

INTEGRATION OF DEMOGRAPHIC ISSUES IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS ON INDIA'S POPULATION POLICIES

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Abstract

Population size and growth continue to be the paramount issues regarding sustainable development in India, notwithstanding the fact that the Indian economy has grown by a little over 5 percent during the last two decades compared to the population growth of about 2 per cent during the same period. The reason is that the Malthusian concern has been the core of Indian policy planning thinking. This has while perpetuated the belief that population growth is the immediate culprit of high poverty and environmental degradation, demographic issues such as distribution of Population, age composition, migration and urbanization are being neglected in the planning for sustainable development. The paper highlights the lack of integration of comprehensive demographic issues with sustainable development planning in India and explores the political economy reasons for lopsided consideration of demographic issues in sustainable development planning during the last five decades since independence.

Introduction

The growing realisation of environmental concerns during the late 1970s culminated in the establishment of World Commission on Environment and Development by the U.N. General Assembly in 1983. The commission headed by Brundtland submitted its report entitled "Our Common Future" in 1987. The report was considered a watershed in the history of human civilisation to safeguard the environment. The commission drew the attention of the world communities among others towards the rapid population growth and its link with poverty and environmental degradation in several parts of the world. It

has noted that in many parts of the world the population is growing at rates that cannot be sustained by available environmental resources and argued for achieving sustainable development. It defined sustainable development as the ability to satisfy the needs of present generation without compromising the ability to satisfy the needs of future generation (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). It further noted that everybody must realize that we borrowed this planet from our children, not inherited from our parents. The concept of sustainable development therefore echoes a clear concern and responsibility of the present generation towards posterity. As a

sequel, a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was held during 3-14 June 1992 in Rio-de Janeiro. This conference further discussed at length the population, economic and trade issues between the north and south influencing environmental degradation. (United Nations 1992).

The concept of sustainable development is an effort to create a new perception of development, premised on environmental preservation and the balance between man and nature—a vital component for human survival, which also recognizes the right of the next generation to have equal claim on the natural resources. As such, sustainable development is based on a new ethics of sharing resources in the present as well as in future to the extent the delicate balance of the nature is not jeopardized. It is not in conflict with human development determined by the access to the basic needs of life and the improvement in human capability defined by educational and health status. In fact, human development is the key to sustainable development.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994 reemphasised the crucial link between environment and sustainable development and recognized population policy and programmes as important state instruments for improving socio-economic conditions and expanding choices for individuals (Population and Development Review, 1995). The key recognition was that focusing on people—their rights, capabilities, and opportunities—would have multiple benefits for individuals, for society, and for their sustainable relationship with the environment. In fact, ICPD resolved the contradiction between two polarized stands viz. control of population through state policy of family planning efforts and the development as the best contraceptive which emerged after Bucharest conference in 1974 (Finkle and Crane 1975). It focused on wider issues of human life and, therefore, provided the critical

input in consolidating the concept of sustainable development. It was the first UN conference in which environmental concerns had been addressed in population context (McIntosh and Finkle 1995:225).

Sustainable development ultimately aims at improving human well being, particularly through alleviating poverty, increasing gender equity, and improving health, and other aspects of human resources, along with safeguard to the natural environment. The demographic knowledge is critical to achieve these goals of sustainable development. Policies and strategies that include various dimensions of population will be sound theoretically and have the chance to be realized given the political will and determination.

During the last one decade, it has been increasingly realized that relationship between population, environment and development is a complex issue. Any attempt in Neo-Malthusian framework of simply dividing the volume of resources by the number of people on the globe will not suffice (Shrivastava 1992). But the Malthusian thinking has been very pervasive. In the context of India the Malthusian ideology has a deep root, closely linked with history of Great Britain where from ideology of Malthus grew and spread elsewhere (Caldwell 1998). This paper makes an attempt to assess the nature of evolution of population policy and its content historically, and highlights that the issue of population revolves around size. The other important aspects of population such as distribution and composition of population, and urbanisation closely associated with sustainable development are most neglected aspect in population related policies in India. Other areas, which did not receive adequate attention in the policy circle, are the migration and concern for aging. The paper highlights the lack of integration of comprehensive demographic knowledge with sustainable development planning in India and explores the political economy reasons

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for lopsided consideration of demographic knowledge in sustainable development planning during the last five decades since independence.

