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Sustainability in the Midst of Scarcity: A Case of Travancore, Kerala**

Introduction

THE quest for comprehending the relationship between means of subsistence and Population is not of recent origin. Increase in population beyond the means of subsistence has been a matter of concern for planners and academicians for quite a long time now. The father of population theory Robert Thomas Malthus visualized the interlinkages between population growth and food production which became the central thesis of his famous work *Essays on Principles of Population*. Since the sustainability of human life entirely depends on the food availability, growth of population exceeding the growth of food production can surely be expected to lead to devastating consequences like outright starvation and widespread hunger.

The occurrence of starvation and famines is not uncommon phenomenon in India's history. A multiplicity of reasons has been attributed towards the occurrence of a famine. Climate supposedly played a vital role for the arrival of such exigencies. Other than climate, however, the most popular explanation has been overpopulation¹. This theory has its roots in the Malthusian and neo-Malthusian formulation regarding the adverse consequences of a rapid population growth on the economic well being of a society particularly in the third world countries. At the same time there is a wide range of disagreement with regard to this view and alternative argument has been put forth as to the growth of population being a driving force behind technological innovations². It is also argued that famines, in fact, can and have taken place in boom situations i.e. in the absence of any substantial reduction in the food availability¹. According to Sen, starvation arises from failure on the part of groups

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1. Arnold (1988) provides all the existing theories that explain the existence of a famine.

2. Boserup (1965) noticed that with the increase in population, there was an adaptation of agricultural technology such as intensive cropping, changes in tools and implements and other such measures.

3. Sen (1981) found that several famines have, in fact, taken place without substantial decrease in the food availability. He cites the great Bengal famine of 1943 as one of the examples.

of people to establish entitlement over requisite amount of food and not always because of Food Availability Decline⁴.

There is a strong view that India had already reached the Malthusian limit even by the end of nineteenth century and the famines that had occurred in India in the past were a result of overpopulation and consequently no governmental measures could prevent their occurrence⁵. Presumably, this view became prevalent after the famine conditions of the 1860's. Governors General like Lord Lytton (1876-80), besides several other writers had conceived famine in India as the arrival of Malthusian positive checks. However, there were disagreements regarding the view that India's population had attained the Malthusian limit⁶. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned here that the general policy in dealing with famines very much depended on the perception regarding its causes of occurrence.

Though several parts of India experienced famines, for whatever reasons, the state of Travancore, Kerala⁷ presents an unique distinction in this context. This state was generally free from demographic catastrophes despite in its rapid population growth, severe pressure on land and general inadequacy of food in the region. This necessitated large amountsof food imports from outside to meet the state's increasing demand. On account of this the prices of food items in the domestic market also fluctuated along with the world market prices which lead to a scarcity in food supply. On the whole an ever increasing population generated a high pressure on land resulting in a declining land-man ratio. How did the population of Travancore manage to sustain a high growth rate of population despite a situation of worsening land-man ratio? This is the basic question that is addressed to in this paper. In other words the present study is an attempt to find out the reasons for something that did not happen rather than what actually happened.

It seems that Travancore was able to provide entitlement over food to its people while several parts of India failed to do so. However, an enquiry into the reasons for the success story of Travancore in ameliorating famine condition in the past calls for an understanding of the agrarian history of the state since its population heavily depended on agriculture for their livelihood. Before independence when other parts of India were under direct British rule Travancore was a princely state with comparatively less British intervention. British rulers had a firm faith in the laissez-faire policy advocated by Adam Smith during the periods of scarcities. This was in contrast to the situation in Travancore where the government had intervened in the economic life of the people through several measures. It is hypothesized that a timely government intervention in the economic life of the people, in general and during scarcity periods, in particular enabled the people of the state to avoid a demographic crisis.

4. Sen (1980).

5. Ambirajan (1976) provides the views held by several administrators and intellectuals regarding population-subsistence issue in India.

