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AN ASSESSMENT OF INCREASING POPULATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Understanding patterns of health and disease requires that the focus in public health is not only on personal behaviours, biologic traits and specific risks but also on characteristics of the social and physical environments that shape human experience. At the end of the 20th century a challenge of the dominance of biomedicine and the need to give greater emphasis to the ecological context in the study of human health and disease was growing. The emerging new paradigm of public health is based on a holistic conception of health and on creating social and environmental conditions conducive for health. The social and physical surroundings in which people live affect their health. Individuals and populations are embedded within social, political and economic systems that shape behaviours and offer or constrain access to resources necessary to maintain health. Recognition that health is a product of the antecedent biological evolution interacting with current social and environmental conditions facilitates identification of social and environmental determinants that might be amenable to community interventions and can lead to improved health outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Public health problems are increasingly global and complex, especially environmental and social threats arising from global environmental changes, driven by rapid industrialization, population growth, over-consumption of natural resources and the inappropriate use of technology. Large proportions of the life-supporting resources of the ecosystems are being degraded and used unsustainably. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, health consequences of these changes are already visible and could grow worse over the next 50 years.

Scientists, policy makers and public health practitioners meet unfamiliar challenges when trying to address broad contextual issues in population health. To tackle the impact of Global Environmental Changes, the public health community needs to be equipped with the necessary scientific and technical means to anticipate and prevent human health consequences, for current and future generations, arising from degrading life support systems. Public health researchers have a significant responsibility for undertaking research that will assist society to understand and avert the health impacts of global changes. They are expected to expand and strengthen the knowledge of the implications of a depleted or destroyed natural environment for population health and of the social and health implications of increasing population and consumption in a world of finite resources.

OVERPOPULATION IN INDIA

Theory and definitions

In nature, the evaluation of overpopulation is conceptually straightforward. If a group relies on a local area for its sustenance, then its population will be limited by the productivity of that area. If productivity does not meet the demands of the group, the group's numbers will decline to the point of sustainability, or the group will move to find more productive land. Thus, sustainability can be viewed as a ratio of the demands of the group compared to productivity of the land, or more simply, the number of mouths compared to the amount of food (or land to produce it).

The same limitations apply to humans; we are bound by our regions, both geographical and political. If a country can not produce enough food, its members can be put in dire straits. Imports, however, add a new element into analysis, as it effectively raises the amount of food a region has. Thus, the population of an area could theoretically greatly exceed the productivity levels of its political boundaries if it imports enough to feed its population. This, however, brings up another level of analysis; dissemination of goods. If a country's government fails to adequately dispense goods to its population, then government can be substituted for land, and overpopulation can be measured as the ratio of the demands of the people to the ability of the government to meet those demands in terms of infrastructure and distribution. Ultimately, humans are collectively limited by the production capabilities of planet Earth.

Is overpopulation a problem in India?

As of July 2003, India had a population of just over one billion (CIA World Factbook). With around 170 million hectares of arable land, it has the potential to produce among the world's highest crop yields, and indeed, India produced the second highest amount of both rice and wheat per year in 1999 (Hopper). While whether or not this amount of food could sufficiently cover the needs of the population, two things are clear without dispute; millions of Indians' fundamental biological needs are not met, and should the population continue to rise, it will not be possible to produce enough food to cover those needs.

Evidence for the first argument is simple to find. In 1999, 53% of the Indian population under the age of five was malnourished, and 37% had no access to safe water (The Earth Times). Fifteen million people in Bombay have sidewalks for beds (Associated Press), and 25% of the population is below the poverty line (CIA World Factbook). All of these issues boil down to the simple idea that there are not enough goods to go around. Or, if there are enough goods to go around, then there is not enough government to dispense them.

The second argument, that as population rises problems are worsened, is intuitive. But beyond this, growth rates are a big deal for a country with a huge population. India adds more people to the world each day than any other country (Clarke), adding up to about 12 million people per year by one estimate (Litke), and 18 million by another (ENN). Each added person increases the

number on the side of the ratio that should decrease if needs are going to be met. And this brings us to the heart of the problem.

