

Development and Population Control

POINTS TO DEVELOP

Planned development not necessarily enough to control population.

Increase in population has diluted every achievement on development front.

Development has not benefited a majority.

An economic growth rate marginally higher than the population growth rate produces counter-productive effect on demography.

How to counter the vicious syndrome; (i) increase economic growth sharply and ensure equitable distribution. (ii) reduce population growth drastically.

Difficulties involved.

Development, according to many analysts, is “the best contraceptive”. But if we look at India, there seems to be some doubt about the statement’s truth. In India, planned development and family planning have been going on for over four decades now. But our population problem has only become more disturbing over the time. The fruits of development are seen on the food front where production has gone up three and a half times since 1951. Life expectancy has increased, so has the gross domestic production. Schools have proliferated. However, population growth has not slowed down much.

The increase in population, in fact, dilutes every improvement in India’s national development. If the population rise had been contained, the same economic achievements would have resulted in a significant development of our people.

The gap between GDP and per capita income indicates the adverse effect of a large population on standard of living. Another aspect of development in India is the skewed distribution of the GDP, which has denied any effective rise in the living standards of most Indians. Nearly 30 per cent of the people still live below the poverty line and many more just hover over the border line. The benefits of development have been mostly cornered by a small percentage of people, with only some small portions ‘trickling’ down to the majority. The existing standard of living is just about maintained so that there is a low death rate but no appreciably high reduction in the birth rate.

An economist would say there has been failure on the population front rather than in development. Then, surely, development cannot be 'the best contraception'. A population expert would say that if the development efforts have not led to any significant reduction in the population growth, it is because of the low rate of economic or production growth vis-à-vis the rapid population growth and the unequal distribution of the small benefits. The 25 or so percent of our people who have benefited from the development process have generally shown a significant fall in birth rate to maintain a substantial rise in their living standards. For the remaining 75 percent, the rise in the living standards is so marginal that it has simply resulted in lowering of the death rate without a corresponding decline in the birth rate. Thus, it is not development per se, but the rate of development and the distributive factor of its benefits that are critical for the development process to be effective in controlling the population growth.

Two ways are possible to overcome this problem. Either increase the economic growth rate to at least three or four times the present population growth rate even while ensuring equitable distribution, or reduce the population growth drastically to one-third or so of what exists now, again keeping in mind the distribution aspect. Raising the economic growth rate substantially further will take much effort and discipline. A high growth rate is also bound to cause serious damage to the ecological balance, for we are not technologically so advanced or so well-endowed financially to buy environmental –friendly development processes. The other alternative of bringing down population through a vigorous and effective promulgation of family planning programmes at once conjures up the nightmare of the Emergency ways.

However, when we talk of development, we may enlarge term's meaning to include human development. It is only through developing human beings – through literacy, education, better health facilities- that we can hope to have an impact on population growth. Mere economic development will not do. If the state concentrated on what is called the 'social sectors' and provides for development with a human face, only then can we have healthy and aware human beings who will have a stake in keeping the size of their families small.