

POPULATION, DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

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FORUM OF FREE ENTERPRISE

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“Free Enterprise was born with man
and shall survive as long as man
survives.”

— **A. D. Shroff**
1899-1965

Founder-President
Forum of Free Enterprise

Population, Development and Environment

by
S. P. GODREJ *

India is a fast-developing country. We certainly need to develop in order to take our rightful place in the comity of nations. But development has necessarily to be in keeping with our endangered environment. Again, development can only be within manageable limits, as sought to be laid down, unsuccessfully so far, by the population control programme. Development, Environment and Population thus constitute a Trinity. However, excess of population leads inevitably to environmental degradation.

A Matter of Shame

The new economic policy laid down by our government certainly holds out hope for the future. Nevertheless, it is a matter of shame that 50 years after Independence, 170 millions suffer from hunger, 48 per cent of our population (482 millions) continue to be illiterate, maternal, infant and child mortality figures are alarmingly high, the majority of our villages have no roads, not even access to a basic necessity like drinking water. With only 2.5 per cent of the world's land area, we have to support as much as 16 per cent (860 millions) of the world's population, on merely 1.5 per cent of the world's income! This highlights the stark truth that without definite success in population control, the full benefits of liberalisation will continue to elude us. If only all of us could have taken this fundamental problem more

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seriously, our economy would not have reached the low ebb it did a few years ago.

Forget future benefits for the moment. We face the stark reality today of millions unemployed and 30 per cent having insufficient income to support themselves. Law and order enforcing agencies, the public services are stretched to breaking point. We were recently witness to long-suffering, irate commuters stoning and burning trains and railway stations. Make no mistake—these are insidious portents, warning signals. We ignore them at our peril.

A related danger is that because of our concentration on economic development, necessary as it is, not enough funds are left for health and education, which world experience and the experience of a state like Kerala and, to some extent, Tamil Nadu prove to be a powerful factor in controlling population. We cannot allow welfare to be traded for economic growth.

Impending Holocaust

Population growth in India has the dimensions and the immediacy of an impending holocaust, directly preventing the much-desired congenial environment and economic betterment. This problem, though most acute in our country, is not confined to it.

Additions to the world population in the next decade are expected to average 97 million per year, the highest in history and affecting India most. The Earth Summit at Rio concentrated on the massive environmental degradation rather than on the much more urgent and inter-connected problem of population control. The Cairo Conference too concentrated on contraception and abortion and women's rights, which are very important, rather than on population control.

This lack of attention is shocking when one recalls that more than three decades ago the Pearson Commission Report, hailed as a milestone in international economics, laid particular emphasis on the dire need for population planning. The Commission warned: "There can be no serious social economic planning unless the serious implications of uncontrolled population are understood and acted upon." "No other phenomenon," the Commission added, "casts a darker shadow over the prospects for international development than the staggering growth of population."

Nothing more starkly illustrates the gravity of the population problem than the fact that free-thinking Christians are now considering birth control by artificial means as a possible solution. No less a dignitary than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, recently criticised the Vatican's policy on contraception. This isn't a religious but a human problem. How in the name of religion and conscience can we allow unwanted children to be born only to die or, as in some countries, to be ruthlessly killed on the plea that they would be a harmful burden on society!

While on the subject of religion, I would like to mention that on my travels abroad I am often surprised to be asked what is the national religion of India. India should be known as a secular state, but at the same time it has been the home of several great international religions like Islam, Buddhism and Sikhism, besides, of course, Hinduism.

Missed Opportunities

The story of population control in India is one of missed opportunities. We Indians have desisted from bringing about the stark awareness, with professional use of media, especially television and radio, followed by

action. If political capital had not been made of the excesses during the Emergency which were exaggerated to quite some extent, and a long-term view had been taken for the benefit of our country's future, the family planning movement would not have had the damaging setback it had. As it has been, we threw out the baby with the bath water!

Much before Independence, my father, Pirojsha Godrej, foresaw the danger of expected squalor and misery, and spoke of it in no uncertain terms. He even said that a time might come when we would have to evolve to learn to sleep while standing! Deploring the slums in those days, he included housing, health and education for industrial workers, so that they would have at least the minimum comforts to be able to give of their best. He pondered over the possibility of research on this problem, so distressed did he feel about it.

This excess of population has not only numbed the physical fibre of our people, but the constant deprivation has also damaged their mental faculties, which stark reality has not been realised.

Basic Needs Unfulfilled

Today the basic needs of our people cannot be fulfilled, like the minimum of needs for housing, adequate foodgrain production and necessary educational facilities, primary health-care centres. Diseases like T. B., cholera, malaria and plague eradicated at great cost and with the help of international funding-agencies are coming back with a vengeance. We have more leprosy patients than a more heavily populated country, China, whose population we shall exceed in a short time, because of its success in population control.

In the international sphere, our status has suffered. Countries with huge populations and attendant poverty carry a sort of stigma as the Yellow Peril was in the past, involving social and economic discrimination. One could cite quite a few depressing examples.

