

Tackling India's Population Problem

“We all worry about population explosion, but we don't worry about it at the right time”, said Arthur Hoppe. It is really surprising that notwithstanding the fact that overpopulation has been holding us back in our effort to move ahead in the developmental race, there does not appear to be much importance being attached to this problem. The same has come to be noticed more in the aftermath of the emergency excesses of the late 1970s to control our population.

According to the 2011 census, the population of India was exactly 1,210,193,422, which means India had crossed the 1-billion mark. Our population is said to be around 1.3 billion now. India is the second most populous country in the world after China and the various studies have projected that India will replace China by 2025. In spite of a steady decline in the fertility rate subsequent to the sundry population policies including family planning and welfare programmes undertaken by the government, the actual stabilisation of population can take place only by 2050.

Our birth rate is still higher than the death rate. Advances in medical science and technology have helped in bringing down the death rates, but the same cannot be said for birth rates which are still much higher than the death rate. The fertility rate notwithstanding a remarkable decline continues to be much higher compared to other countries.

The Indian population growth is still witnessing geometrical progression while the resources of subsistence are increasing in arithmetical progression, as noted by Thomas Malthus long back. India has to accommodate 16 per cent of global population in 2.4 per cent land. With 44 children taking birth every minute, our population has been rising by 2.9 per cent every year. Thus, an extra 26 million people are added to the existing population every year.

Even though the legal marriageable age of a girl is 18 years, the concept of early marriage still prevails which actually prolongs the child bearing age thereby worsening the population problem. Marriage being a sacred obligation and a universal practice in India, almost every woman is married at the reproductive age, contributing to the population rise. The economics of poverty further adds to the problem with the poor families treating more family members

to be an asset than a liability. Be it the need for seeing more children as insurance in old age or insuring against their potential loss against unforeseen health hazards, poor families still prefer more children.

India continues to lag in the use of birth control measures because of continued ignorance or societal shame attached thereto, lack of education and awareness being principal reason behind the same. The age old notions that sons are the bread earners or 'deliverers' from the life-death cycle in the family puts considerable stress to produce children till a male child is born. Increased illegal immigration from neighbouring countries including Bangladesh and Nepal has also added to our population.

Overpopulation puts a direct pressure on the limited resources of a developing country and adds permanence to the vicious cycle of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. It becomes increasingly difficult to provide basic facilities if population is huge or increasing at an alarming rate. Basic health and education services are compromised as providing the same to such a huge number is difficult. It is because of the overstretched resources, facilities and services that there is a widespread poverty and misery which often leads to social unrest because of the systemic inability to manage a 'revolution of rising expectations'.

There happens an over-exploitation of natural resources leading to environmental degradation, thereby negatively impacting the quality of life. Women in India do not participate in the productive activity for a long time due to frequent maternity. Population rise without commensurate livelihood opportunities leads to more unproductive consumers, which further burdens the economy. One of the far-reaching results of the ever increasing population is that it reduces the saving and investment in the country. With the average per capita income being low, the purchasing power of the Indian people is extremely poor.

With the rising population having outpaced the creation of subsistence resources, it has nullified all the developmental achievements made so far. Despite all the progress made even today, one-fourth of India's population is still said to be living below poverty line. The various governmental activities in a liberal democratic India have been directed to the task of providing adequate means of livelihood to an increasing number of people through an integrated development of agriculture, trade, commerce and industries. However, all such initiatives and interventions shall come to naught unless and until the population problem is tackled effectively.

The present pattern of population growth in India is said to be uneconomic and inimical to the health of the nation. Population explosion, beyond the carrying capacity of our country, has given rise to more unemployment, more pressure on infrastructure, overcrowding, rise in slums, overexploitation of natural resources, decreased production and increased costs and inequitable distribution of income and resources. Many of our law and order problems including threats to national security through terrorism and Naxalism are said to be offshoots of the unmanaged population problem.

However, it is also a fact that we cannot exercise any effective check on population unless there is an appreciable rise in the standard of living for the common people. The importance of a higher standard of living needs to be driven home to the Indian masses. The desire for

better living conditions automatically works as a motivation to reduction in family sizes. Education at the grass root, more equitable distribution of the national wealth and incentives for family planning can bring about the desired change on the population front.

The policy makers should initiate a bold population policy so that our economic growth can keep pace with the demands of a growing population. Increasing the welfare and status of women and girls, spread of education, increased use of contraceptives and family planning methods, sex education, encouraging male sterilisation and spacing births, free distribution of contraceptives and condoms among the poor, encouraging women empowerment and more accessible health care centres for the poor can play a major catalysing role in controlling population.

Our society needs to be made aware of its dangers. NGOs and media should come forward to create awareness against excessive population growth. We as aware citizens should change our mindset, to enable young people to make personal and socially responsible choices about their sexual behaviour. A mass awareness programme and persistent propaganda should be launched through all forms of media involving all strata of society. Increasing public awareness and ensuring reasonable population growth will definitely lead the country to economic prosperity by duly harnessing the benefits of a demographic dividend.

Salient Points

- India is the second most populous country in the world and will replace China as the most populous country by 2025.
- In spite of a steady decline in the fertility rate, the actual stabilisation of population can take place only by 2050.
- India accommodates 16 per cent of global population in 2.4 per cent land.
- Early marriage, son-preference and poverty are among the main reasons for more population in India.
- Increased illegal immigration from neighbouring countries including Bangladesh and Nepal has also added to the problem.
- Overpopulation puts a pressure on the limited resources of a developing country and adds permanence to the vicious cycle of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty.
- There is a social unrest because of the systemic inability to manage a 'revolution of rising expectations'.
- Over population leads to over-exploitation of natural resources resulting in environmental degradation.
- Many of our law and order problems including threats to national security are offshoots of the unmanaged population problem.
- Education at grass root, more equitable distribution of national wealth and incentives for family planning can bring about the desired change on the population front.
- The policy makers should initiate a bold population policy so that our economic growth can keep pace with the demands of a growing population.

Glossary

Commensurate: corresponding in size or degree

Reproductive: relating to reproduction

Nullify: invalidate

Inimical: harmful

Catalyse: cause an action to begin