UNIT 2  HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF IDEAS ABOUT POPULATION

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:
- describe Malthusian thinking on population and his critics;
- describe gender and birth control movements; and
- discuss ideas of Annie Besant, Margaret Sanger and Mahatma Gandhi about population and birth control.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the third decade of this century India’s rapid rise of population became a major concern. Until 1920, India’s population had been growing very slowly owing to the heavy toll from famines, epidemics and wars. According to Census reports, the Indian Population within its present geographical boundary actually declined between 1911 and 1921 from 252.1 to 251.3 million because of the high mortality inflicted by the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. About 5 percent of the country’s population—some 13 million persons—died in that epidemic (Davis, 1951). The population has increased steadily since 1921, largely because of the epidemic and famine control and sanitation measures undertaken by the provincial governments. For the first time since the initiation of a systematic population Census in 1881, India’s population increased slightly more than 10 percent (or 27.7 million) in a decade, with the 1931 census enumerating a population of 279.0 million (Census of India, paper I of 1951). Concern over the rapid rise in population arose from four quarters: intellectuals, social reformers (especially those interested in improving the status of women), the Congress party (the leading political party that spearheaded the movement for political independence) and the Government.
The longstanding equation of large populations with prosperity and good government began to change by the mid-nineteenth century, when British officials confronted a series of famines across the subcontinent. These famines, which occurred with shocking regularity from the 1860s onwards, led some administrators to question whether India was a land depleted of resources straining to support an excessively large population. Previous Indian rulers had also confronted famines, and the subcontinent was vulnerable to such crises because of its dependence upon monsoon rains. However, the British were the first to develop an official policy that mandated specific responses to famine conditions.

To frame this policy, some administrators turned to Thomas Robert Malthus. According to Malthus, population growth could be limited either by preventive checks, which lowered the birth rate, or positive checks, which raised the death rate. Preventive checks included such measures as postponement of marriage, celibacy, or contraception, whereas positive checks involved war, disease, or starvation.

2.2 MALTHUS AND HIS CRITICS

In his famous treatise ‘An Essay on the Principles of Population’, 1798, Malthus stated that, the populations of the world would increase in geometric progression while the food resources available for them would increase only in arithmetic progression. In simple words, if human population was allowed to increase in an uncontrolled way, then the number of people would increase at a faster rate than the food supply. A point would come when human population would reach the limit beyond which food sources will not be able to support it. This would check the population growth caused by natural phenomena like famine or disease.

According to Malthus, human society is never at a perfect stage. When there are constraints in food supply due to increase in population, man works hard to provide enough for his family. This might lead to an increase in agricultural production to provide for all, but at the same time man will be complacent when all his needs are fulfilled. This would push the cycle of overpopulation and food shortage, all over again. Being a clerk, Malthus validated his theory on moral grounds that suffering was a way of making human beings realize the virtues of hard work and moral behaviour. Such kind of suffering due to overpopulation and limited food supply was inevitable.

Malthus made two main assumptions:

i) Food is an essential component for human existence.

ii) Humans have the basic urge to multiply.

Malthus’ theory was based on the notion that the power of population to multiply is much greater than the power of the earth to provide subsistence for them. In his own words “passion between the sexes is an inevitable phenomenon”; hence, when unchecked, population would grow at such a high rate that it would outstrip food supply. According to him, disease, food shortage and death due to starvation, were nature’s way to control population. He proposed that human beings adopt measures like infanticide, abortion, delay in marriage and celibacy to check population growth.
According to Malthus, the entire scenario of population growth is a complex one. Excess population meant greater supply of working labour force ready to work at the available wage rate and in this way they could support their families. This will lead to an increase in the overall demand for food outstripping its supply. Thus prices will increase and inflation will set in. This inflationary pressure will affect the already distressed poor section of the society. The poor will work more to improve their situation and will also consider reducing the family size so that they have less mouth to feed. However, this will only last till the population equals the food supply and the inflation ceases; after which, overall standard of living will rise and so will the population explosion reaching the same point. Hence, he called it a vicious cycle.