Our four-decades-long, multi-pronged Family Planning programme, costing nearly Rs. 5,500 crores, has not made the expected and much-needed dent in our population growth. Considering that ours was the first country to adopt Family Planning as state policy against many odds, the first to establish a birth-control clinic in Mysore in 1930 and that the Foundation of the International Planned Parenthood Federation was laid in India, we nevertheless continue to lag behind the other countries which started their programmes later and which have managed to surmount their difficulties.

We have in Bombay the network of the Family Planning Association of India with Smt. Avabai Wadia as its ardent President. We also have the Population Foundation of India in Delhi, founded by the late Shri J.R.D. Tata, a most zealous advocate. The International Institute for Population Sciences in Bombay (one of the few such institutes in the world), with considerable up-to-date research on the subject of demography, has helped to provide a scientific support to population control.

Population-Environment Nexus

The depletion of our resources is in almost direct proportion to the growth of our population. Our lack of thorough awareness and evaluation of the population-environment nexus, and failure in bringing about this awareness to the large multitudes of our people, are most depressing.

Sorely required land areas, inadequate as they are, are being further denuded. We clear 1.3 million hectares of forest land every year for cultivation and energy. At the time of our Independence, about 50 years ago, 45 per cent of our country was covered by forests and we boasted having the second largest variety of trees and plants, second only to Brazil! Now, unbelievably, it is no more than a mere 12 per cent at the most. Our lifeline rivers, even the fabulous, gigantic Himalayan region, vast life-giving forest areas have been polluted or devastated. We are wasting land-use by allowing, for traditional reasons, sick, useless cattle to graze upon it: the largest cattle population in the world, whereas China is not saddled with this burden. Wetlands, which could be most productive, are another neglected source of wealth. India is blessed with a vast coastline.

Wildlife Threatened

Our degradation today has come about because of our lack of attention to the countryside where the vast majority lives in squalor in villages. Gandhiji knew what he was talking about when he stressed the importance of village uplift. Had we looked after our countryside, our cities would not have been degraded. At the same time we have to realise that the process of urbanisation is irreversible. Something has to be done about the degradation that has already taken place, and steps have to be taken to stop further degradation. Advanced countries appear to have been able to control urban populations. We can learn from their example.

Our precious wildlife, second only to Africa, is threatened along with its habitat conserved through preservation of wildlife in the past. Each tiger, our magnificent national animal, alone, requires extensive territory for survival, which thereby preserves the required

habitat of flora and fauna. Indeed, Nature had endowed us so richly in many aspects. Yet, instead of having been trustees for preservation of wild life, we have degraded our country to lower depths than many less fortunate countries. We have forgotten that Man inhabited the planet much after the flora and fauna.

Eminent scientists, including some Nobel Laureates, have criticised Western countries, particularly U.S.A., for grossly disproportionate over-consumption. Affluent lifestyles, wherever they exist, even in developing countries, are often the worst polluters, generating great quantities of non-recyclable matter which affects even a city like Delhi. The appalling congestion results in large numbers of people suffering from gas-poisoning and what not.

The accumulation of all these factors due to gross abnormalities has brought about, as a result, a crisis of character in our people in the fight for a better quality of life—even survival, aggravated by the prevailing unemployment and rampant corruption.

In the nexus with the continuing threat of the population explosion, these problems are not peripheral as they seem to be considered generally, but form the *core* of existence itself. We just cannot afford to lose further valuable time to make more and more people aware about the dangers of environmental pollution due mainly to horribly congested, ever-growing urban living conditions. We must reach the hearts and minds of the people through their language and style of thinking, rejecting fallacious theories.

WWF — Premier Conservation Organisation

Thanks to the co-operation of industry, government and the conservation-conscious public, WWF — India has

grown to become the premier conservation organisation operating through a network of 18 branches (expected to increase to 25 in the near future), with its headquarters at the Pirojsha Godrej National Conservation Centre in New Delhi.

WWF—India's central goal is the conservation of India's biological diversity through a multi-pronged strategy which stresses community-based approaches. The promotion of conservation awareness ranks high on its agenda and is aimed primarily at the country's youth through a network of Nature Clubs. WWF—India has also been contributing to policy work on global environmental issues through the WWF—International network, with the worthy aim to help build a future in which Man can live in harmony with Nature.

Learning From Other Countries

There is hope for us still if we learn from the example of countries that have successfully controlled their populations like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia (the largest Muslim country) and, nearer home, tiny Sri Lanka, which has managed to bring down population growth rate to 1.3 per cent (compared to our 2.1 per cent) and the infant mortality rate to 21 per thousand births (compared to 88 in India). More significantly, Sri Lanka's literacy rate is 88.4 per cent, compared to India's 52.1 per cent.

Our country is one of the most highly industrialised countries and has made highly significant strides in advanced technology as in utilising atomic energy for peaceful purposes, space research, and so on. It is beyond comprehension therefore how we have failed in tackling so basic a problem as the population-environment nexus. There is hope therefore that we can still develop the right mental attitudes and implement the right priorities. More

and more Indians should be made to feel strongly about the burning need to plan their families—and induce others—in their own interest. This approach should acquire the force and momentum of a People's Movement and come to be considered as a mark of patriotism.

