

## POPULATION CONTROL : FOR OR AGAINST PEOPLE ?

Whereas Malthus related population and population growth to consumption, Engels and Marx related them to production. By the Malthusian hypothesis, population could be checked by means of forcing down the wages which would in turn lead to a natural increase in death rates. Marx posed the question as to whether overpopulation was in relation to the natural resources or to the needs of the prevailing system. This debate, the first on the issue of overpopulation represents to date the crux of the ideology supporting the reasons for population growth and consequently the measures necessary to curb it.

The capitalist mode of production as a prerequisite demands a surplus population from which an everready supply of human material — surplus labour — is created for exploitation. Overpopulation has therefore to be seen in terms of this mode of production and not as a consequence of the 'Eternal Laws of Nature' (Meek, 1971). In capitalist society the actual producers are alienated from the means of production because the latter are owned by the capitalist. Production is geared to the market demand and not to the human needs of the population. Therefore, the Malthusian prediction that growing populations would be the main cause of world-wide starvation is a historical error. The truth is not 'how many people' but 'how many people who can afford to buy enough food just to stay alive.'

In his polemical writings against the Utopian thinkers of his time, Malthus expressed contempt for the poor. He claimed that the unemployed poor were a burden on Nature's reserves and therefore, had no right to live, leave alone to reproduce. Biased heavily in favour of the English aristocracy, his pseudo-analysis about the 'inferior ranks of people' offers a rescue even today to population control propagators when they have to explain 'undesirable' events, the rational and truthful explanation of which can result in 'undesirable' consequences such as the conscientisation of the oppressed masses (Bondestam, 1980).

### The Real Facts About Poverty

Malthus' observation that a reduction in population size would release the otherwise limiting

resources is only apparently true. When the entire family lives at a subhuman level of subsistence, having lesser children does not increase the standard of living perceptibly. They still live below the poverty line; often all of their life is spent only in combating death from hunger and starvation. Escape from death however does not mean any improvement in the standard of living. Malnourishment, unhygienic conditions and strenuous physical labour, all together increase body weakness and decrease body resistance to acute and chronic disease. Morbidity creates further poverty (due to inability to work, expenditure on disease) and eventually leads to death. Either way death seems inevitable. The reason for producing or wanting to produce more children is economic and its resultant is the surplus lives produced.

Among the poor, the cost benefit of having more children is greater than when they have less. At a very young age, the child becomes either a direct wage earner or helps enhance the family income indirectly (baby sitting, filling water) by relieving the adults of household chores. Having many children is thus not only beneficial but also necessary because not all children that are born would live beyond the age of five. It is only when a steady income flows in regularly that having more children becomes a liability. A small family norm is a middle class value and to force the poor into accepting this norm without improving their economic and social conditions is inhuman.

Release of resources through population control is possible only when resources are universally available and uniformly distributed. The inequalities in access even to basic services such as health care become apparent through the fact that though 80 per cent of the Indian population is rural, only 46.2 per cent of the total health budget is allocated for this population. Worse still, the public health personnel are so overburdened with family planning responsibility that primary health care has become synonymous with birth control for the rural population.

The poor live in deficits and debts, therefore a reduction in family size will not create any savings. Population control cannot ensure that the released

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resources, however insignificant will be invested to benefit the poorer sections of society. A fair distribution of resources is possible only in a socialist society where the means of production are distributed fairly. The propaganda that population control will release available resources is just an eyewash (Quadeer 1976).

### Neo-Malthusians and The Ideology of Population Control

The Malthusian theory of arithmetic increase in food production and the geometrical increase in population and the ensuing doom was belied by bourgeois development in Europe in the 19th century as also through the import of this development into colonial India. It was at this point that the capitalist forces in the form of neo-Malthusian arguments introduced the 'population bomb' hysteria. Neo-Malthusian ideology was part of the reactionary counterstrategy against rising socialist forces. They propagate the view that demographic factors are the main cause of economic and social difficulties experienced by developing countries and to control natality is the neo-Malthusian solution. This propaganda is furthered to divert public attention from the real facts about poverty and in order to disorganise and weaken struggles aimed at democratisation.