6. A detailed description of both the view is given in Ambirajan (1976). Also see Rashid (1980).

7. Kerala state was formed in 1956 with the amalgamation of majority of malayalanrspeaking areasof two princely states Travancore and Cochin (a tiny state situated between Malabar and Travancoje) and the Malabar districts of Madras Presidency. The study is based on Travancore which was a princely state earlier while Malabar was under British rule.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section is mainly an attempt to understand the magnitude of population growth and the related food situation in Travancore. The second section exposes the government interventions and their impact on the economic life of the people of Travancore particularly during periods of scarcity. The final section proposes certain plausible explanation on the theory of sustainable growth of population.

Population and Food

Travancore, Kerala experienced a phenomenal increase in the population particularly in the 20th century. Consequently, there has been severe pressure on land and insufficiency of food within the state to meet its growing demand.

The first systematic census conducted in Travancore with some reasonable level of accuracy was in 1875. From 1881 onwards decennial censuses were undertaken in the state. According to the 1875 census, Travancore had a total population of 23.11 lakhs and by 1881 it had increased to 24.01 lakhs with an annual growth rate of 0.76 per cent. The total population and its growth rate of Travancore and Indian subcontinent based on census figures from 1881 is given in Table 1.

TABLE I: TOTAL POPULATION AND ITS ANNUAL GROWTH RATE IN TRAVANCORE AND INDIAN SUBCONTINENT 1881-1941

Year	Population		Average annual Growth rate*	
	Travancore (in 000's)	India (in million)	Travancore	India
1881	2401	250.2		
1891	2558	279.6	0.63	1.1
1901	2952	283.9	1.43	0.1
1911	3429	303.0	1.50	0.6
1921	4006	305.7	1.56	0.0
1931	5096	338.2	2.41	1.0
1941	6070	389.0	1.75	1.4

* Calculated considering exponential growth.

Source: For Travancore Census of Travancore various issues and for India Visaria (1982).

The Table shows that Travancore experienced a higher annual growth rate of population than the Indian subcontinent throughout the census periods except in 1881 -91. Not only the growth of population of Travancore was much higher than that of Indian subcontinent but there was also a consistent increase in the annual growth rate of the same between 1881 to 1931. The higher growth rate has been attributed to a decline in death rate during an early phase in this part of the region than others.

Due to phenomenal growth of population, there has been a severe pressure on land in the state. The state has recorded one of the highest density levels among Indian states. There

has been a consistent increase in the density of population from 1881 to 1941 in the state (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: DENSITY OF POPULATION OF TRAVANCORE

Year	Number of Persons Per square mile
1881	315
1891	335
1901	387
1911	450
1921	525
1931	668
1941	792

Source: Census of Travancore. various issues.

Because of the severe pressure on land there were apprehensions for long as to whether the population would overtake the means of subsistence because of the alarming growth of the former. For instance many of the census reports of Travancore discussed at length the population growth and food problem in the state and have thrown some pessimistic view regarding the population growth⁸.

This is because there was virtually an absence of additional cultivable land by the year 1931. Table 3 gives the area under occupation and the percentage of occupied land to total land available for occupation.

TABLE 3: LAND AREA UNDER OCCUPATION AND ITS PERCENTAGE TO THE TOTAL LAND

Year	AVAILABLE FOR OCCUPATION	
	Land under Occupation (in 000 acres)	Occupied area as percentage of total available for occupation
1911	1943	13.7
1921	2100	79.7
1931	2537	96.3
1941	2575	97.7
1951	2585	98.1

Source: Varghese (1970).

The trends in the occupied area as a percentage of total cultivable land potential of the state clearly indicates the extent of population pressure on land (see Table 3). Despite this unusual pressures on land there was no considerable decline in the growth rate of popu-⁸. Census of India (1891). Census of India (1931).

lation. The 1931 census reports, thereby stated that the population of Travancore was already reaching or nearing a stage at which the population had begun to out-run the means of subsistence.

Given the two factors, population and land, it is interesting to know, the provision of the means of subsistence to this growing population with limited resources.