Means to lower the population

The ratio to examine here is birth rate to death rate. If birth rates exceed death rates, population is increasing. There are two ways to lower the growth rate; decrease births or increase deaths. Because development centralizes around ideas of improving quality of life, and thus life is a central idea to development, advocating a policy of causing death seems contrary to the spirit of the project. So the viable option is lowering birth rates.

India's growth rate has markedly improved over the past years, dropping from 2.2 in the 1980s (ENN) to 1.47 in 2003 (CIA World Factbook). It remains above the world average of 1.33 (*Earthtimes*). A stable population (zero growth) by the year 2045 is the goal of India's National Population Commission, but some call into question whether or not this is enough (*Times of India*, Sept. 12). Some believe that population growth must be brought to zero by the year 2015, and only after stabilization will India then be able to comprehensively address the problems caused by the large population (*Times*).

What is the best way to lower birth rates? When the pressures of overpopulation are prevalent, women sometimes feel the effects more than men. Coercive governmental measures like decreasing benefits to a family with more than one child (as are being enacted in India (*Reuters*)) can result in discrimination against female children if there are cultural pressures to produce boys, which also exist in India. This discrimination ranges to depriving girls of food, education, and health services, to aborted female fetuses and female infanticide (ENN, *Earthtimes*).

Other coercive measures have been attempted in India. In 1975-77, former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi created sterilization camps and forced vasectomies (*Deutsche Presse-Agentur*), causing population-control policies to be met with strong resistance and fear, stagnating progress significantly (*Earthtimes* Dec. 23). More recently, the government has considered using injection birth-control methods, which have been alleged to have significant negative side effects and recall the coercive measures of the 70s (*The Hindu* 2001).

The fact is that there are different reasons for high birth rates; religious reasons, ignorance, attempts to ensure reproductive success, attempts to create a family labor pool—the list continues. But the measures being considered should not involve draconian laws aimed only at results which neglect the rights and potential usefulness of the people.

What needs to happen is support, financial and political, must be given to promote and facilitate birth control philosophy and methods which involve people as an agent of change rather than a source of dilemma. Around 30 million Indians want to use contraceptives, but do not have access to them (*The Earth Times*, 1999); money must be given to provide it. Others are unaware and unwilling to discuss birth control methods (ENN Oct. 12); efforts must be made to promote discussion and spread knowledge of it to those who are receptive. Campaigns currently expound

on the good of the country. Instead, media should “emphasize that a small family is beneficial to an individual's own well-being rather than focusing on population control for the national good” (*Times of India*). These types of measures have been enacted in some states including Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and they have since been country's growth stability leaders (*Times*). The philosophy must be to have the people be an active participant in the country's problem. If the people understand and want to help, then the problem disappears because there is no one left to cause it. On the other hand, if a dichotomy is set up between government and people, rates will likely drop slowly, and will accrue a multitude of human rights violations along the way.

The term 'over-population' is relative. In a primitive rural economy, the people wanted children in order to have more hands to work on the field. The larger the number of workers, the greater the production, and the more the earning for having enough food for all; a large population was not a problem. It is also not a problem if there are sufficient living space and supply of food.

But where there is dearth of space and not enough production of food, increase in population is certainly a burden on those who have to deal with these matters. Hence, in assessing the problem we have to see whether there are increase in production of food and sufficient land to accommodate an increasing number of men.

In India today, the problem has assumed serious proportions. There has been phenomenal increase of population within the last few decades, reaching upto one hundred crore at the turn of the century. The density per square mile is about 350. In USA, it is about 41 per square mile, while in Britain it largely approximates to the figure in Kerala and West Bengal. In Britain, there is less than one acre of cultivable land for each individual. Besides, where urban population is increasing everywhere, the rated migration of villagers to towns is the highest in India, further aggregating the housing problem in towns.