Proposed Solutions

Malthus has proposed two main solutions to the problem of population explosion.

Positive Check

This method results in increase in death rate. He described this as God’s way of restoring the natural balance. It includes famines, hunger, epidemics, war and other natural miseries which cause large-scale deaths. Although it helps in controlling the population growth, it also causes widespread misery and pain. Hence, it is not regarded as an ideal solution to population problem.

Preventive or Negative Check

This method refers to human effort in reducing the birth rate. It is more practically and logically applicable. Abortion, prostitution, postponement of marriage, birth control and celibacy are few measures that were advised to be strictly followed in order to help solve the problem.

Moral Restraint

This is regarded as a universally applicable solution keeping up with the ideologies of virtue, economic gain and social improvement. According to this principle, one should refrain from marriage till the time he is capable of supporting a family with food, clothing and shelter. Until then he should follow strict celibacy. In the words of Geoffrey Gilbert, “He (Malthus) went so far as to claim that moral restraint on a wide scale was the best means indeed, the only means of easing the poverty of the lower classes.”

Impact

Malthus’ theory had great influence on both Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace, who are the co-founders of the modern evolutionary theory. In his own words, Darwin acknowledged, that he was already aware of the ‘struggle for existence’ among different species of plants and animals. However, it was only after he read Malthus’ work that he realized that animals in their struggle to survive retained the favourable features that would help them adjust to the environment, and lost those that were of no use to them. Thus, the Theory of Natural Selection was born.

By the end of the 19th century, when living standards improved and birth rates dropped in the Western countries, concerns of overpopulation became irrelevant. However, in under-developed countries which have agrarian economies, Malthus’ theory often finds credibility.
Some critics like Karl Marx, argued that Malthus failed to recognize the potential of human population to increase food supply. He failed to comprehend man’s ability to use science and technology to increase food supply to meet the needs of an increasing population.

Thinkers from the field of social sciences have criticized Malthus for his belief that the human society could never be made perfect. Malthus opposed all political, social and economic reforms which did not address at controlling birth rate. The methods proposed by him for checking population growth were mostly impractical. Poor Laws was popular in England as it provided relief to the people who qualified as poor under the laws. Malthus was also against this and believed that the poor should remain in the state of financial distress as such charity only provided short term benefits. From his writings, some have interpreted Malthus as a stiff and pessimistic individual. However, to some he was a pragmatic thinker, who brought in fresh ideas to the issue of population growth.

**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:**

a) Use the space below for your answer.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1) What were the main assumptions of Malthusian theory on population?

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2) What were the proposed solutions by Robert Malthus?

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### 2.3 GENDER AND BIRTH CONTROL MOVEMENTS

During the first two decades of the 20th century, a steady stream of Indian intellectuals and civil servants visited England for higher education or for training for posts in the Indian Civil Service. During their stay in England, they were exposed to Malthusian theories and to the establishment of Neo-Malthusian leagues in England and elsewhere in Europe. As a result they became aware of positive checks likely to operate on a population increasing beyond its means of subsistence. In the Western World, India was routinely cited as an example of a population likely to be subjected to such positive checks—wars, famines and epidemics—because of the extreme poverty prevailing in the country and the prolific breeding.

The Indians who visited England became keenly committed to the ideas of birth control as means of regulating population growth and formed the Neo-Malthusian League in Madras in July, 1929. Some prominent public personalities joined the league in Madras. They published a propaganda journal.
Population control has been a central concern of population scientists and activists throughout the 20th century. In its negative and over-simplistic sense, it has remained a popular topic of discussion among the elites such as academics, doctors, businessmen, political leaders and bureaucrats. Even in the pre-independent India, from P.K. Wattal, B.T. Ranadive and Radhakamal Mukherjee in 1930s (some demographers subscribe to similar views even today), to the series of politicians taking steps to check the increase in population to the bureaucrats, Megan and Leonard Rogers have, shaped the attitude of authoritarianism of the higher and middle class in India on the population issue over last 70 years. Radhakamal Mukherjee convened the first Indian Population Conference in Lucknow in 1936. He also headed the sub-committee on population of the “National Planning Committee” of the Indian National Congress in the 1930s.

Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, and the visionary leader and first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, opposed the inhuman, negative, anti-poor and anti-women tendencies and narrow approaches to population control. It was evident when India introduced the official family planning programme as a part of the 5-year development plans from 1951.

The Post-World War II international movement for population control and family planning had its ideological foundations. Demographers, birth control proponents and other population activists shifted their attention from the poor and minorities and started paying attention towards the poor and underdeveloped countries. In the 1950s and 60s, U.S. Government was influenced by population activists to lead on the international platform. The fear of the “population bomb” and “population explosion” was too much similar to that of a nuclear war. Doomsayers, like Paul Ehrlich, cemented international fears of population explosion in India and China, and the threat to security of U.S. A Neo-Malthusian twist was given to the issue by arguing that backwardness, poverty, unemployment and all other hardships in poor countries were only due to “over-population”, and hence, birth control must be the priority.

The Neo-Malthusian view of economic development argued that over population is a cause of poverty, rather than a result of poverty. This argument was based on the assumption that poor and underdeveloped countries and particularly lower class communities are responsible for their poverty. Their fertility, therefore, must be controlled to ensure greater economic prosperity for the families of the poor, for their nations, and for the world as a whole, since the large poor populations in the third world are considered a drain on the world’s resources.

The Marxists considered the Neo-Malthusian view as “reactionary”. Other anti-Neo-Malthusians and liberals like E. Dupreel, the Belgian sociologist and Julian Simon became the exponents of a saner and more rational view of population. Many economists dismissed the ‘Club of Rome’ Report. Simon (1981) remarked “People with a lot of education tend to lack respect for the
capacity of people who are poor and have had less education, to cope, and may therefore worry that they won’t be able to handle their problems in their parts of the world”.

One of the direct outcomes and fallouts of the international and U.S. policy and strategy in the 1950s and 60s in India was the system of “family planning targets” initiated in 1966. After the slow phase-by-phase introduction of a “clinical” approach and an “extension” plus IEC approach, an aggressive method-specific targeting and new invasive method for women (like IUD) were taken up. The National Family Planning Programme was incorporated within the MCH system where MCH workers were given targets to motivate a particular number of men and women to “accept” different kinds of contraceptives month-by-month. A system of rewards and penalties, and competitions was build-in for State Governments, Hospitals, Districts and MCH workers.

The evolution of population stabilization efforts in India by government goes back to the onset of five year development plans in 1951-52. A national programme was launched which emphasized “family planning” to the extent necessary for reducing birth rates to stabilize the population at a level consistent with the requirement of national economy. A clinic-based approach with equal emphasis on natural method like rhythm as on some contraceptives was taken cautiously, along with awareness building and research on new contraceptives and their acceptability. A Family Planning Research and Programme Committee was constituted, which in its first meeting at Bombay in July 1953 took quite a comprehensive and broader view of the family planning. To quote their report: “The committee emphasized that the family planning programme should not be conceived of in the narrow sense of birth control or merely of spacing of the birth of children. The purpose of Family Planning was to promote, as far as possible, the growth of the family as a unit of society, in a manner designed to facilitate the fulfilment of those conditions which were necessary for the welfare of the unit from the social, economic and cultural points of view. The functions of a Family Planning Centre would include sex education, marriage counselling, the spacing of children, and advice on such other measures (including on infertility) as necessary to promote welfare of the families”.