Indian State and the Demographic Concern:

The *Essay on Population* first published in 1798 by Malthus has a great appeal among the bureaucrats and political elites. His basic idea was the growth of population taking place geometrically, whereas food supply was growing arithmetically leading to the occurrence of positive checks like starvation deaths and epidemics wiping out the additional population and establishing a new equilibrium in the society. The vices and miseries of the society are directly product of this imbalance between the population size and its subsistence level. He further believed that passions between the sexes remained undiminished in human history and requires moral restraints in withholding the sexual urge to control the increase in population growth. There is also a tendency among man to be attached early with woman. While the rich have the moral restraint in the indulgence of sex, it goes without among the poor. The poor begets more children and further impoverish themselves and are responsible for miseries and vices of the society. It is ultimately the principle of population that arbitrates and establishes equilibrium. But the equilibrium is disturbed by the poor due to their lack of control on sexual urge. The human society, therefore, remains imperfect. On this very principle Malthus vehemently opposed the ideas of perfection of society advanced by Condorcet and the idea of political justice propounded by Godwin. He described these ideas as most Utopian without having the basis of scientific truth. Malthus opposed the poor laws of England also on the basis of the principle of population he propounded and argued about it to be futile (Malthus 1798). The impact of the ideas of Malthus has been pervasive during the 19th century among the upper sections of

society who were in command of policy making in Great Britain (Caldwell 1998:678). Although, the poor law was amended in 1834, influential successors to Malthus spelled out his message in clearest term. In 1848 John Stuart Mill concluded in his *Principles of Political Economy* : "Everyone has a right to live. We will suppose this granted. But no one has a right to bring creatures into life, to be supported by other people" (Mill 1848:252 quoted in Caldwell 1998:678). Bagehot, the editor of *The Economist* not only expressed similar ideas to that of the Malthus, but also applied the principles towards politically motivated goals: "The most melancholy of human reflections, perhaps, is that, on the whole, it is a question whether the benevolence of mankind does most good or harm. Great good, no doubt, philanthropy does, but then it also does great evil. It augments so much vice, it multiplies so much suffering, and it brings to life such great - population - to suffer and to be vicious" (Bagehot 1869: 188-189 quoted in Caldwell 1998:768).

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, Malthusianism was deep seated in the psyche of English people and the population growth of the poor was considered dangerous (Caldwell, 1998:679).

India has witnessed a number of severe famines in the nineteenth century that took heavy toll of lives. The population grew negligibly before 1921. Even there was decline of population at some times (Myrdal 1968: Bhatia 1991; Maharatna 1996). The first half of the twentieth century also saw some of the severe famines. The famous Bengal famine in 1943-44 took millions of lives. Within a span of just three months the death toll was estimated to be 2.5 to 3 million (Myrdal 1968). During this time food production in the country had also declined severely. The estimates of trend in imperial India indicates that aggregate food production declined by 5 million tonnes during the period from 1893-94 to 1945-46 and the per capita

food production declined by 32 per cent during the same period (Myrdal 1968:1245).

The British Government took the responsibility of direct administration of India after the great revolt of 1857. Ambirajan (1976:6) believed that recurrence of famine in the later half of the nineteenth century converted many officials to a Malthusian. The Malthusian view in the administration affected the amount and timing of famine relief work as the Indians were blamed for this catastrophe (Ambirajan 1976).

The census of India started in 1872. The census reports analysed the population growth in relation to famine occurrence at the country and provincial levels. Census reports also tried to relate the cultivable area in different parts of India to the rate of population growth in order to explore Malthusian pressures (Caldwell and Caldwell 1986:37). Thus, the ideology of government apparatus during the first half of the twentieth century was increasingly Malthusian (Caldwell 1998:687).

The Gandhian legacy also was not contrary to Malthusian view of Indian political economy. Gandhi adopted *Brahmacherya* in 1906 and had been candid in his opinion on population growth, which was very close to Malthusian idea of self-restraint. Gandhi was against the use of contraception in birth control and firmly believed that there should not be sex except if children are desired (Payne 1969: 463). He held the view that sexual lust was the root cause of conjugal unhappiness and even the married couple should think of each other as brother and sister (Narayan 1968:220). Gandhi considered more number of children immoral. Gandhi said to Margamet Sanger in January 13, 1936 who came to meet him in his Wardha Ashram:

"People should be taught that it is immoral to have more than three or four children, and after they have had three children they should sleep separately. If people were taught this, it would harden into custom. And if the social informers can not impress on

people, why not law" (quoted in Payne 1969:464).

Thus Gandhi's ideas were very similar to that of Malthus except that Gandhi's accusation to the poor could be derived whereas Malthus was unequivocal in his accusation to the poor.

The close link of India with Britain transmitted the Malthusian tenets and attitudes from the elites of Great Britain to the newly educated elites of India. The recurrence of famines provided the fertile grounding of the Malthusian ideology among the elites of ruling congress party. The Gandhian ideology further helped promoting the Malthusian moorings.