The propagators of family planning can be broadly classified into people who apolitically and genuinely believe that population control is the answer to the world's problems and neo-Malthusians who use family planning to propagate their own ideology. But the distinction is not sharp. For instance Margaret Sanger who did pioneering work in challenging religious orthodoxy regarding contraception considered that the American public was being too heavily taxed to maintain a 'growing stock of morons' (referring to the American poor) who 'threatened the very foundation of American civilisation'. Her statement was recollected with fervour by the neo-Malthusians whilst unleashing a population control programme among poor Puerto Ricans with lowered intelligence.

The neo-Malthusian ideology holds the distribution of existing resources as being inversely proportional to the growth of the 'teeming millions'. The truth is that the existing resources are concentrated in the hands of a few in a capitalist order. The underlying fear behind this gross misrepresentation of facts is the imminent possibility of socialism gaining terrain due to the rising unrest among the unemployed and the exploited working class. Capitalists even today form the major donors to the

population control funds throughout the world, either through private agencies or through 'legitimate' government bodies.

### The Population Control Policy

The 1974 World Population Conference at Bucharest gave a call (in fact Dr. Karan Singh, the then Health Minister of India, did) for 'development being the best contraceptive'. Ironically, one year later, India plunged into coercive and inhuman sterilisations under the Emergency regime of Mrs. Gandhi. Even on the global level, governments of developing countries and private population control agencies were planning family planning as the primary strategy for development policies. Programmes were made more accessible, more attractive and more efficient (Wolfson, 1978).

Though donor agencies recognise social problems, very few have been prepared to support these activities without population control being the frontal strategy of approach to solve problems of poverty and unemployment. Maternal and child health (MCH) is the classical example where donor agencies have diverted their funds to, since MCH is closely related to fertility. Family planning comes along as an indispensable part of the package. Donors make it quite plain that they consider development to be impossible without curbing the birth rate. Family planning is the unavoidable condition to be fulfilled when a developing country asks for international aid.

In post-independent India, most of the leadership belonged to the upper and privileged classes. They often had westernised values and were sharply different from the people they were supposed to represent. Independent India had proclaimed socialism from the roof-tops but in truth only the Indian bourgeoisie as a class had benefited with the elite becoming more privileged day by day. Due to technical incompetence and the quest for profits, there was an increasing dependence on western countries for technical and monetary assistance. A vicious circle emerged because this dependence created further incompetence and servility. Foreign experts virtually shaped India's policies and also acquired a great deal of influence on their implementation (Banerji, 1980). As the economic condition of India deteriorated under free enterprise and lopsided development, foreign aid acquired a crucial role in shaping Indian policies. In the field of population control, western capitalists were able to push in their anti-third world ideology along with aid for 'development.'

India was the first developing country to begin implementing a national programme on family planning as a state policy in 1951. In 1963, a revised and extended variant of the official family planning (FP) programme was put into action. Population control (PC) has become a priority increasingly, in fact with fanatic fervour it has been proclaimed that PC is so urgent that it cannot await improvements in the economic and social fields. It is like putting the cart before the horse. Though the Fifth Five Year Plan promised a "frontal attack on the citadels of poverty" what was actually implemented was an inhuman, anti-poor PC programme.

The role of the Indian government in unleashing all the repressive state machinery on the poor for forced sterilisation has been condemned the world over (Wolfson, 1978). Yet, even today the use of force, pressure, utilisation of the bureaucracy and panchayats at village and taluka levels as well as monetary incentives have become accepted as a form of motivating people to accept FP. If PC is seen independent of development, then motivation and incentives are seen independent of the individual's social existence. Target methods and coercion can also be understood when PC is treated as a substitute for development (Mamdani, 1972). Family planning is much easier to implement than major advances in the areas of education or the economy and though it has been repeatedly stated that FP is part of the package of development, it has been thrust as a substitute for development and structural change.

