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# The Population Problem: A Third World Reaction

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In an age when man has walked on the moon, two-thirds of humanity goes to bed hungry every night; needless to say, this humanity lives in the Third World. Moreover, the absence of a so-called "standard of living" that

is the lot of the average Indian makes a discussion of the population problem almost farcical. To a man whose most distant horizon is unmarked by the faintest glimmer of hope, a suggestion that a decrease in population would be beneficial is not only unrealistic, it is meaningless—for the simple reason that he can see no action on his part ever lifting him up from his abject poverty.

To talk of India increasing its population by 13 million every year, or that its population is in danger of reaching an explosive situation, means nothing to the rural illiterates who constitute two-thirds of India's population, as of all developing countries. It has been rightly said that "Governments don't have babies—people do." Therefore, till we bring the population problem down to the micro-level of the family where behavioural change in the married reproductive couple is the

first pre-requisite, we can never expect any significant lowering of the birth rate.

Even today it is a fact that many African and South American countries, not to mention China and Russia, maintain that there is no "population problem." They contend that where there is little or no development of resources, it is useless to aim at fertility control as the panacea to all problems. "Look after the people," they argue, "and the population will look after itself."

This view was surprisingly (and pleasantly, so far as Third World countries were concerned) reflected in the speech by John D. Rockefeller III at Bucharest last year. Speaking on "Population Growth—The Role of the Developed World," he affirmed that he had come to the conclusion that family planning alone would not solve our problem. "All programmes should aim at the enrichment, and not the restriction of human life." He isolated four elements that needed reappraisal, namely: 1) population planning must be seen within the context of economic and social developments; 2) economic growth is only valuable inasmuch as it enhances the well-being of people generally; 3) the developed nations must try to understand and help develop other nations while recognising that each nation must be allowed to solve its development and fertility problem in its own way; and 4) women must have more and more choice in determining their roles in society.

This view is heartening, but what is done about it? The developing countries argue (and with justification) that the Gross National Product, based as it is on the American dollar, is a standard concocted to suit Western ideals. They know that two-thirds of the money given to finance the family planning and abortion programmes of the Third World countries comes from the First World—notably the United States.

Why, they wonder, this great investment in a negative cause? Are their interests moved by compassion? Or are they moved to desperate pronouncements and narrowly conceived aid schemes by fear? Can we trust these countries whose colonial yoke we have only just lifted? Why is it that these so-called Christian countries try to aid the family planning programmes of the poor and coloured? Is it fear or Christian charity that moves them to finance massive contraceptive programmes? Do they realise that our infant mortality rates are the highest in the world?

Can we be sure that they are truly interested in the quality of life, or is their vision limited by mere accumulation of wealth? With these contraceptives do we get tractors, fertilizers, wells, or schools? Do they appreciate the role that culture and religion play in our lives? Are they mindful of their own problems in society while arguing us to improve our material position? Are they fully aware of their own high consump-

tion whereby one American child consumes 28 times as much as a child in India in the course of a lifetime?

These are some of the many questions that the Third World countries have in mind and are now beginning to voice.

### Causes for Population Growth

It is important to keep in mind the basic causes for population growth in the developing world—causes which are not fully appreciated by population policy-makers.<sup>1</sup>

1. The primary cause of current population growth is the decline in the Death Rate (D.R.). The Birth Rate (B.R.) is definitely declining. From a B.R. of 50 per 1000 in 1901 in India, it has come down to 37 in 1975. However, the D.R. came down sharply from 43 in 1901 to 15 today.

2. The basic logic is that under conditions of industrialisation, there is a marked tendency for the technology of death control to be applied earlier and more extensively than technology of birth control. Later and less predictably the technology of birth control may be used to reduce the rate of growth and bring about a new condition of equilibrium.

3. The technology of birth and death control is applied first and most extensively in the upper social and economic classes and only somewhat later with equal vigour within the lower classes. Thus, while birth and death rates manifest a similar decline, there tend to be differentials between social classes.

4. Another general pattern has been for urban birth rates to decline first, resulting characteristically in a differential approaching ten. (It must be remembered that 80% of the population in developing countries is rural.)

5. One important feature of a developing country today is that it can remain backward in many aspects and yet match the crude death rates of most advanced countries as, for example, India.

There is little dispute that general economic development greatly influences fertility, mortality and migration, and that it is an extremely important factor in determining demographic behaviour.

