

The population bomb is ticking

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has taken an initiative to formulate a policy focusing on one child per family instead of current average of 2.7. But it appears that the measures run counter to achieving the goal. Many countries in the deepest demographic trouble imposed aggressive family planning programmes, only to see them go badly awry.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

FOR folks inclined to fret that that the earth is heading for an environmental abyss the population problem has always been one of the biggest causes for worry. In the slums of Dhaka city, tens of thousands of people shelter in huts made of cardboard with polythene roofs. There is no running water and no sanitation. The stench is overpowering: garbage and human waste heap up in piles. With 13 million residents -- up from 320,000 only 30 years ago -- Dhaka is considered the most populous urban centre on earth.

Ultimately, no problem may be more threatening to the environment than the proliferation of the human species. Today, the planet holds more than 6 billion people. During the current century, world population will double, with 90% of that occurring in poorer countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and most African countries.

In the poorest countries, growth rates are outstripping the national ability to provide the bare necessities. Trees are being chopped down for fuel and croplands over-plowed by desperate farmers. Climatic disruption in recent time, followed by salinity intrusion, shrinking farmlands and crop losses and hunger on a scale never known before are now a reality.

The prospect is horrifying, and this is what Lester Brown, president of the World Watch Institute predicts for 2050, when the earth's population will have more than doubled from the present 6 billion and the capacity of science to devise methods for coaxing more food

out of the soil will, in his view, be greatly diminished.

The population of Bangladesh in 1971 was 75 million, and in less than 40 years it has crossed 140 million. The Draft Population Policy, 2009 advocates introduction of single-child families [AK1] by 2015, which is not only an ambitious target but also a daunting challenge. There is no denying the fact that any government trying to achieve the Millennium Development Goals or socio-economic goals must contain the population boom.

With about 1,000 people living in one sq km in the countryside and the present birth rate of 1.4, resulting in an increase of 2.7 per family, there would be about 30 lakh new mouths to be fed every year. Consequently the agricultural land in the country continues to decrease by one percent every year, reducing the present cultivable land to 60 lakh hectare from 90 lakh hectare in 1980.

With population increasing even at this rate, we will become more populous and impoverished than many larger Asian countries. The horrifying poverty, with images of starvation, has captured the attention of the people. The burgeoning population will create huge pressure on every sector.

If there is a key to population control in developing countries, experts agree, it lies in improving the social status of women. Women in this region have little political or legal rights, and not many receive schooling that prepares them for roles outside the home. So said Robert Berg, president of the International Development Conference: "Expanding educational and employment opportunities for women is necessary for permanently addressing population issue."

Prospects are so dire that some environmentalists urge the world to cut the earth's population growth rate by half during the next decade. "That means a call for two-child family for the world as a whole," explained Lester Brown. That may be a daunting challenge. In the past, many poor nations, including Bangladesh, condemned the notion of family planning as an imperialist and racist scheme. But in reality, today all Third World countries are committed to limiting their populations.

The government must speed up the effort in limiting population. Contraceptive information and devices should be available to anyone who wants them. According to surveys made by the United Nations and other organisations, most couples belonging to the middle-income group in developing countries do not want more than two children because of the gruelling experiences they have in supporting large families with limited income. Yet, many have little or no access to effective methods of birth control. The increase in funds for family planning devices could shave projected world population from 10 billion to 8 billion over the next 60 years.

Bruce Wilcox, president of the Institute for Sustainable Development, an environmental research organisation in the U.S., declared in 1989 that solutions to the population challenge would demand "fundamental changes in society." Ingrained cultural attitudes that promote high birth rates will have to be challenged. Many families in poor agrarian societies like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan see children as a source of labour and a hedge against poverty in old age. People need to be taught that with lower infant mortality, fewer offspring can provide the same measure of security.

Of all entrenched values, religion presents perhaps the greatest obstacle to population control. Roman Catholics have fought against national family planning efforts in Mexico, Kenya and the Philippines, while radical Muslim groups have done the same in Iran, Egypt, Pakistan and in parts of Bangladesh. Still, religious objections need not entirely thwart population planning. Where such resistance is

encountered, vigorous campaigns should be mounted to promote natural birth-control techniques, including the rhythm method and fertility delay through breast-feeding.