### The Feminist Perspective

It cannot be denied that birth control has created more options for women. Knowledge and availability of birth control measures is a matter of women's rights because women should be allowed to govern their own fertility. Repeated pregnancies and the drudgery of constant child-rearing not being conducive to good health, it is of extreme importance that women have access to safe and effective methods of contraception.

The disturbing factor however is that the aggressive incentive based population control programme has not allowed this right to stay with the woman. Policy makers decide whether a woman should have children, if so how many or whether she should be allowed to abort her own foetus. Doctors and social workers in clinics for abortion and contraception tend to adopt moralistic attitudes. Pharmaceuticals decide that women should passively accept the contraceptives that fetch the largest

profits to the manufacturers. Third world women are constantly used for the field testing of dangerous contraceptives. Primarily black and Spanish-speaking women are targets of sterilisation in the USA. Cultural biases in India naturally compel a woman more than her husband to accept the FP operation and poor as well as lower caste rural women have been targets of the mass sterilisation camps as well as those for Copper-T insertions. Powerful patriarchal institutions in fact have strengthened their hold over the woman's reproductive organs through birth control.

Even the bourgeois state fills in the gaps either at home or outside it through population control and birth control. A woman's leaving home for a job does seem as though she has a greater freedom of choice, but in truth it is the flexibility and compulsion of the changes in the labour market that have left her with no choice but to enter the production force as a wage earner. Even if a woman is a wage earner, her family labour always comes first. The birth control policy monitors her 'reproductive' and 'productive' duties. Abortion laws should also be seen in the same context. Population control has increased state and international control on a woman's intimate physiological function under the guise of 'making available a birth right'.

The alarming anti-woman trend in the new reproductive technology (NRT) needs to be studied carefully. Unichem and German Remedies will probably be given the licences to manufacture the injectable contraceptive NET-EN in India. Hormonal implants which render infertility for upto five years are being tested on Indian women in spite of dangerous side-effects. Amniocentesis for female foeticide has been covertly recommended by FP propagators since girl babies are the future 'breeders'. Research to develop a 'male child pill' is being recommended (Postgate, 1973). With the growing concept of surrogate motherhood, women could be converted into breeders in a reproductive brothel where the most powerful socio-political control over women's reproduction would be made possible (Dworkin, 1983). Here, the 'valuable' ova and sperms from white couples could be merely incubated in the wombs of brown or black poor women, sterilised for convenience (Corea, 1984).

We open this issue with Ramala Buxamusa's article based on her Ph.D. thesis which exposes the impact that foreign aid has had on the Indian population policy. International aid to the third world for development contains major funds for

population control in an attempt to prevent the developing countries from becoming socialist. She traces how the initial resistance of the Indian government broke under international pressures.

Sucha Singh Gill's article convincingly examines the ideological content and class bias of the birth control programme. According to him, the emphasis of the Indian planners on population control is an attempt to weaken the class struggle in India.

In the third article, Kusha relates her experiences in a contraceptive testing unit in a working class area of Bombay. During her association with this unit for many years she saw contraceptives ranging from diaphragms to hormonal implants being tested for field trial on working class women inspite of the unpleasant and dangerous side effects they created. Her first hand experiences are eloquent.

Irina Sen focuses on the motivational aspect in the family planning programme. When the earlier subtle motivations failed to increase family planning acceptance, the government plunged into an aggressive disincentive based coercive birth control campaign. Irina examines the social and psychological theories on which the motivational strategy was founded and highlights the fallacies that accompany the present family planning programme.

Vimal Balasubrahmanyam takes a critical look at the trend in the incentives and disincentives in family planning without making a single comment! In a carefully prepared collage and not without a glint of humour, she traces the dangerous trend over a period of two years (1982-84).

The last article in this issue by Martha Gimenez is reproduced from the Review of Radical Political Economics. She discusses the micro economic and the sociological theories that analyse reproductive behaviour and presents a marxist critique of the same. She argues that reproduction should be conceptualised in the context of a given mode of production.

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