Despite an increasing population pressure there has been a shift from the production of food crops to the commercial crops in the state. During the last few decades of the 19th century and by early decades of the 20th century cash crop cultivation became all the more widespread in Travancore. A marked increase in the area under commercial crop took place during the first decades of this century. By 1920-21 nearly 46 per cent of the total cropped area was under cash crops⁹.

As a consequence, the state was unable to produce the staple food (rice) requirement for its growing population. There was only a marginal increase in the area under paddy cultivation between 1918-19 to 1932-33 from 6.3

8 lakh hectares to 7.01 lakh hectares¹⁰. This marginal increase in area was quite insufficient to keep pace with the rising population. As a result, Travancore turned to be a net importer of paddy from its net exporter status starting from 1867 onwards". In such a situation when the state could only produce one third of its rice requirements, there was large scale import of rice.

There have been fluctuations in the price of imported rice depending on the prevailing world market situation. It is observed that there was a downward trend in the price of imported rice up to first world war from 1908-1909, however, the price rose steadily during the first world war period. Again the price came down drastically and touched its lowest level during the depression of the 1930's. With the onset of second world war a substantial increase in the price of imported rice was noticed. The fall of Burma in 1942, the main import source of rice for Travancore, led to an abnormal increase in the price of rice. The domestic price of paddy also showed almost the same trend¹².

Along with the price movements, there has been fluctuations in the volume of imported paddy. The imports came down as a consequence of increase in price. Table 4 gives the paddy imported in to the state for the three decades from 1920-21 onwards.

TABLE 4: THE AMOUNT OF PADDY IMPORTED IN DIFFERENT PERIODS

Period	Average annual import
1920-21 to 1930-31	291 2558 cwts
1930-31 to 1940-41	5468967 cwts
1940-41 to 1946-47	3466340 cwts

Source: Panikar *et al.* (1977).

9. Panikar *et al.* (1977).

10. *Ibid.*

11. Even before that, in 1853 Bengal paddy has been imported to the state for the first time due to the famine like condition prevailing in those period. See Uma Devi (1981).

12. A time series data of import as well as domestic price of paddy is given in Panikar *et al.* (1977).

This table clearly exhibits the increasing trend in the amount of paddy imported during the depression of 1930's. Whereas the quantity imported is comparatively less during 1920's and 40's when the price was higher than that of depression period. Even with all these problems the state was generally free from famine and could sustain its growing population. However, it should be kept in mind that, there was alternative staple food products like Tapioca which replaced the insufficiency of rice to some extent. In this context it needs a mention here that free from famine condition does not necessarily imply that the people of Travancore were in a state of affluence. There were, as mentioned earlier, very difficult periods particularly when the price of paddy went up in the outside market.

The Role of Government in the Economic Life of Travancore

The origin of the present agrarian set up of Travancore can be traced back to the beginning of the 18th century when Marthanda Varma annexed the areas and put an end to the warfare among the local chieftons very common till then¹³. After acquiring the territories, the Maharajah asserted his sovereignty by converting almost all the lands to the state. As a result, by 1850, nearly 80 per cent of the cultivated land and whole of the waste land had become sircar land¹⁴. So it was easy for the people of Travancore to take the land directly from the state and cultivate it. This sounded the death knell for the feudalist society. Consequently, the penetration of capitalism in agriculture arrived earlier in Travancore.

The state also adopted a remarkably enlightened and progressive agrarian policy. As early as 1818 the government issued a regulation encouraging the cultivation of the waste lands and guaranteed the enjoyment of occupancy rights of such land initially transferred for a period often years. By 1865, the government issued a Pattern proclamation which conferred full ownership right on the tenant cultivators of sircar lands subject to the due payment of land revenue and allowed unrestricted transfer of their properties⁵.

On account of all these developments, Travancore became a region of small holdings. Of the total holdings in 1931 only 4.5 per cent were 10 acres or more¹⁶ (see Table 5). More than 62 per cent of the holdings were of size class less than 2.5 acres and another 25 per cent between 2.5 to 5 acres indicating clearly the smallness of the holdings in Travancore. This has paved the way for the creation of a strong middle class in Travancore.