The first great brake on population growth came in the early 1960s, with the development of birth control pill, a magic pharmacological bullet that made contraception easier than it had been before. In 1969, the United Nations got in on the population game, creating the U.N. population Fund that brought family planning techniques to women who would not otherwise have them. The most significant step came in the 1994 Cairo conference, where attendees pledged \$5.7 billion to reduce birth rates in the developing world and acknowledged that giving women more education and reproductive freedom was the key to accomplishing the goal. True, even global calamity like AIDS has yielded unprecedented dividends, with international campaigns to promote condom use and abstinence helping to prevent not only disease transmission but also conception.

It was learnt from reports published in *The Daily Star* on December 12 last that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has taken an initiative to formulate a policy focusing on one child per family instead of current average of 2.7.

But it appears that the measures run counter to achieving the goal. Many countries in the deepest demographic trouble imposed aggressive family planning programmes, only to see them go badly awry. In the 1970s Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi tried to reduce the national birthrate by offering men cash incentives if they underwent vasectomies. In the communities in which these sweeteners failed the government resorted to coercion, putting millions of males from on the operating table. Amid the popular backlash that followed, Gandhi's government was turned out of office, and the public rejected family planning.

Even though family planning had a bad reputation after the abandonment of the Indian government's programme in the 1970s, states like Tamil Nadu still set birthrate targets and instructed



Too many to manage.

health workers to urge women of reproductive age to be sterilised. In fact, nurses earned bonuses based on how many sterilisation they encouraged.

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In 1992, Tamil Nadu finally dropped its "by-the-numbers" policy, setting an action that was later adopted by India as a whole. The change paralleled the consensus reached at the U.N.'s 1994 population conference in Cairo, which rejected target-based birth control in favour of giving women better health care and more family-planning choices.

Perhaps India has now a more humane and effective population policy, and much of the credit goes to people like Nirmala (32) who headed the village Health Nurse Association in Tamil Nadu. The committed nurse visited 5,000 or more people, treating all sorts of illnesses and offering contraceptive tips, she left smiles on the faces of women she visited.

Long before the Cairo conference, Nirmala complained about the birth control "numbers game," but superiors told her she would be "suspended" if she challenged policy. Only in 1992 did she get a real hearing when S. Ramasundaran

took over Tamil Nadu's family welfare program.

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According to the draft policy, yet to be made public, couples who had only one child would be provided with due preference in all state facilities, including government assistance. Sensible citizens believe that such incentives to chosen people would create schisms that would rather push the government into another crisis situation.

We don't need to offer incentives or even resort to draconian measures for achieving family planning targets. Simply remove the shackles and let people do what they were supposed to do. The fact is: men particularly concern themselves with birth control. But as Nirmala says: "Family planning is a social responsibility." You can't call it family planning, she feels, until the whole family is involved.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET. e-mail: aukhanbd@gmail.com

Anxious times for India

What the Centre has done will create unrest in the country. The signs are already there. The appointment of another commission on the reorganization of states would only open the Pandora's Box. Even a small linguistic group might claim a state of its own. Many chauvinists would go on fast unto death because that is the quickest way to achieve "their demand."

KULDIP NAYAR

IT was Information Officer of the then India's Home Minister, Govind Ballabh Pant, when the Fazl Ali Commission submitted the report on Reorganization of States in 1954. While working on the proposals, Pant would often say why they had taken up the controversial task of redrawing the map of India first when there were so many urgent problems facing the country. Fifty five years later, the nation can rightly pose the same question to the rulers. In fact, the problems have increased: insurgency, terrorism, price rise or unemployment.

