

The population bomb is ticking

If there is a single key to population control in developing countries, experts say, it lies in improving the social status of women. Third world women often have relatively few political or legal rights, and not many receive schooling that prepares them for roles outside the home.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

NO problem can be more threatening for Bangladesh than the proliferation of people. Today, Bangladesh holds more than 150 million people in a land area of 1,33,000 sq km. All indications suggest that, in the absence of aggressive measures to control the birth rate, the population will double in less than 40 years, with about 90% of the growth occurring in rural areas.

Bangladesh has the highest population density in the world, with about 993 persons inhabiting 1 sq km. With the present birth rate of 1.39%, the density will undoubtedly keep on increasing, outstripping the ability to provide the bare necessities.

While observing the World Population Day, with the slogan "Everyone counts," stalwarts in the administration and experts in population science cautioned that this unplanned growth of population would further complicate the process of meeting the demand for food, basic health requirements and educational facilities -- triggering unemployment and social unrest in the country.

The prospect is horrifying. Barren fields, dried-up wells, shrinking land area, polluted rivers and environmental catastrophes haunt the nation with each passing day. In most parts of Bangladesh, especially the northern part, the horrifying images of hunger and non-availability of food prove that we have fallen far short in augmenting food production as well as downsizing population growth.

A brief survey of the progress -- or failure -- of the population program worldwide reveals that the first brake on population growth came in the early 1960s, with the development of the 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 a UN Population Fund, a global organisation committed to bringing family planning methods to women who would otherwise not have them. In the decades that followed, the UN increased its commitment, sponsoring numerous global symposiums to address the population problem.

The most significant aspect was 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. Happily, even a global calamity like Aids has yielded unexpected dividends through international campaigns to promote condom use and abstinence, helping to prevent not only disease transmission but also conception.

Such efforts have paid off in a big way. According to UN sponsored head-counters, the average number of children produced per couple in the developing world -- that reached a whopping 4.9 earlier this century -- has plunged to just 2.7. In many countries, the fertility rate is well below 1.5.

A little more than 30 years ago, global population growth was 2.04%. Today, it is just 1.3%. Sunny as the global averages look, things look bleaker when you break them down by region. Even the best family-planning programs do no good if there is neither the money nor government expertise or political will to carry them out. In less developed countries, which currently account for a staggering 96% of the annual population increase, these are sorely lacking.

Let's take population control and illiteracy together, as they are inextricably linked. The main reason for slow progress in population control programs is very low literacy among women and little access to birth control measures. No rural couple is going to opt for birth

control if it means going several kilometres, usually on foot, to buy a packet of condoms.

At the moment, as a government handout reveals, the number of eligible couples stands at about 25 million but, as government and NGO sources indicate, high rates of unmet need of the married people, about 18%, for family planning is posing a threat to population control.

As a consequence of non-recruitment of family planning workers during the last few years, shortage of field-level staff and non-availability of contraceptives, family planning activities in the country, especially in rural areas, have become a futile exercise.

The conditions in which women and children live in rural Bangladesh are often worse than those in which the villages' animals live. As I travelled the Aila hit region Shyamnagore in the Sathkira district in June 2009, I saw that the extent of the misery of the people burdened by a big family was made worse by natural disaster.

Battered by the devastation caused by the intrusion of saline water, most families having at least five to six children took shelter on the metal road and bamboo macha erected as a temporary shelter on the side of the road. The women were illiterate and did not understand the meaning of planned family through use of contraceptives.

There is something saddening about Bangladesh going into the new millennium with the highest number of illiterate people living in absolute poverty. These people see children as a source of labour and a hedge against poverty in old age and in illness. The argument put forward by a group of economists that "development is the best contraceptive" holds water in the context of the present world situation.

Happily, with the spread of literacy and prosperity in some developing countries, the idea of small family is gaining momentum. People need to be taught that with lower infant mortality fewer offspring can provide the same measure of security.