The middle class forms the backbone of the Travancore society. There were virtually no defined upper class group in the state and if in any case they existed it was only a very small portion of the population¹⁷. It is a moot point that the middle class played a crucial role towards reducing the population pressure and the consequent pressure on land and scarcity of food items through several measures. In other words, it can be argued that the existence of a strong middle class enabled the state, at least to some extent, in avoiding any unforeseen exigencies like famine.

13. Jefferey (1976).

14. Sircar land means the land under the control of government. Varghese (1970).

15. Varghese (1970).

16. Velu Pillai (1940).

17. Travancore (1931).

TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF CULTIVATED LAND BY SIZE CLASS IN TRAVANCORE. 1931

<i>Size Class (in acres)</i>	<i>Percentage of holdings</i>
<1.00	38.1
1.0- 2.50	24.8
2.50- 5.00	24.3
5.00- 10.00	8.3
> 10.00	4.5

Source: Census of India (1931).

One of the important measures that was adopted to reduce population pressure was the migration of the farmers of Travancore to the hilly areas of Malabar in search of land. It is already noticed that by 1930 almost the entire cultivable land in the state were under occupation, at the same time the population was increasing at a faster rate. As a result migration took place in a big way particularly in the 1930's and 40's to Malabar in search of land¹⁸. Table 6 gives the number of persons born in Travancore and enumerated in Malabar in different census periods.

TABLE 6: STATEMENT SHOWING THE NUMBER OF PERSONS BORN IN TRAVANCORE AND ENUMERATED AS SUCH IN MALABAR IN SUCCESSIVE CENSUS, 1901-51

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Persons</i>
1901	3049
1911	2611
1921	2030
1931	3328
1941	N.A.
1951	88275

Source: Tharakan (1976).

The above table confirms that a substantial amount of migration to Malabar was only after 1920's when the land scarcity became very severe. A sudden spurt is observed in the number of persons from Travancore enumerated in Malabar in the 1951 census. It has been noticed that majority of Malabar settlers were small farmers belonging to Syrian catholic community¹⁹. The Syrian catholic community forms a strong middle class of the Travancore society²⁰. In other words the migration of the middle class from the state of Travancore played a crucial role at the time of abnormal population pressure on land which helped the state to avoid a Malthusian positive check.

18. Tharakan (1976).

19. *Ibid.*

20. An account of the importance of middle class (Syrian Christians) in the nation building efforts of the state is given in Bayly (1984).

There were also other forms of innovations in the form of land reclamation, mainly with the initiative of the middle class²¹. However, these innovation would have been impossible without adequate financial backing from the government.

The government also intervened to prevent any unforeseen possibilities arising out of food scarcity. For instance, during the period of scarcity in 1861, the government got permission from the British authority to suspend the duty of imported grains into the region and food was freely distributed to the poor²². Also during the year 1918-19, when a severe scarcity of food occurred during the First World War, the government took prompt action in prohibiting the export of paddy and tapioca from Travancore, arranging emergency relief sales to the poor at several centers, and the purchase and transport of paddy from Burma on government accounts etc.²³ In another occasion, during a period of scarcity in 1924, to relieve the suffering of the people, the government provided immediate help like food, clothing, and rice in all affected areas. To help those who lost houses due to severe floods during that period, building materials such as bamboos, grass and reeds were arranged to be distributed by the forest departments from convenient centers in the affected localities free of cost to the poor. Due to timely governmental intervention, any widespread starvation or destitution could be avoided during depression period when there was a severe scarcity of purchasing medium²⁴. Another major scarcity period in the history of Travancore was during the Second World War when there was a sudden rise in the price of paddy due to the lack of shipping space for imports from Burma and later due to the fall of Burma. This period is marked by a famine condition in several parts of India. However, in Travancore government stepped in by regulating the distribution of food grains on an equitable and uniform basis and thereby to ensure that every person in the state will obtain a definite quantity of food stuffs²⁵. These instances signify the role of governmental interventions in preventing untoward calamities.