It is generally agreed that broad-based economic development usually results in major declines in fertility. *But what is the nature of the reverse relationship—the effect of demographic growth and development?* A broad range of views exists from those suggesting that ratios of population growth (whether slow or rapid) are only minor or irrelevant components of the development process, to those suggesting that rapid population growth will actually contribute to economic growth (as in Brazil and Mexico).

In any country the ultimate aim of national development, be it economic or social, is presumably to improve the quality of life of the population. This refers to both the material and non-material aspects of life and encompasses all the goals which a family may be expected to try to achieve.

*Family Resources* are of two types:

1) *Human Resources*—time, energy or health, ability and skills; knowledge, interests and attitudes.

2) *Non-Human Resources*—wages, incomes, savings, material possessions, land and its produce, community facilities.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are three important points to realise concerning resources: 1) the use of resources determine the kind of life an individual or family has; 2) all resources are limited but can be better or more fully developed; and 3) the uses of all resources are interrelated.

In some societies as in most developing countries, especially for the rural people, there is very little appreciation of the fact that the individual, or the family, has the power to change his way of life, and can use resources to gain the goals he values. An individual cannot easily grasp the fact that family size can affect this standard of living and the whole quality of life for him and his children now and in the future. He needs to be taught about his resources and how they can be developed.

#### **He Needs to be Taught to Plan**

Massive adoption of new ideas on family size accompanied by action translating these new ideas into reality is inconceivable without a massive breakthrough

—In spreading and strengthening patterns of rational economic behaviour;

—In inculcating and reinforcing the idea that individual ac-

tion can improve one's economic status;

—In effecting favourable changes in economic mobility, initiative, risk-taking and economic calculus;

—In prompting modern attitudes on child-rearing and education; in raising aspirations and goals of achievement for the individual and his family and his children;

—And in changing many other aspects so that in that truly great transformation in human life, lower fertility and growth is tightly bound into the realisation of our economic and social goals.

*However, a clear set of threshold factors in whose presence the fertility transition begins and in whose absence it does not is yet UNKNOWN.*

According to Coale's comprehensive study of the Western transition there are three general prerequisites for a major fall in fertility.

1. *Fertility must be within the calculus of conscious choice.* Potential parents must consider it an acceptable mode of thought and form of behaviour to balance advantages and disadvantages before deciding to have another child.

2. *Reduced fertility must be advantageous.* Perceived social and economic circumstances must make reduced fertility seem an advantage to individual couples. At present in rural communities children are economic assets and until this is changed, little will be achieved in motivating a couple

to adopt a small family norm. Moreover, when infant and child mortality figures are high what other guarantees does a mother have to ensure some survivals other than having a large family to start with?

3. *Effective and acceptable techniques of fertility reduction must be available.* Procedures which will in fact prevent births must be known and there must be sufficient communication between spouses and sufficient sustained will in both to employ them successfully.

*It is an accepted fact that motivation is the single most important determining factor in proving a method of contraception effective.* And it is this factor of motivation that is lacking in an appreciable section of rural society.

Studies by Enke to estimate the negative value of an additional birth in India indicated a considerable loss to the economy, but some economists like De Mayne object on the grounds that one must consider the non-monetary benefits from children; because besides producing goods or being economically profitable, children bring satisfaction and are necessary for the development of the individual. Parents are willing to pay for the satisfaction of having children. Therefore, though it cannot be measured, "satisfaction" is an important consideration.

### Mankind's Great Need— Population Research

In 1971 U Thant of the United Nations said, "The greatest contribution that the developed countries can make . . . for all the peoples of the world is in the field of research and development . . . to develop safer and more effective methods of fertility control."

Pope Paul VI in his encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, includes a strong plea to men of science "who can considerably advance the welfare of marriage and the family, along with peace of conscience, if by pooling their efforts they labour to explain more thoroughly the various conditions favouring a proper regulation of births."<sup>3</sup>

The United States spends a minute fraction of its total budget on research, and this from a country that spends millions in putting a man on the moon—mostly, if not purely, for prestige purposes. Moreover, research in behavioural sciences related to population is badly neglected if not totally ignored in the U.S. Forrest Linder says, "A rational population programme requires the involvement of a multidisciplinary fraternity of economists, psychologists, political scientists, and lawyers—a group which is now only peripherally concerned with population problems and which has an enormous unused resource of talent."<sup>4</sup>

Studies should cover four broad areas of investigation: 1) measurement of population change; 2) effects of government policies af-

fecting population; 3) social, economic and psychological factors affecting population change; and 4) consequences of population change.