Carving out Telangana from Andhra Pradesh in the south is not so much a problem as is the timing. India was beginning to pick up the rhythm of development after the recession. But the Congress party

panicked over the fast unto death by K. Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR), chief of Telangana Rashtra Samiti, and conceded the demand even at midnight. Should New Delhi have disturbed the hornets' nest at a time when numerous ethnic or linguistic groups want a state of their own? With 70 per cent of people immersed in dire poverty, the government's first task should have been how to find bread for them, not to pock at the sleeping dogs.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, too had panicked when Potti Sriramula, a person from Andhra Pradesh, went on fast unto death. That was when the Fazl Ali Commission was appointed. Nehru subsequently admitted that he made a mistake and should have attended to other pressing problems before taking up the reorganization of states. In fact, the Dar Committee, appointed by

Constituent Assembly, said that carving of the new state could wait for some years. Still Nehru went ahead.

As far Telangana, the Fazl Ali Commission had recommended its formation because it felt that the territory, primarily the old Nizam State, was linguistically and culturally different from the rest of Andhra. The twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad were pre-ponderingly Urdu-speaking and they did not fit into Andhra, a state with the official language of Telugu. It is another matter that in the last 50-odd years the state has got integrated administratively and economically.

Indeed, there are genuine voices, as have been heard after the announcement of Telangana that Andhra Pradesh should stay united.

There was a strong opposition when Nehru amalgamated Telangana and Andhra into one state of Andhra just as he forcibly merged Gujarat and Maharashtra into one state. Gujarat broke away and became a separate state through agitation. But Telangana stayed as part of Andhra Pradesh, although the demand for separation did not die down. The debate in the country is more about the hurried manner in which the central government has accepted the demand for Telangana. What was the urgency that pushed the government to announce the split of the state?

The message that has gone around is

that New Delhi can be bent if some determined elements come out on the streets. Violence has come to matter. Agitators justify it on the ground that their cause is just. Burning public property or breaking the law and order machinery is considered in order to achieve the end. The atmosphere of the entire country has been charged, tension reaching as far as Assam.

I suspect that when the top Congress leaders, including Sonia Gandhi and her political advisor, Ahmad Patel, met to decide about the creation of Telangana, they had politics uppermost in their minds -- how the decision would translate itself into votes. (KCR has said that Sonia made him as her son and gave him Telangana). The British were motivated by "imperial interests" when they carved out states. The Congress is goaded by "political considerations," just as the BJP was when it created the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttranchal a few years ago, carving them out of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and UP, respectively.

The creation of linguistic states is understandable but applying the principle to accommodate every ethnic group is akin to playing with fire. Small states are welcome because they are more accessible to the people. There is a livelier sense of local needs and the government can appreciate them more realistically than

the administration in large units. The governance is intimate and readily responds to the people's needs.

But how small is the question. Economic viability and historical and cultural considerations too are relevant. All the three states which the BJP constituted for political reasons are on the drip which the Centre sustains. They are known for corruption. Jharkhand has the distinction of electing corrupt chief ministers, one after another. One of them is behind the bars. The last chief minister, Madhu Khoda, has reportedly made Rs. 4,000 crore in less than two years when fresh election was called.

Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, next to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, has announced that there will be no more states after Telangana. It is like bolting the gate after the horse had run away. How can the Centre make such a sweeping statement when it has capitulated under pressure in the case of Telangana? Already there are agitations and fasts at some eight places, all wanting a state of their own. The government should have consulted at least the Andhra chief minister before announcing Telangana. It could have insisted on a referendum or the resolution by the state assembly. It did nothing like that and charged into China shop like a bull.

The question is a larger one. It is lack of development and indifferent administration. Without having the basic necessities and impartial police as the guardians, people increasingly believe that they have only to exert pressure to get their due or to have closer governance. (Swiss Gantons are the only places where it has been possible to realize the ideal of direct democracy.)

What the Centre has done will create unrest in the country. The signs are already there. The appointment of another commission on the reorganization of states would only open the Pandora's Box. Even a small linguistic group might claim a state of its own. Many chauvinists would go on fast unto death because that is the quickest way to achieve "their demand." This may tell upon the country's unity.