2.3.1 Margaret Sanger and Annie Besant

Feminists have always been divided on the importance of birth control to women’s liberation. Early feminists such as Annie Besant (1847–1933) in England, Emma Goldman (1869–1940) and Margaret Sanger (1883–1966) in the United States were pioneers in the birth control movement. However, most U.S. suffragists at the start of the twentieth century dissociated themselves from birth control, due to the belief that its advocacy was too controversial and might hurt their principal goal of gaining women the right to vote. In later year’s feminist activists in rich nations supported access to contraceptives to allow women and couples to limit fertility, with the view that this would improve women’s lives and status.

Margaret Sanger migrated to Britain and it was while she was in London she met Marie Stopes. She later recalled: “She then explained to me that, owing to her previous unfortunate marriage she had no experience in matters of neither contraception nor any occasion to inform her of their use Could I tell
her exactly what methods were used? I replied that it would give me the
greatest pleasure to bring to her home such devices as I had in my possession.
Accordingly, we met again the following week for dinner in her home, and
inspected and discussed the French pessary which she stated she then saw
for the first time. I gave her my own pamphlets, all of which contained
contraceptive information.” After hearing Sanger’s story Marie Stopes decided
to start a birth-control campaign in Britain. She knew it would be dangerous
as several people in Britain, including Richard Carlile, Charles Bradlaugh and
Annie Besant, had been sent to prison for advocating birth-control.

At the March 1925 International Birth Control gathering in New York City,
Dr. S. Adolphus Knopf, a member of Margaret Sanger’s American Birth
Control League (ABCL) warned of the menace posed by the “black” and
“yellow” peril. Margaret Sanger spoke of sterilizing those she designated as
“unfit”; a plan she said would be the “salvation of American civilization”. She
also spoke of those who were, “irresponsible and reckless” among whom she
included those “whose religious scruples prevent their exercising control over
their numbers”. From the beginning, Sanger’s advocacy of ‘sex education’
reflected her interest in population control and birth prevention among the
“unfit’. The eugenic theme figured prominently in the Birth Control Review,
which Sanger founded in 1917. She published such articles as “Some Moral
Aspects of Eugenics” (June 1920), “The Eugenic Conscience” (February 1921),
“The Purpose of Eugenics” (December 1924), “Birth Control and Positive
Eugenics” (July 1925), “Birth Control: The True Eugenics” (August 1928) and
many others. Sanger’s obsession with eugenics can be traced back to her
own family. One of 11 children, she wrote in the autobiographical book, ‘My
Fight for Birth Control’ (1931), that “I associated poverty, toil, unemployment,
drunkenness, cruelty, quarrelling, fighting, debts and jails with large families.”
Just as important was the impression in her childhood of an inferior family
status, exacerbated by the iconoclastic, “free-thinking” views of her father,
whose “anti-Catholic attitudes did not make for his popularity” in a
predominantly Irish community.

In the sixth international Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference held
in New York in 1925, an Indian representative, Taraknath Das, countered the
“Yellow peril”, with evidence for the “white peril”, and while endorsing the
dissemination of “birth control, emphasized that “it has to be only a part of
a programme that aimed at poverty, poor health and ignorance, that were the
root cause of India’s population problem”. He looked at birth control within
a broader health and social development perspective to “afford greater freedom
to women and greater opportunity for real education”. A demographer, Louis
Dublin warned against disregard of “the permanent interests of the state” by
promoting birth control. He cautioned on the issue of contraceptive safety and
reliability. The issue of “control of fertility” remained unresolved: “how to be
controlled, by whom, and for what purpose”.

2.3.2 Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi had assessed and felt the pulse of the masses as no other
leader or elitist had done. It is a pity that many Neo-Malthusian scholars and
stand-alone family planning activists accuse Gandhiji of his negative attitude
to population issue. From the records of Margaret Sanger’s encounter with
him, it is very clear that Gandhi had a clear vision that Indians should have
smaller, but healthier families. He had agreed that uncontrolled reproduction was a social problem. He was a strong advocate for gender justice and women’s empowerment for enabling women to take decisions on child bearing and to negotiate with their husbands to observe abstinence.