Necessarily if the density of population be large, the pressure on the means of subsistence will also be unduly heavy. There will not be enough food to go round, and high prices of foodgrains will keep the lowest income groups on the verge of starvation. Hence, here also, unless the production of food is sufficiently stepped up, it will have serious effects on the national economy considered as a whole. If no preventative measures were taken to check the growth of the population, positive checks, in the form of famine or warfare would take place

The Malthusian law held that population increases far more rapidly than the means of subsistence does. At last a time comes when the growth of population has to be checked if the people are to be adequately fed. The Malthusian law might have been valid at the time of the Industrial Revolution, when there was large-scale migration of agricultural workers to mines and factories in search of more paying jobs, and to the colonies in search of fortune.

Aided by superior knowledge of science, man has mastered the threat of famines and epidemics, and wars may soon be a thing of the past with the nuclear threat as a deterrent. The application of science to agriculture has increased production of food to an extent that could not have been

dreamt of by Malthus. Today, in advanced countries, the increase in the means of subsistence has outstripped the rate of population growth.

Two factors, however, yet remain that necessitate some sort of threat to the growth of population. First, a large family has an adverse effect on its standard of living, since income being limited; the expenditure per capita is bound to be less. But this can be offset by the welfare activities of the State which confers benefits according to incomes.

Of Course, the responsibility of the individual for not allowing family to grow disproportionately is not diminished thereby. So nuclear families are the cherished ideal of the modern society. Experts believe that by adopting new techniques food production can be enormously stepped up. Besides, food there are fertilisers that can be produced by synthetic method and the chemical foods can supplement and meet all our food needs. Prof. Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate-economist, however, believes that the real problem is not so much the supply of food as the common mans purchasing power, financial means to buy food materials.

The other risk is that of limited living space. In the past, the plundering nations solved this by grabbing lands from weaker people, living in under-developed or undeveloped countries. That is how the Dutch and the English grabbed South African lands, forced out her peoples or reduced them to slavery. But colonial expansion is now no longer possible. Hence, the alternative today is to fix attention to the reclamation and resettlement of waste lands.

The Dandakarayna scheme, if properly worked out, could very well relieve the increased pressure of population in West Bengal due to the influx of refugees from Bangladesh. There is also immense scope for the reclamation of waste and undeveloped lands all over the country, which may be used to relieve increases in population. But good management, use of fertilisers, pest control and the use of high-yielding varieties are more important.

In India, therefore, the problem of over-population will be best met by increase in the food resources of the country. Secondly, an intensive effort must be made to bring waste lands under human settlement. The propaganda for artificial birth control will be of doubtful value as long as the lower income group man, for whom family planning is most needed, does not respond adequately.

The world is slowly and surely coming together, to form a single global unit. Economic needs are dictating national policies to a large extent. There is also a useful shift towards an international outlook. The re-distribution of surplus food under the aegis of the, UNO and Food and Agricultural Organisation point out the way to larger adjustment on the basis of international co-operation.

A time may soon come when under-populated countries like Australia, America or Russia may willingly welcome and receive the excess population from other countries, irrespective of colour and custom. And who knows that the moon will not be colonised? In any case, an intensive efforts at developing the national resources remain a primary condition as well as responsibility.

INDIA'S GROWING POPULATION - STRENGTH OR WEAKNESS

Come another World Population Day and it is time for introducing a slew of family welfare programmes for the government in order to improve the quality of human resource and also to put breaks on the rapid growth of our population to some extent. But all these measures have failed to yield desired results or the results have been insignificant as compared to the growth we have been witnessing. The reasons for this are varied ranging democratic compulsions to political expediency on the part of the government and our own languid response to a pressing issue like unhindered population growth.

Now there is an assuring argument doing the rounds that we need not lose sleep over our multiplying numbers because our population itself is our strength and not our weakness as it was once envisaged. The reason for this is that that huge population offers a bigger pool of human resource and hence a bigger consumer market. We wish it were true but the reality is quite different from what we expect it to be. No doubt it is good to be optimistic. However, sticking on to this optimism does not do any good for India because it is not always quantity alone that matters. What matters of course is the quality of our population which is abysmally pedestrian and we cannot for sure say the quality of our humungous population is an asset to our country.