Even in the case of the provision of health facilities, the state of Travancore took initiative during the early part of the 19th century. As a result the state had a distinction of having the lowest death rates in historical times too. The European system of medical aid was first introduced in the state during the reign of the Gouri Lakshmy Bhayi in 1811 A. D. By 1860, there were seven medical institutions in Travancore and by 1865 this number rose to 31. A sanitary department was organized way back in 1895. By 1930 in all the towns and in most of the villages there were agencies to attend sanitation and vaccination²⁶.

Though there had been several periods of predicaments and miseries to the people of Travancore, as noted earlier, none of these resulted in a famine condition in the state. This, despite the presence of all the negative factors like rapid population growth, severe pressure on land and insufficiency of food.

21. Panikar (1977) gives the details of land reclamation and Kayal reclamation taken place in Travancore to reduce population pressure.

22. A detailed note of governmental intervention during times of crisis and scarcities is given in Velu Pillai (1940).

23. Singh(1944).

24. Depression Enquiry Committee report (1930).

25. Travancore (1945).

26. Census of India (1931). A great deal of information regarding the development of modern system of medicine is given in the census report of 1931.

Summing Up

This paper attempts to comprehend the success story of Travancore in ameliorating the negative fallout of an unforeseen situation like famine and find out those factors responsible for the sustainability of population. It is felt that a clear understanding of the population-subsistence relationship will be of importance to those regions which are plagued with rapid growth of population.

One of the prime causes that enabled the state of Travancore to avoid any kind of violent tribulations in vital rates was the existence of a strong government which interfered in the life of people through several ways. It is noticed that governmental intervention during scarcity periods played a vital role in avoiding any demographic crisis in Travancore. Also the non existence of landlordism, due to the taking over of major tracts of land by the state and its other progressive policies creating a strong middle class has done a great deal towards sustaining human population in this region despite rapid growth of population and severe land pressures.

On the other hand, British rulers in India adopted a policy of laissez-faire to deal with scarcity situations. This had its roots partly in Adam Smith's observation that a famine could be the result of regulation by the government and the market be better left free²⁷. Referring to the catastrophic famine of 1770 in Bengal and Bihar, Smith had written that some improper regulations and some injudicious restraints by the East India Company had contributed to the famine. Based on this belief, the British rulers almost followed a policy of non intervention during periods of scarcity. Even when they intervened by way of some relief measures, they were limited in scope. For example, during the great Bengal famine of 1943 the relief supply was mainly limited to the city of Calcutta while the rural areas were totally neglected²⁸.

It also needs a mention that there existed a strong middle class in Travancore, mainly due to the progressive land policies of the government. This class played a crucial role to reduced the population pressure. It has been noticed that land reclamation, intensive cropping, and certain amount of migration were taking place in Travancore with the phenomenal increase in population. The initiative for all these innovations came mainly from the middle class of the state. Due to all these reasons the Malthusian limit became a myth in the case of Travancore although right from the 1875 census reports, pessimistic views were expressed regarding rapid growth of population in the region. Even after that there was manifold increase in the population without any Malthusian check. Furthermore even with such pressure on land there has not been any considerable decline in the forest area of the state which remained roughly about 30 per cent of the total land area²⁹.

However, the success story of Travancore in ensuring sustainability of population even with so much of negative factors such as rapid growth of population, severe scarcity of land and food does not in any way indicate that an uncontrolled growth of population is a threat to the sustainable development of a country in any part of the world. Since the effect

27. Rashid (1980).

28. Greenough (1980); Bose (1990).

29. Velu Filial (1940).

of population growth on the sustainable development vary according to different ecological zones and socio-economic environment a generalization is impossible from the experience from a particular region. Here the attempt was mainly to present an interesting case of sustainable management of population by the state. At the same time to those countries which are worried about the rapid population growth and the sustainability of people of the state of Travancore gives a lesson or two. The lesson being that governmental intervention can play a crucial role in ensuring sustainability of people even when there are problems of rapid growth in population, severe pressure on land, and scarcity of food items within the state.

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