

The Problems of a Huge Population

India's population, according to census figures, will be somewhere near 1.45 billion by 2035. So we will be the leading country by population in the world. A dubious distinction at most, despite the optimist's view that human resources are to be seen as potential and not as a burden.

Can we in reality provide the kind of education and skill development opportunities to these numbers that will make them the 'human capital' as envisaged by some economists, foremost of them being Amartya Sen? Whatever may be said in favor of huge populations being an asset if properly hounded, there is an optimum level beyond which we should recognize even something potentially good can become disastrous. This country does not have the resources to provide such numbers with even the rudimentary levels of living a decent life. Every economic resource in this country is being strained, and it is just nonsense to say that growth in population has nothing to do with it, and it is all due to poor management of resources. True, poor management, even mismanagement, has much to do with non-equitable distribution of what there is, and large-scale unemployment and resultant poverty and lack of purchasing power in such large sections of our population, but the large numbers also have a share in the problem.

Even at the level of our population figures at present, our numbers are not 'human capital'; most of them are unskilled, undernourished, and practically unemployable in modern industries. To blame industrialists for not opening more employment opportunities is not entirely right for the simple reason that there is a gross mismatch between what the employment market requires and what is available. For people to move out of the agricultural sector, too, more skill-development is required, which cannot simply be achieved by throwing money into programmes of so-called upliftment, today, there is a gross shortage of medical personnel in our hospitals, even in the urban scene, leave alone the rural one that comes nowhere near even those meager levels. Our children die in a prestigious government hospital in the nation's capital for lack of attention, and it is not entirely wrong to say that there is a shortage of many unemployed but qualified doctors and nurses, why does not the government employ them? Neither has the question been asked of the authorities concerned, nor have answers been forthcoming. The same situation of shortage of qualified staff plagues the education system, and many other areas of economic activities. These mismatches need to be set right before the population numbers become simply unmanageable.

It is all very well to say we should not employ disincentives in the population policy, but without some disincentive, we will not be able to control the numbers, even if that sounds cruel. It is no doubt true that better health facilities and

education, more importantly social awareness, will in the end enable people to make informed choices on how many children they want. But that lies in the distant future. Something drastic has to be done here and now if population is to achieve a stabilization of sorts. There is no reason why democracy should stand in the way of putting in place some sort of discouragement to encourage limited family size. Let the poor not be attacked with disincentives; everyone knows their compulsions for having large families. But there incentives could and would work if they reach the targets, and a humane way of reaching the people is adopted.

Having said that disincentives should be put in place however, it is necessary to see that these disincentives are not indiscriminately and harshly applied. In the Indian social scene, though the women bears the child, she has little or no control over her reproductive rights. It is the husband, or the husband's family, who decides on the number of children what is more, the fascination for a male child is almost ubiquitous in this society, irrespective of caste, class, or community. Small family norms in the states where they exist have led to worse sex discrimination than what already exists. The woman is under unbearable stress to bear a male child, and when there is already one girl child unscrupulous efforts are made to ensure that the next one is a boy. Sex determination tests are illegal, yet many clinics offer sex-determination technology on the sly. The sex ratio has plummeted in India on the whole, but to dangerous extents in some pockets. Women may not want to kill the fetuses, but they are coerced into making the obnoxious decision by social pressure. A girl child is always seen as a burden, there is the nightmare of collecting money enough to marry her off 'decently'. And there is always the lurking fear that she will be killed for not bringing enough dowry. So, why not select the problem, even if it may make a small dent in it. Our cities show a skewed sex ratio as well, though we may expect otherwise.

It is in this field that our NGOs can do a great deal, if they leave the more fame-attracting. Seminar-oriented fields. And the role of media is equally important in dispelling superstition and gender bias. Ultimately, it is empowering the women to make decisions that will encourage small families, irrespective of whether the children are boys or girls.