of population outpacing socio-economic development and thus perpetuating this negative relationship.

It is true that the birth rate is much higher than it should be and needs to be brought down. It is also true that limitation of resources, both natural and financial, stands in the way of a massive developmental effort that, by raising per capita income to middle class levels, would bring about the demographic transition and establish the right relationship between population and the quality of life. The policy of a direct attack on the birth rate by a state-sponsored family planning drive as is being

attempted in India is not likely to produce the desired results in the absence of the necessary socio-economic motivation; and such motivation cannot be a result of mere education or propaganda or efficient communication. What then is the remedy?

In my considered judgement, the lesson that stands out unambiguously from the history of population growth and socio-economic development during the post-independence period is the need for a revolutionary change in our economic outlook and ideology, for a much more positive attitude towards social development, and for adequate and the right investment in the social services and human resource development.

To begin with, it is necessary for us to realise that we cannot hope to achieve for this country a level of living that is comparable with that of the advanced industrialised countries of the West or of Japan in the East. The range of difference between the Indian per capita income and that of these countries is so wide that any attempt to bridge it would be totally unrealistic and only result in creating a national feeling of frustration and inferiority complex. This is because we are starting on the developmental race with the handicap of a large population and a standard of living that places nearly half of its number below the level of absolute poverty. While science and technology can and will certainly help, the land-man ratio, the energy potential, and other natural resources in terms of per capita availability are such that it is not possible to have that quantum of per capita income that has been reached in the developed industrialised nations of the West.

Recent events have also underlined the instability and longterm dangers attendant on the affluence achieved in these countries and set afloat basic questions regarding the limits of growth and the extent to which people should go on expanding their wants and seeking still higher levels of living. The text book maxim of the unlimited character of human wants is coming up against the political reality of uneven national distribution of essential resources, the economic reality of limitation of even global resources, and the social reality of the counter-productive effects of affluence and urbanisation. It is time, therefore, that Indian economic thinking and policy turned away from the barren ideology of unlimited economic growth and set before the Indian people a ceiling on the level of living it should aim at in terms of material goods and economic services.

This, however, would not be feasible as long as Indian society continues to be non-egalitarian and feudal success, position, and power continue to be demonstrated and identified with conspicuous consumption, and little pockets of affluence more than comparable with that in the developed world spring up and flourish in a surrounding dominated by mass poverty and frustrated youth. Limiting the national horizons of growth in terms of material goods and economic services has to be accompanied by a ceiling on individual incomes, effective equalisation of opportunities, an egalitarian socio-economic order, and a return to the cult of plain living and high thinking, with non-economic rather than economic factors and values determining the quality of life.

This goal should not be dismissed as a return to Gandhian, alleged medieval values ; and once it is set, it has to be concretised in a plan for development, where the economic stress would be on agriculture, energy, transport, intermediate technology, dispersal and decentralisation of industrial activity, and optimum utilisation of human resources.

On the social side, the accent would be on children, and their nutrition and education, the liberation of women from the traditional constraints, women's education and opportunities for work participation and self-realisation, and opportunities for social cooperative activities and cultural development.

On the environmental side, the accent would be on rural development that would make rural living both healthy and enjoyable, and building up of small and medium towns and garden cities with a definite limit on the growth of big cities and a gradual deurbanisation and reduction in population- of the monster metropolitan centres that India now proudly shares with the developed world.

The most important change that is necessary for creating the right type of social and economic development and one that would also help to arrest the rapid growth of population is in the field of education. Education does not only involve the creation of the capacity for communication and the acquisition of the minimum amount of knowledge needed for living in, and facing the challenge of, the modern world with its science, technology, and the political social and economic complexities of large numbers of people living in close proximity. It also means the acquisition

of the skills needed for maximising production, minimising cost, and making the best use of the country's natural and human resources. Above all, however, it means the introduction of values and the creation of attitudes and behaviour patterns that gives meaning and quality to life and enriches the process of living. What education needs is a real and wholesale revolution, not just in terms of curricula, syllabuses, homework and examinations, but even more in terms of its association with activity, with environment, with society, and with values that make life meaningful and beautiful and give both purpose and enjoyment to the fact living.

If we could bring about such a change in our system, techniques, and content of education, I have no doubt that India, with all its initial handicaps of large numbers, extensive poverty, and comparatively limited natural resources, can nevertheless look forward to an era of social and economic development that would give her people decent living standards, social life and solidarity, cultural enrichment and individual happiness. It would also help to bring about the demographic transition that would give motivation for family planning and utilise the technology available for spacing of births and limitation of families. The vicious circle linking population growth with inadequate and distorted socio-economic development would be snapped, the pace of population growth would slow down and eventually reach stability, and human progress and happiness would have a reasonable chance of continuity with the eventual possibility of creating the better man which has been the dream and vision of prophets and sears from time immemorial.

What India needs is the kind of social, economic, educational and cultural development that would make population its partner in this process and its principal beneficiary. Only thus can we set at rest the Malthusian and neo-Malthusian fears roused by the high rate of population growth that has characterised India's recent history; and, then, proceed to build the good society that has so far eluded our grasp.