Unquestionably true, solutions to the population challenge demand "fundamental changes in society." Ingrained cultural attitudes and, in some cases, mistaken religious belief that promote high birth rates will have to be challenged

by empowering women through education. It has been proved time and again that literate women tend to have fewer children.

Of all the entrenched values religious interpretation made to suit the needs of the interest groups is perhaps the greatest obstacle to population control. Roman Catholics fought against national family-planning efforts in Mexico, Kenya and the Philippines, while Muslim orthodox groups did the same in Iran, Egypt and Pakistan.

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

Endorsing the views of Alex Marshal of the UN Population Fund, the program should be launched in such a humane manner that it does not hurt the sentiments of the rural people. The message should be; there is no such thing as population control. Alex says: "You don't control it. You allow people to make up their mind."

That strategy has worked in many countries that once had runaway population growth. Mexico has made government-subsidised contraception widely available and at the same time launched public-information campaigns to teach people the value of using it. In the past 30 years the average number of children born to a Mexican woman has plunged from 7 to 2.5.

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

Governments in the Asia region are starting to recognise the importance of educating women and letting them -- not just their husbands -- have a say as to how many children they will have.

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The return of Stupidjuice

THE highly fashionable New York drink, Glaceau Vitamin Water, is "available here at last" says the poster near my office. Vitamin Water? That sounds yummy. NOT.

But the pictures reminded me of something. In Asia in the 1980s peddlers would set up rainbow-like displays of what they called "fruit juices" on the pavements.

In the hot summers, people would buy them, since they were wet, sweet, cheap, and often came with exciting free extras, including botulism, salmonella, dysentery and similar types of conveniently-sized portable livestock.

In those days, Asian kids grew up with incredibly strong antibodies. My antibodies could pull trucks with their teeth.

But as a child, I could guess what the orange and red flavours were meant to be, but the blue and purple drinks confused me. "What fruits are they made of?" I asked.

"Stupidjuice," one of my uncles explained. "These drinks are made from tap water, sugar and chemicals. Only idiots would buy them."

A bottle cost one tenth of a rupee, roughly equivalent to one US dust speck.

But life is strange. As the years passed, homebrewed sugar-water died out in most places in Asia.

Yet in India, Stupidjuice evolved into something rather wonderful: a fruity crushed-ice drink called gola.

Imagine a slushy with a more complex flavour, a fruity base topped with masala spices, fresh lime and a portion of chicken tikka. No, wait; the last item is my lunch.

In recent months, big businesses launched a gola brand called Gogola, inspired by Google. Luxury brands use crushed ice made from purified mineral water and syrup made from jambul, a fruit said to be a natural cure for diabetes.

Fruit juice has come a long way in Asia, yeah baby. Such were my thoughts as I did what the advertisements told me to (I am a deeply obedient consumer) and went to the mall to buy a bottle of Glaceau Vitamin Water, citrus flavour.

It was tepid, watery and didn't taste anything like citrus fruits. Then I noticed some TINY print on the label which said: "Contains no juice."

The ingredients were tap water, sugar and chemicals.

"This is StupidJuice!" I exclaimed out loud, laughing like a maniac. "You are selling StupidJuice for 100 times the original price."

The serving staff had no idea what I was talking about, but nodded nervously while phoning the mall security department.

It was too weird. Rich yuppies were lining up to buy a product identical to the scam fruit juices sold in Asia two decades ago.

Standing in the coffee shop, I phoned a business reporter and asked: "Who makes this stuff? Why is there no logo on the bottle?"

He laughed, explaining: "The logo has been omitted because it might give buyers a clue that it is not really a fruit-based health drink at all. A Coca-Cola subsidiary makes the most expensive coloured sugar-water on the planet. Their other drink is called SmartWater. Basically, Coke has taken a \$4.1 billion bet on human stupidity."

Hmm, betting on human stupidity, are they? That's a sure win. Buy Coca-Cola shares. This product is going to be massive.

"My antibodies are bigger than your antibodies," I told the guards who ushered me out.

The yuppies watched from a distance, sipping their StupidJuice.