Political parties should get together to consider how to reach out to the people who do not get any benefit from the system. Electoral reforms are needed to ensure that small groups have participation, maybe through proportional representation. The government cannot afford to ignore the fallout of Telangana. The country is facing anxious times. However unthinking the Congress may have been in its decision, all political parties should help it at this time to put out fires. They can consume all, not the Congress alone.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

Sustaining tradition with entrepreneurship

There is a modest demand for the traditional Monipuri handloom items in the market. Of late with traditional excellence, there has been increment in pattern and item varieties. Whether in charm or standard Monipuri merchandise is bright in exclusivity. But to create a steep demand for these items, they perhaps need to improve them a bit more. And for that invest a bit more.

MANIK CHOWDHURY

COLTHING items are certainly the most wanted and most sold ones during festivals like Eid and Puja. And those involved from manufacturing to trading of these are believed to make a hay day of the occasion. Promila Devi and her husband Nani Gopal Singha of Lala Dighir Par, Sylhet were also supposed to get a share of the bonanza, because they are very much in the process.

But in reality it didn't exactly happen that much for them. Perhaps because the Monipuri items are more traditional than 'modern' and perhaps less gorgeous and fashionable than exotic ones in the eyes of 'modern' consumers. But the products and items are no way undergraduate. Rather these have a classic traditional edge over many others. These only need some addition of gloss and trendy designs and a bit of publicity.

Counting not so satisfactory extra earning of the season, Promila Devi and Nani Gopal Singha must be contemplating 'improvements.'

Lala Dighir Par is a famous place in Sylhet

city. Ask any one he would show you the way. And why not be famous. 'Dighi' in Bengali means large tank. But it's not large, rather a vast tank with metallic banks and surrounding walkway. The place has derived its name from the tank's.

There is a Vaishnav temple on one side of the tank. And around this temple live 29 Monipuri families. Their specialty is that each family has one or more than one weaver, better call weaving artist, and most of the families have one or more than one loom in each house. Those don't have loom in house, use neighbour's at a mutually convenient time. They produce Monipuri shawls, wrappers, sarees, bedsheets and bedcovers etc. of colourful designs and patterns.

These weaving artists are all women. Male members generally work outside home. Some are mechanic-technicians by occupation, some are shopkeepers, some work in offices, some are also teachers. Their households run on male-female joint income.

After finishing daily household chores, women sit on the loom. School/college going girls also join hands with mothers

after class hours. But operation of loom or any such production job where raw material and its processing is involved requires capital. Procurement of yarn and its sorting and colouring involve a sizable expenditure. No household saving can meet it. What the male members earn often fall short of meeting everyday essentials' cost, not to think of contributing to capital mobilisation. Relations and acquaintances? They aren't as affluent, of course.

Then, should this traditional, rather a heritage of cottage industry be gradually lost in oblivion for want of capital? No. Before such ominous time could come microcredit provided by some special institutions reached their sphere to meet their comparatively small capital need. One such beneficiary of microcredit is Promila Devi. In 1995 she became a member of ASA's Osmany Medical College branch and took her first loan of Tk. 4000/- . However small but the amount helped her, like many others in the community, sustain the practice rather art and craft of weaving Monipuri specialties.

Since then Promila Devi repaid the earlier loan in regular installments and took fresh loan of increased amount each year, and now is repaying her 15th loan of Tk 36000/- . And since then like many others in the community, she has woven a lot and marketed a lot of the Monipuri handloom items. The craft is very much alive in the hands of enterprising self-employed workers etc.

