Population Control and Social Change


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This book contains the Bannaill Lectures (University of Patna) delivered by Dr Gyan Chand in March 1954. The main thesis, developed and analysed in these six lectures, centres round the need to secure social change as a pre-requisite to successful population planning. Such a change "needs an understanding of and a large measure of agreement in regard to the social purpose of the changes in question. This aspect of the matter has hardly received any attention in this country but in nevertheless of basic importance." The optimum population theory is not helpful in formulating a population policy for India. The author is of the view that even if population growth is slackened, problems of poverty and hunger cannot be substantially mitigated within the existing economic and social system. "These evils can be remedied by changing the economy and not by checking the growth of population".

In considering the population problem of India, what is of vital significance is not the rate at which the population tends to grow but the absolute increase in numbers of the population. The other features which make the growth of population a real problem are uneven geographical distribution and high degree of immobility within the country, as reflected by population trends of Rajasthan, Orissa and Travancore-Cochin. Such uneven spread and immobility may be explained by the absence of social drive, lack of new economic opportunities, excessive dependence on agriculture and the undeveloped nature of industry. In view of these particular aspects of the population problem, regional approach to population planning becomes necessary. In this context the redistribution of population from villages to towns seems to offer some solution.

Death Rate

A realistic economic policy will, however, have to be based upon the assumption that India's population will continue to expand since the prevailing high-death-rate might decline by the development of health services which may increase the survival rate and thus accelerate population growth. Although the available data on the death-rate shows a declining tendency, the actual death-rate after making due allowance for deficiencies in reporting agencies, appears to be high. The author estimates that every ten years population equal to the present population of Rajasthan "is being lost to this Country owing to our excessive death-rates". To prevent this colossal waste, immediate steps are necessary which make "the death-rate more a function of the entire economy and its limitations and not merely a matter of the development of health services". At the same time in devising these measures adequate attention should be given to the existing regional differences in birth and death-rates, as illustrated by the different trends of South India and Central India.

Planned Parenthood

The author then proceeds to discuss in the fourth lecture the practical utility of contraception vis-a-vis other methods of birth control. He advocates planned parenthood as a means of population planning but, urges that its greater significance lies in its ability "to master reproductive capacity and make it subservient to personal and general will." Judging the value of contraceptives by applying the tests of effectiveness, harmlessness and cheapness the author comes to the conclusion that the existing contraceptives fall short of satisfying these basic requirements and therefore, pleads for further research in this field. The implications of family planning are indeed of profound significance. Such planning 'in a society which is changing fast and is on the eve of great change, becomes a creative art of the highest importance in which the community and the individuals both play a crucial role.'

The author then considers the economic prospects from the standpoint of population policy, and in this context discusses in brief the various aspects of the Second Five Year Plan. In the context of growing population pressure and abysmal poverty, the author holds that future plans should be both bold and imaginative and for their smooth implementation recommends an overall reform in the administrative apparatus along with the tremendous organisational efforts required to build up socialist economy. Regarding the employment potential of the Plan, the author opines that the Plan "would just provide for mostly the increase in the working population in the next five years and hardly affect the existing amount of large unemployement in the country". The author considers that the economic development visualised in the Plan is likely to lead to social transformation, as a result of which population planning would become 'a part of social planning in general and thereby acquire great breadth of meaning and wide social appeal'.

Population Policy

In the concluding lecture, which deals with population policy, the author emphasises the need for social change as a must for successful population planning. The author argues cogently that any economic policy which brings changes in the entire social structure might be acceptable as a sound population policy, and from this point of view suggests increase in the rate of national output and a fair distribution of wealth. He further states that the population programme should broadly consist of such measures as the expansion of health, maternity and child welfare centres, the internal redistribution of population through industrialisation and town-planning, planner international emigration, formulation of a positive eugenic policy to counter-check the evil of inbreeding caused by caste-system, and a programme of specific and regional demographic studies.

These, in brief, are the considered views of Dr Gyan Chand as expounded in his lectures. He rightly
stresses inapplicability of the optimum population theory in relation to Indian population trends, which has tended to blur clear thinking on the population problem. Considering the absolute increase in population, and the rate at which the population tends to increase, the existing programme may, at best serve as a palliative rather than a solution. A new approach to the population problem becomes inevitable, if population growth is not to dissipate the gains made by economic development under the Plans. Dr Gyan Chand provides this new approach, which rests on three axioms: first, the prevailing poverty and hunger cannot be substantially mitigated within the existing economic and social systems; second, public economic policy for some time to come, will have to be based on the assumption of the continuing expansion of population; and third, birth-rate and death-rate will have to he made an essential function of the economy and not merely of health or social services.

... and Economic Policy

The validity of these axioms cannot be refuted or denied. The existing economic and social system, which has remained more or less stagnant and has indeed, deteriorated in certain directions under the impact of alien rule, cannot be expected to serve the needs of a new, and changing society. The second axiom follows from the first, while the third axiom, although unrelated to the first, in fact, provides the basis for determining the content and nature of the economic policy.

The change in the social and economic systems is, thus, at the core of what the author visualises as rational population policy. This elevates the population problem, altogether to a new plane where it becomes an integral part of overall social and economic planning and policy. This approach, however, presupposes that the population trends will respond to changes resulting from social and economic progress. But the process of change in backward societies is slow and gradual. A contemplated shift in population may also become a gradual process. Economic and social policy will have to be orientated as to conform to and facilitate this gradual process of shift. It, therefore, becomes necessary to plan such measures which might help to attain or to accelerate the process of shifting. The long-term social and economic policy which the author visualises, therefore, requires to be supplemented by a population programme based on available expedients.

The method of family regulation which the author recommends as a means of curbing population growth merits encouragement because the function of restraint to population growth is the primary responsibility of the individuals constituting the society. Although the success of such a method depends largely on the response of individuals, it remains to be seen whether the factors which have restrained the excessive growth of population in the West, will work similarly and as effectively in India. The existing social and ethnical differences and the hold of caste and religious influences may present certain formidable difficulties to the practice of family regulation even amid overall economic progress and development. Perhaps the possible alternative in such circumstances will be legalised abortions the effectiveness of which in checking the birth-rate has recently been demonstrated by Japan.

The programme of population planning which the author considers in the first three and the last lectures requires careful consideration by the planning authorities of this country. The programmes incorporated in the First and Second Plan, assessed in relation to the magnitude of the population problem, appear utterly inadequate and vague in approach; hardly any attempt has been made to study the problem from the regional point of view. Although planning is now under way over the last six years, measures contemplated for population planning are piecemeal and uncoordinated and cannot meet the basic requirements of the situation. The plea for a rational social and population policy put forth by the author comes at a time when the economy is already in the grip of a crisis. All such the lectures serve a most useful purpose.