The example of the Grow More Food Campaign (the Green Revolution), which was successful for a fairly long but limited period with the evolution of new strains and the planting of more and better seeds on highly scientific lines is a pointer. We even had a surplus, but unfortunately a large number of people had no money to buy. Moreover, there are some negative aspects also in such a crash programme.

Ours is a country with rich culture and tradition, but we have to develop a rational outlook in conformity with the acceptance of inevitable changes and face problems which we should be able to solve. Equating mythology with history, belief in karma that our lot is pre-ordained, reliance on astrology, which is hardly a science, are traditional weaknesses. Change seems to be against the ethos of our people, living on the "*chalta hai, chalne do*" attitude.

There is resounding evidence that in countries which were able to slow down their rate of population growth, the average income per capita group rose, and there was all-round improvement in the economy because large savings got deployed to growth and prosperity.

A Positive Approach

The Family Planning policy to succeed has to develop a positive approach of developing the country's human resources by promoting equity, striving to reduce income disparities, to the extent possible, improving nutritional standards of the poorer sections and working towards universal literacy and good health standards.

The decision to have children or not is an intensely personal one, motivated not only by economic considerations, but also by social and cultural dictates like the son complex, which should be striven to be ameliorated through advancement of females through education and in other ways. Whatever means of contraception are adopted, the health of women during pregnancy deserves the utmost attention. Their physical and mental peace of mind has to be ensured. As Pranay Gupta puts it wisely in his book "The Crowded Earth": "When you advocate family planning, you are interfering with the most private and sensitive aspect of human relationship. You cannot, indeed must not, tread heavy booted into people's 'bedrooms' (that is, privacy), however poor they might be. But you can help structure people's choices so that they make prudent and voluntary decisions concerning family size."

Our people, except in well-nurtured colonies like some industrial complexes, have so far failed to acquire convinced awareness of the value of a small family, which Europe, U.S.A. and several countries in Asia and the Pacific acquired in the current century, as a result of which the demographic transition there has been smooth and fast. These deeply ingrained attitudes cannot be overcome by coercion or only by legislation. But constitutional changes where required are imperative, along with closer growing co-operation with NGOs and the organised sector, and with government departments.

Suggested Solutions

There are several ways that could lead to a change of attitudes:

Sound education particularly on the necessity and benefits of Family Planning, would bring about the necessary awareness in people, which in turn would enable

them to prevail upon politicians to give greater attention to this direst of needs.

Very special attention needs particularly to be given to *crash programmes for female literacy*. When female literacy goes up, fertility goes down. The example of Kerala.

Trade Unions as voluntary bodies in whom workers can repose their faith are in an advantageous position to influence workers for the success of the programme. This has been proved to be successful in quite a few institutions.

The committed media could not doubt greatly help in creating public awareness as a national duty and privilege. Russell W. Peterson, President of the world-renowned National Audubon Society, puts it succinctly: "We have all been horrified by the recent reports of the accident in Bhopal, India, where some 2,000 people were killed when methyl isocyanate leaked from a chemical plant. We have all read the daily front-page accounts of the latest sensational hijacking and the killing of two Americans by terrorists in Tehran. But how many of us realised that 45,000 children died yesterday, and will die today and tomorrow, because they were brought into a world not prepared to take care of them? We must remind the editors and opinion writers that this, too, is news—and not ever let them forget it."

Scientists, and *medical men particularly*, have a crucial role to play. Doctors know that in the appalling conditions in which people live, diseases cannot be cured, and, even if cured, are bound to recur when people return to these conditions. They have to agitate to improve these conditions.

Today we do not give to issues of vital national

importance like the population-environment nexus even 1/10th of the importance we give to selling merchandise on profit. The resources available for environmental control now and in the foreseeable future will fall far short of the needs. Clear priorities, and efficient and effective strategies, will be essential to maximise the sustainable development impact of the resources available. The Environment Action report is an important and welcome step in this regard.

Turn where we will, we cannot escape the fact that environmental degradation is a direct consequence of the population holocaust. It is no use deluding ourselves that once Panchayat Raj is established everything will be all right. We deluded ourselves in the same manner about our Five-Year Plans, which largely remained on paper. Our people have to pursue family planning with "religious" zeal. Fortunately, we are a democracy. In a democracy power resides with the people, if only they have the will to exercise that power. Desperate ills call for drastic remedies. Seeing how our politicians hanker after power, we could lay down a small, planned family as an important criterion for holding any political office and not give tickets for elections without this safeguard.

Whether through what Dr. Karan Singh calls "a national movement for population control" or what the late Shri. J.R.D. Tata referred to as "the evolution of a global concern on the issue of population", the need today is to catch the rampaging population bull by the horns. Therein lies the promise and hope for development — not only economic progress, but all-encompassing human progress in improving the quality of life of our people.

"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

- Eugene Black

FORUM OF FREE ENTERPRISE

The Forum of Free Enterprise is a non-political and non-partisan organisation started in 1956, to educate public opinion in India on free enterprise and its close relationship with the democratic way of life. The Forum seeks to stimulate public thinking on vital economic problems of the day through booklets and leaflets, meetings, essay competitions and other means as befit a democratic society.

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