These areas of research are even more unexplored in Third World countries where social, economic, cultural and religious values considerably influence family decisions to space or limit their families. Factors like the universality of marriage, early marriage and male sex preference are closely related to fertility patterns but need more emphasis and attention.

#### **World Concern and Injustice**

"Responsibility and freedom are corresponding concepts. Factually though not chronologically responsibility presupposes freedom and freedom can consist only in responsibility. Responsibility is the freedom of men which is given only in the obligation to God and to our neighbour" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

According to recent figures of UNESCO, two-thirds of the world's population live on less than 12.5% of the world's produced wealth; the remaining one-third consume 87.5%. On a global scale it is probably true to say that the population problems of the Third World countries have arisen primarily as a result of colonial impacts on the economies of these countries.

Some facts need to be considered in this perspective. China, India and Japan, with 40% of the human race, are confined to 10% of the earth's surface while Can-

ada, Australia and New Zealand, which make up an equal area inland, have less than 1% of the world's population.

—120 million Indonesians and 75 million Bengalis can live on 1/40 of what 200 million North Americans consume.

—America has 6% of the world's population and uses 40% of the world's fuel.

—The per capita consumption of minerals including construction materials varies from 40 in the U.S. to less than one in the developing countries.

—Millions of tons of superior proteins in the form of soya beans, oil seeds, cakes and fish meals go from the poor nations to the rich nations.

—Ecologically the birth of an American baby is a greater disaster for the world than that of 25 Indian babies.

—The average Indian farmer has only 0.6 acre, whereas the bare minimum should be 1.8 acre.

—The U.S. emerges as the world's chief importer of skills—the final destination of migrant brains. In 1968 the U.S. granted immigration visas to 16,000 specialists from outside the Western hemisphere.

*The Christian Science Monitor* has observed that while with one hand the U.S. disburses millions of dollars in assistance to the developing countries, it nonchalantly scoops with the other hand those very specialists whose training in the natural, applied or medical sciences makes them future leaders in their own coun-

tries, more valuable than food-stuffs or technical equipment.

*Not only have most industrialised countries failed to live up to the meagre commitment of the UNCTAD Conferences—both of which ended in solemn pledges by the rich countries to devote a mere 1% of their gross national product to the dire circumstances of the needy—but the percentages of GNP which the U.S. parcels out as “aid” have actually been declining.*

In spite of her heavy handicaps India is considered a good bet by not a few economists. Barbara Ward remarks, “Of all the countries at this stage of growth, I would say that India is the most important. The framework of a functioning economy is already built. The great need for the next decade is foreign aid; if that is available, and both India and Pakistan ‘take off,’ then more than half the problem of underdevelopment could be met, there in the Indian subcontinent, and that means nearly half the population of the underdeveloped countries.” Barbara Ward makes a moving appeal to the West to come to the aid of the underdeveloped countries and to India in particular.

“The donors will not only help themselves economically—by developing a new and vast market—but they will also save” themselves from ruin. The “starving men, bundled in rags laying on Calcutta’s pavements are ignored at the rich nations’ peril. Just so did the nobles of France ignore

the peasant starving at their castle gates. Behind the Indian figures and statistics lie the realities of children without bread, men without work, women without hope. If these do not move us to action, the outer form of our society may survive but its inner spirit will have withered away.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Are We Split Christians?**

Split Christianity is meant to indicate that the social behaviour of Christians appears more determined by the belonging to one particular social group than by the Christian faith. Thus if a family counted among the middle class, its role in society was guided by the values, the customs, the life goals particular to the culture of this class and not by Christian ideals. And so, while religion taught that men were made in the image of God, life taught that society makes man according to the position he has in society. Religion taught brotherhood, life taught competition and so there was nothing wrong in a philosophy of “the best for me, the rest for you.”<sup>7</sup>

Are we educated Christians going to use our faith as a sleeping pill to tranquilise us or do we remember that by very virtue of being Christians—and educated, at that—we are called upon to fight for justice? For without justice there can be no peace. Without peace no nation, however rich or powerful, can remain in blissful isolation.

In fact in India it is the educated elite who, having had their education at the cost of tens of



thousands of rural illiterates, are responsible for the perpetuation of the state of affairs—namely that the major part of the education budget goes towards the financing of higher education, catering as it does to the privileged few.

With the national literacy percentage a meagre 30, and with women's literacy rate in rural areas a mere one-third of this, surely it is time for our Catholic institutions to make a complete reappraisal of their goals.

In conclusion must we not ask ourselves whether we are in fact

split Christians? Or having acknowledged our failings, are we going to take up the challenge and make this truly "one world for all"?

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