The Govt. has set up the Health and Development Committee popularly known as Bhore committee in 1943 to assess the country's health needs. The committee advocated for the deliberate limitation of families as desirable. The Congress Party's National Planning Committee agreed with the suggestions of the Bhore Committee and advocated for intervention of family planning programmes by the Government (Shah 1947). Govt. of independent India launched the family planning programme from its first five year plan began in 1952. India became the first country to embark upon an explicit official family planning programme (Misra 1980 :298) among the world nations. Such efforts are very much applauded by the international academia irrespective of its bearing in improving the conditions of the masses. Ness and Ando (1984) has observed that in Asia population is less infused with religious significance and interpretation than in other world regions. This is the part of the reason that Asia has led the third World in adopting modern population policies and experiencing a more rapid fertility decline than others.>

Neglect of Sustainability Issues :

The Malthusian influence on the socialization of India's elites and bureaucrats shaped the population policies in independent India with an overriding concern of population size allegedly thought to be hampering development. As a result, the successive policies were mainly concerned with reduction in birth rates. It is believed that reduction in fertility rates will solve some of the challenging problems like poverty, illiteracy and law and order problem in the country. This belief also suited the political elites of ruling establishment as a route to escape from being fixed for their political economic failures. It is evident from the fact that statement of National Population Policy was placed on the table of parliament in 1976 during the period of emergency imposed in the preceding year. During the period of emergency family planning was vigorously launched and sterilization was coercively followed to make it clear that Govt. was eradicating the root problem of the country. It was meant to spread the message that Govt. is serious and working. It further allowed the state government to pursue legalization of compulsory sterilization programme if the state government has the necessary infrastructure (Misra 1980; Gwatkin 1975). After the debacle of Congress party in 1977 general elections the Janata Party after assuming power initiated an immediate change in policy of government towards family planning. It was reflected in the change of family planning to family welfare and the new policy stressed its voluntary participation meant for achieving maternal and child health and the well being of the family (Government of India 1977). This change in policy did not make the population policy as much comprehensive as to include population distribution, urbanisation and composition of population in an integrated manner, although such ideas existed among the marginal section of academics and intellectual as late as 1969. It was echoed in a conference on population

policy and programme in 1969 organised by Council for Social Development. The resolution of the conference states that the population policy should be regarded not only in terms of number but also in terms of its distribution, its composition and structure in relation to resources (Council for Social Development 1969). This comprehensive vision of population as an input in sustainable development was not reflected in the thinking of population policy statement of either in 1976 or in 1977 after the change in government. The Government of India has announced the most recent changes in population policy in 2000. By this time the concept of sustainable development and sustainability issues have already acquired worldwide concern. The latest policy declaration by the government is again very much concerned about the size and growth of population along with some concern for the aged population. The new strategy of population control has been devised based on women centred approach euphemistically called reproductive and child health programmes (or popularly known as RCH programmes) and it seeks to achieve replacement level of fertility (Total Fertility Rate of 2.1 i.e., approximately two live birth per woman) by the year 2010 and population stabilization (zero population growth) by the year 2045 (Govt. of India, 2000). The policy document makes it clear that the goal of population stabilization could be achieved by the enabling role of the government with active participation of civil society through the process of social change. The underlying belief is that improving women's education and empowerment will socially engineer small family. Further, the process of population stabilization will be voluntary based on informed choice of contraceptives. The Govt can intervene in the areas of unmet needs of family planning as an important input to improving reproductive and child health. The service of abortion is also recognized as an integral part of meeting the health needs of women (Govt. of India 2000).

While it is clear that the latest policy has been able to incorporate several international concerns for gender and health, the concern for population distribution and rural to urban migration as a concern for population policy is overlooked. There is an increasing population pressure in the Himalayan tract of the country, which is fragile. The growing tourism is attracting increasing migration to this part of the country. The coastal areas are also witnessing tremendous increase in population density. The redistribution of population either through direct and indirect policy is perhaps not thought to be a feasible exercise in the country. But even if country achieves stabilization of population in the near future, the challenges of sustainable population will still be daunting. The vast inland areas of the country are lying relatively less populated and there is much greater scope to encourage population redistribution in this part of the country. This requires an explicit recognition by the government that the marginal coastal and mountainous areas cannot sustain more population. The linking of the rivers across the heart of the country would perhaps be helpful in redistributing the population in the interior of the country, which has a relatively low density of population. This concern of sustainability at disaggregated level is therefore equally important. But this is not viewed seriously as population concern, rather than sustainability, is on the priority agenda of the Central Government. Recently several state governments have also brought out the agenda of population concern in their policy and planning, but an integrated approach linking the vital issues of poverty, land, forest and water resources is lacking.