True. In a social or political set up we cannot overlook the potential of a big number. The power of numbers and the potential market created by a huge population can sustain a country to some extent. Many European countries which have been experiencing zero or negative population growth have realized this lacunae as they economy is in shambles and have been offering incentives for people in their countries to encourage them to have more children in order to increase their population. On the other hand we have a few countries (including India) where population is growing unabashedly putting extra burden on our limited infrastructure and negating whatever progress we have achieved. The biggest casualty in our greed to multiply has been the nature which has been ravaged, exploited and squeezed to the tilt leaving very little capacity for her to shower her bounty any more.

So what the world faces today is a problem of either too little or too much of population. For many European countries the negative growth of population in their countries is a worrying factor. There is an imbalance both in quality and quantity of population at the global level. Unfortunately for India its burgeoning population is a cause for concern mainly because the quality of our population is mediocre. Despite some sincere efforts at one stage and some half-hearted measures over the years government policies have failed to bring about any drastic improvement in the quality of our human resource.

Even now people in our country consider that having more children would supplement family's meager income and hence they go for more children. There are people who still believed children are gift of god and fail to realize that more mouths to feed means a sizeable section of our society is deprived of even basic necessities. The quality of our undernourished, poverty stricken, unhealthy, uneducated population will be nothing as compared to those where quality of life in

terms of food, shelter, clothing housing, health-care, economic security, old-age care and standard of living is much higher and superior.

Needless to say the productivity of such a population would be much higher than those where the people have to struggle on a daily basis for getting even the basic needs. While countries like China and Japan have taken firm steps to reverse the trend of population growth India is taking it easy thinking that its 1.2 billion population is its asset or strength. But the truth is quite farther from this. We need to take drastic measures and resolutely try to improve the quality of our population to convert it into quality human resource. Or else all our efforts will go down in the drains.

This is easier said than done. Our population can be our strength only when we have the power and strength to feed the people, provide them clothing and shelter, good education, health care and jobs and mould them into an asset. As of now, whatever little measures adopted by the government for the betterment of the people have failed to effectively reach out to the huge population spread across this vast country. We don't have the wherewithal to mould this huge population into useful resource and therefore it will be a burden and not an asset to our country

Growing population has put pressure on our limited infrastructure which may crash under the burden of the weight of its population any time. Growing population would put more pressure on existing housing sector, our transport system, health care, education, ecology, natural resources and food production. Huge population has taken a toll on our environment which has been exploited to cater to the needs of the growing population. Our country has not been able to concentrate on much progress because our unbridled population growth has neutralized whatever progress we have achieved. Poverty is intrinsically connected to exponential population growth and hence it is imperative to we have a system where sincere efforts are made to curb the population growth.

Our neighboring country China stringently adopted one child policy and as a result parents could give more time and attention to raise, educate and train the child. Its one-child policy has yielded desired results as China will be way ahead of India in terms of quality of human capital in the next one decade. It does not mean to say India needs to adopt such an extreme measure like the one China has put to practice because we are a democratic country. No political party worth its salt would dare to introduce such a policy in India. But we certainly need to devise and implement policies and programmes without succumbing to political expediency or democratic compulsions with the sole aim of improving the quality of our population, which is possible only by curbing its growth, as a first step.

Unless and until we make noticeable efforts to improve the quality of our population and equip ourselves to be the best we are hardly going to make any difference, except that we keep multiplying and put more burden on our already overburdened infrastructure and our ecosystem. A huge population makes efficient management a burdensome task and everything goes beyond our control.

Every year July 11 is observed as World Population Day. The major intention of celebrating this day is to create awareness on issues pertaining to global population. The world population has crossed 7.025 billion in May this year and it has taken just 24 years for the population to grow from a mere 5 billion in 1987 to more than 7 billion in two decades. India is all set to overtake China (only in numbers) by 2030 but we cannot say the same with the quality.

Procreation is our right but it is not enough just to multiply in number. What we need to consider is not what the large population of our country has done so far but what kind of population we are becoming of now. We definitely need to strike a healthy balance between quantity and quality.

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