The birth control program initiated in Bombay and Madras did not spread very rapidly because of Mahatma Gandhi’s strong moral opposition to the use of artificial methods of birth control. Gandhi the most influential leader of congress party and the Indian freedom movement, conceded that India’s population growth had to be contained by reducing the number of children each couple had, but he denounced artificial methods of birth control. He argued that sexual abstinence was the only ethical means of birth control. He wrote periodically in his magazines, young India and Navjivan (New Life): “The society that has already become enervated through a variety of causes will become still further enervated by the adoption of artificial methods. Those men, therefore, who are light-heartedly advocating artificial methods cannot do better than study the subject afresh, state their injurious activity and popularize brahmacharya (celibacy) both for married and un-married. This is the only noble and straight method of birth control (Gandhi, 1925 cited in Prabhu, 1959:5)”

In spite of opposition put forward by Gandhi for the use of birth control methods, the Women’s movement in India and the various voluntary organizations continued to propagandize and support the use of artificial methods of family planning. The All India Women’s conference, constituted to improve the status of women in society, at their annual meeting in Trivandrum focussed on birth control and invited Martin and Sanger. A number of opposing views were expressed, but after a considerable debate, the conference adopted a resolution approving birth control for health and welfare reasons. Martin and Sanger took this opportunity to meet Gandhi and discuss with him the use of artificial methods for family planning despite their efforts to convert him to their side, Gandhi stood firm and rejected the use of artificial methods of family planning.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space below for your answer.
   b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1) Why was thinking of Malthus on Population was criticized?

2) What was the thinking of Annie Besant, Margaret Sanger and Mahatma Gandhi on birth control?
2.4 LET US SUM UP

This unit helps you acquire an understanding of the major theories, findings, and debates that have emerged from attempts to explain trends in population growth, concern about natural resources and debates surrounding gender and birth control. The main idea is to historically map the debates on population and birth control and introduce you to thoughts of some of the major thinkers on the issue. Ideas of Annie Besant, Margaret Sanger and Mahatma Gandhi explain the history of birth control movements while taking into account various perspectives on the issue.

2.5 KEY WORDS

Malthusian theory: Malthusian theory states that the populations of the world would increase in geometric progression while the food resources available for them would increase only in arithmetic progression.

Gender: Gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of men and women, the way societies distinguish between men and women and assign them social roles.

Birth Control: Birth Control also known as contraception and fertility control, are methods or devices used to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

Family Planning: Planning, provision and use of birth control is called family planning.

Neo-Malthusian Theory: The neo-malthusian theory follows Malthus’ theory that the world’s resources will not be able to support the population at a certain point, and the population will turn to chaos, finally resulting in extinction of humans. It indicates a correlation between food and population growth.

Abortion: Abortion is the termination of pregnancy by the removal or expulsion from the uterus of a foetus or embryo prior to viability.

2.6 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


2) National Population Policy, 2000

3) Shaman, Diana, Margaret Sanger: The Mother of Birth Control, reprinted from March CORONET, 1966.


2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1) Your answer must include the following points:
   - Food is an essential component for human existence.
   - Humans have the basic urge to multiply.
   - Power of population to multiply is much greater than the power of the earth to provide subsistence for them.

2) Your answer must include the following points:
   - Positive Check, Preventive or Negative Check
   - Moral Strain i.e. one should avoid marriage till one is capable of earning one’s own livelihood.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) Your answer must include the following points:
   - Failed to comprehend man’s ability to use science and technology to increase food supply to meet the needs of an increasing population.
   - Methods of checking population growth were impractical.
   - Misanthropic views and rigid and pessimistic individual.

2) Your answer must include the following points:
   - Annie Besant pioneer of birth control movement.
   - Sanger advocated ‘sex education’
   - Gandhi had a clear vision that Indians should have smaller, but healthier families. He was a strong advocate for gender justice and women’s empowerment.