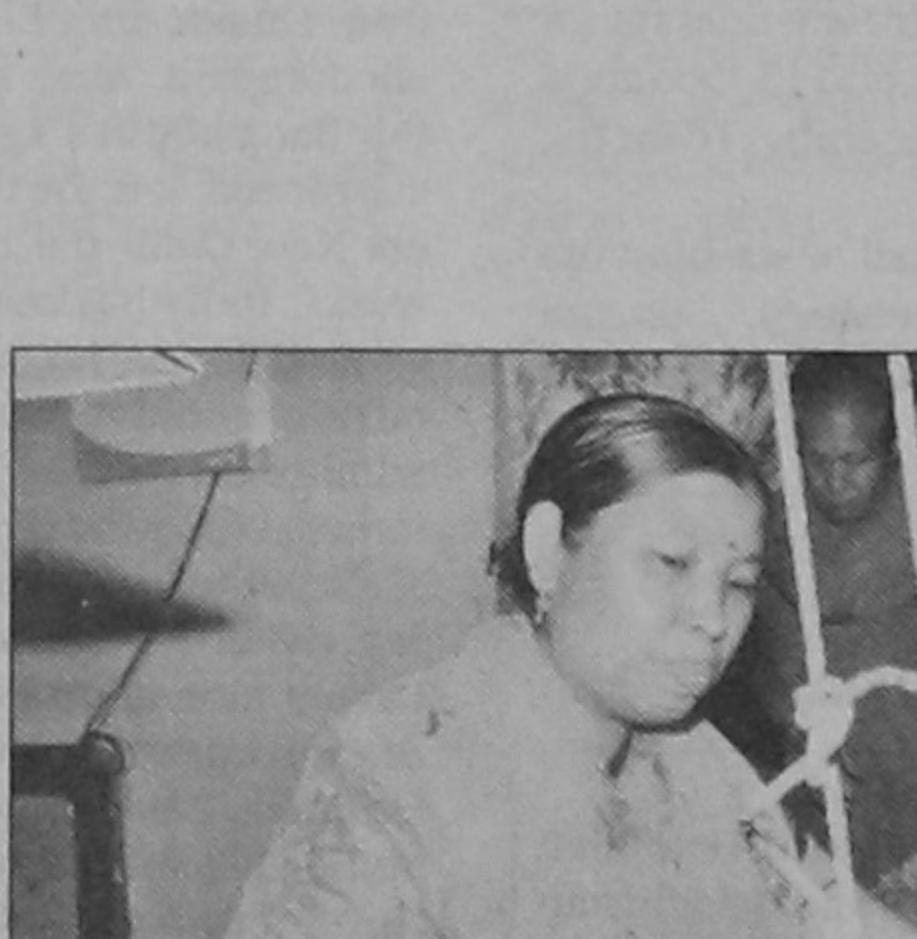
Her husband Nani Gopal Singha is a freedom fighter. However, he has not gained any extra benefit out of this extra-ordinary

identity. He doesn't lament it either. He wants to live a life on the income of his own labour in a free country. He has also taken loan from the same source and opened a showroom of their handloom items. His Tk 15,000 loan is also being repaid now.

Cotton, synthetic and woollen yarns are brought from Kamalganj. With these Promila Devi weaves exquisite Monipuri patterns on her own loom. She has also kept two workers on contract basis. After finishing, the items are individually wrapped in cellophane and sent to their show room and shops. Nani Gopal runs two shops. They have two sons. The elder one studies BBA at Comilla Victoria College and the younger is an Intermediate student at Sylhet College. Both of them help their father in running the shops in their holidays and offhours.

Excluding all expenses, the net income of Promila Devi and Nani Gopal Singha fluctuates between Tk 10000 and Tk 15000. This is no affluence anyway but they could manage their household with this. They think microcredit has given them an initiative to move ahead. By manufacturing and selling handloom items they are also meeting the educational expenses of their sons and have done the necessary renovation and extension of their house. They want to expand the business a bit further. Because that would enhance their income and then they wouldn't face any hardship or constraint in running the household.

There is a modest demand for the traditional Monipuri handloom items in the market. Of late with traditional excellence, there has been increment in pattern and item varieties.



Promila Devi and her products.

They are weaving an exclusive pattern bedcover that also serves the purpose of light blanket. Whether in charm or standard Monipuri merchandise is bright in exclusivity. But to create a steep demand for these items, they perhaps need to improve them a bit more.

So Promila Devi and Nani Gopal are contemplating to take comparatively bigger small entrepreneur's loan from ASA soon

after repayment of their micro loans. They want to be confident of a greater share next festival season. Well they might reap a bit this winter too when demand for wrappers heightens.

Praiseworthy entrepreneurship, indeed. They have the endeavour. And such individual, and for that matter community endeavour will keep on sustaining the unique Monipuri handloom craft.

The writer is a senior journalist.