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The centre holds

In 2008 the US moved left, and in 2010 the UK moved right. But the truth is, since the Cold War ended, most people haven't voted based on deep ideological divides. The majority gravitate toward the center and search for a party or person who seems to reflect their sensibilities, attitudes, and feelings.

FAREED ZAKARIA

WE'VE all seen the pictures of Britain's chancellor of the Exchequer holding a tattered briefcase as he proceeds to Parliament to present the budget. The rest of the world has watched the event with some bemusement.

It's a typically British spectacle, complete with funny titles (why isn't he called finance minister like everyone else?) and lots of tradition. It's very quaint, very old money. (The briefcase is in fact 150 years old and is so tattered that it was finally sent to a museum.) But no one has really cared much what was inside that budget box.

Until now. Three weeks ago the new chancellor, 39-year-old Tory George Osborne, presented a budget that promised to get Britain's fiscal house in order with sharp cuts in spending, coupled with tax increases. It landed in the midst of a heated debate across the industrialised

world about how to best get the economy back on track.

Osborne and his boss, Prime Minister David Cameron, have come down firmly on one side of this debate, hoping that a major effort to reduce the deficit will reassure bond markets and investors that Britain is a safe and compelling place to put their money.

Leaving aside the economics of this, what struck me as I spent time in Britain last week was the politics of deficit reduction. Having announced major cuts in popular programs, plus hefty tax increases, the Cameron government might be expected to be losing popularity by the day. But in fact the budget was well received by the public -- though attacked ferociously from the left -- and the governing coalition has actually inched up a bit in the polls.

There are several possible reasons for this. Cameron has played the public role of prime minister exceedingly well, making a pitch-perfect apology for the

British army's wrongful use of force in Northern Ireland in 1972, and handling himself on the global stage with grace and ease.

It's also true, of course, that the effect of the cuts and taxes have not yet been felt, and when that happens, the government's poll ratings might plunge. But clearly, the honesty of the budget has resonated with voters. It's heartening to see a government do something that it must have thought would be deeply unpopular, and then be rewarded by the public.

Outside the country, Cameron is the victorious and, so far, successful prime minister of Britain, but inside, particularly in his own party, a debate continues about the election results. A Labour government had been in power for 13 years, Prime Minister Gordon Brown was deeply unpopular, and the economy was in shambles -- yet the Tories could not eke out a majority.

Without the alliance they formed with the Liberal Democrats, they would not have had a parliamentary majority. The Tory share of the total vote rose to only 36%, far below the levels under Margaret Thatcher.

After Thatcher, conservatism in Britain became radioactive. As Tony Blair moved the Labour Party to the center, the Tories moved right, became extreme and thus

politically unviable. Their vote totals fell to historic lows, which partly explains why they have not become a majority despite the largest gain in parliamentary seats since the 1930s.

Cameron has tried to return the party to the center on all kinds of issues -- from the environment to gay rights -- but he still has not earned all the public's trust. Minorities and working women still find it hard to vote Tory (so do Scots, but that's another matter).

The reaction to the budget, though, shows that he's got the right idea -- politically at least. Ever since the end of the Cold War, pundits have been eager to declare political realignments. When Bill Clinton and Blair won, observers hailed a liberal wave; victories by Newt Gingrich and George W. Bush were thought to herald new conservative majorities.

In 2008 the US moved left, and in 2010 the UK moved right. But the truth is, since the Cold War ended, most people haven't voted based on deep ideological divides. The majority gravitate toward the center and search for a party or person who seems to reflect their sensibilities, attitudes, and feelings. They want a modern party that feels as though it understands the world we live in. That's why they can vote for Clinton and then Bush, for Blair and then Cameron.

Cameron's coalition with the Liberal Democrats might actually give him the cover he needs to modernise his party even further. When someone in the Tory right wing pushes a policy, he can explain that he simply can't accept it because the coalition will fall apart. If

he governs from the center -- and unless the budget does put the economy in a tailspin -- he might well succeed in making conservatism cool again.

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Cameron the winner.