A regional perspective on population focusing on comprehensive strategy encompassing population issues is not only lacking, but the policies of the state governments are found to be at variance with the national policy. As per constitutional provisions, population and health programmes are implemented by states, and they have also the power to legislate in

this area. Several states have recently come out with legislation of two-child family norm as necessary condition for contesting election at local level. The states like Haryana, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa have introduced the two child norm since 1994 and Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh since 2000 as criteria for contesting local government seats (panchayats). The persons with more than two living children are debarred from contesting election or continuing in office. Most of the people having more than, two children belong to lower socio-economic groups. On the other hand, according to the provisions of the new amendment to the constitution, 33 per cent seats will be reserved for women as panchayat heads and also for members of the panchayats. It also mandates quotas for weaker sections and tribals in proportion to their size.

Could the state legislations debarring those having more than two children neutralize the benefits granted to the women and weaker sections of the society by the 73rd amendment to Indian constitution? This is presently debated in the academic circles (Rao, 2002; 2003; Bhat 2003).

Raising the population issues in Malthusian garb are sometimes diversionary and also occasionally imbued with vested interest in the political circles. Whereas the national population policy reflects the vision of the international elites with larger concern for equity and reproductive health, the issue of sustainability does not go beyond population stabilization.

The politicization of demographic issues by virtue of political disempowerment through legislations incapacitates the masses and holds them responsible for their state of affairs. On the other hand, it allows the state to be free from its responsibilities towards the underprivileged population. The demographic wisdom learned from the experience of the demographic transition in Kerala is not needed by the poorer states like Rajasthan, Madhya

Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa and newly rich state like Haryana. The rapid decline in fertility in the state of Andhra Pradesh (TFR 2.5 in 1997) in recent years, a socio-economically average state, is stretched too far to cite an example that fertility could decline even without social and political justice.

The urbanisation strategy of the country is mainly concerned with decongesting the million, plus, cities by not permitting the certain categories of industries within 25 km from the city centre. Further, the urbanisation strategy is more concerned with urban development, and the population size and rural-urban migration are considered undesirable and problematic for city governance. The recent housing and habitat policy of the government announced in 1998 also does not mention about population distribution and future urbanisation strategy of the country, but raises the problem of housing shortages and suggests how this can be facilitated by the government and local bodies in augmenting the housing supply by helping the private and group initiatives.

The level of urbanisation is nearly 28 per cent as revealed by 2001 census, and rate of urban growth has been slowin down during the last two decades (Bhagat 2001). In spite of low level of urbanisation, the urban population growth is seen as a problem in policy document (Planning Commission, 2001). The Malthusian spectre is very much visible in the government iperpeption of urbanisation. The urban policies are directed to slowing down the urbanisation process rather than viewed as a vehicle of development. Urbanisation in India is neither viewed as a vehicle of social change nor sustainable development. The issues of urban population growth and rural to urban migration are raised and alarmed to divert the attention from the inefficiency of urban governance. The perpetuation of Malthusian view that urban problems are due to the population growth often precipitates backlash on the migrants.

The national political parties after the setback of emergency in 1975 have abandoned addressing population issues explicitly in their political manifestos. However, the concern for population size and growth continues at popular level. Lack of explicit stand by political parties left the area of population for the wishful intervention by the bureaucrats who are convinced for neo-Malthusian solution to the problem. This has not allowed a proper intervention in the area of population and its integration with sustainable development. It is ironical that even the issues of environment and sustainable development are ignored in the planning process of the country. The Planning Commission has prepared approach paper to Tenth five-year plan recently. Environment does not figure in the Minimum Agenda at all. This must be rectified with explicit and independent focus on the need to infuse environmental concerns through the entire economic planning and development process in the country (Kothari 2002 : 292).

Conclusion :

The Malthusian view on population has been dominating concern in India. India's repeated famines in the past and her dose link with Britain led to the genesis of the Malthusian mindset among early bureaucrats and emerging elites. This understanding has not allowed the integration of wider population issues like distribution, composition, migration and urbanization with sustainable development. This has also been diversionary to conceal inefficiency and failure in governance. The abandonment of population issues by the national political parties after 1977 has left the arena of population to be handled by the bureaucrats only.

Since India is a federal country, the issues of population and sustainable development fall under the control of state governments. A comprehensive policy of population issues in relation to sustainable development is possible only at the state level, but such agenda at the policy level must begin from the national

political parties and the initiatives at the central level.

Note :

In 1865, the Govt. had agreed in principle that a general population census would be taken in 1871. The model census schedule and questionnaire also had been worked out by 1865. The years 1867-72 were actually

spent in census taking in the areas whenever it was practicable. This is commonly known as the census of 1872, which was neither a synchronous project, nor did it cover the entire country, or even the entire territory controlled by the British. Although it was based upon a uniform schedule, yet it was not wholly centrally supervised census. However, it marked an auspicious beginning (Chandna, 2002).

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