

Note from the Editor

The Problems with Population Problem

The worst nightmare of the people in Europe and the USA in particular has come to pass: “hoards” of Asians, Middle Easterners, the Central Americans and the dreaded Africans are braving the deserts, mountains, jungles and the seas to, what Mr. Trump claims, “invade” their countries! As of the past, as of the Romans, as of the “whites” in the “new world”, the “barbarians” are seeking to knock down the walls of civilization. Well, if not barbarians, at least these semi-barbarians, as they are portrayed in the media, in ragged clothes and hungry looks, in their hundreds and thousands are rushing to destroy the sanctuaries of civilization, peace and prosperity in Europe, and the USA. Country after country is enacting laws or fermenting opposition to curb such invasion, often challenging these so called “migrants” at the borders with armed soldiers, barbed wires or walls, while some get stopped even before they start on their “caravans” hundreds of miles from the borders. The nightmare is played out on the evening television screens on a daily basis, frightening millions, with no end in sight.

Yet, for the Europeans and the “Americans” (USA) this is the best of the possible scenarios, happening after more than three quarters of a century of brutal “population control” in the lands of the barbarians, and I am not even counting the hundreds of millions of barbarians the Europeans took delight in killing in Asia, Africa and the “new world” over the previous five centuries. Just think how many more millions, perhaps billions, would there be? Millions and tens of millions in place of the hundreds and thousands would be invading civilization today, Europe would have drowned in the Mediterranean and the land between the two oceans would have been obliterated by the weight alone of the migrants. Fortunately, the Europeans and the Americans (USA) had the foresight and the proper planning and even better execution to stop such a catastrophe and have actually *saved* their civilization from the far bigger invading hordes. By and large they have successfully blocked the invasion in the womb, literally!

Beginning after the World War II, as countries of Asia and Africa gained their independence from European colonizers, it was realized that these “new” countries will one day become claimant to the civilization that the Europeans had “created” over the past five centuries. The best way to deal with the “problem” would have been to continue the colonial occupation but the political and economic realities of the time made continued occupation unworkable. And while these countries began to make claims to the economy and the technology of the time, began to develop, it was realized that the best option to contain them would be to reduce their numbers. With numerous statistics and historical references it was successfully demonstrated that it would be to the *advantage of these “new” and “poor” countries* to control their populations if they wished to enjoy the fruits of the modern civilization, to become “modern” and “developed”. Pushed largely by the USA and its institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation and even the United Nations, the logic presented was so flawless and prospects so boundless that it convinced even the leaders of the two of the largest populations, India and China, who eventually forced “population control” on their own billions.

These new and poor countries were so backward, so far below the civilized standards of Europe and the USA, that they were portrayed as just coming fresh out of the caves and deserts, and in case of

Africa, literally out of the jungles. Even Tarzan, in his loin cloth, was considered more civilized, after all he could say, "Me, Tarzan, you Jane" in English, in spite of being brought up by a gorilla in the thick of the African jungle. And, of course, he was white. This everlasting backwardness of the Asians and Africans was not only propagated in the popular media and believed by the common white folks across the world, but was also accepted in the academic circles. Even Karl Marx in his time believed it to be true.

These were "new" countries simply because there never was a state called Pakistan or Tanzania or even India, the boundaries of which were drawn afresh by the Europeans at their will while they ruled or when they left, combining or splitting tribes, nations, ethnic groups into "new" agglomerations. Hence, they were new countries with new names, new peoples and mostly unacceptable borders. That they were "poor" needed very little evidence. Even a cursory look, or visit to any of these countries was enough to witness the near naked, hungry populations in their shacks, the barrenness of their fields, the dusty, dirty towns and cities. And nothing could be done about it, "they were poor, because they were poor"!

Given such a grim scenario, the "rich" and modern countries of Europe and North America felt obliged to assist and "aid" them to come out of this stark poverty, to become modern like the "West". From sociologists to economists, to politicians and philanthropists all wrecked their brain as to how to "develop" these poor hoards in Africa and Asia, make them "modern". In the process, it was universally recognized that whatever gains could be made were simply being "eaten up" by the vast and fast growing populations, while the unanimously identified solution discovered was to check and "control" this population growth. From vasectomy, to the distribution of free condoms, indiscriminate use of the media, to sending religious priests door to door were tried to limit this population growth in country after country, including, most persuasively, in India and China, the two largest culprits.

While development and the level of modernity attained remain questionable for most countries, particularly in Africa, after seventy years or so, the accomplishment of the population control programme has undoubtedly been demonstrated in many countries. The initial reaction to the notion of "population control", often dubbed as "family planning", was very negative and in some cases met with tremendous resistance such as in India, where the government of Indira Gandhi fell allegedly due to her enforcement of the programme. But by and large because of a very successful campaign by the governments, support from the academics and with the example of the happy and prosperous small families in the West in front of them, also the reality of the increasing difficulty of sustaining a large family in an ever expensive market, the population programme was successful in most cases, including in Bangladesh, often called the "poorest of the poor". The population problem solved, the people in Europe and the USA could finally sleep peacefully!

Why is then such an uproar about migration to the "West" today? Why are then people still defying death to get to the USA and Europe? Why are the Europeans erecting barbed wire fences and Mr. Trump seeking to build moats with snakes (sic) in them to guard his borders? What went wrong?

Well, **everything**, *the very notion of population as the problem was wrong*. And today, the results are so horrifying that one needs to keep one's calm even to discuss these. There are so many things wrong, theoretical, factual, economic, social, cultural, political and even religious that it is difficult to see where to start from. I shall try to deal with only a few of them here.

Let's start with a bit of history known to most, but let's do it in any case just to refresh our memories, also because we often fail to see the obvious connection. Beginning from the middle of the fifteenth century to the middle of the 20th century, the Europeans, Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch and finally the French and the British went on a five century of rampaging the world in a fashion no less barbarian than that of the Mongols, who are unfortunately the ones to get a bad press (in the West, of course). Where ever these Europeans went and where ever they found a weak population, no matter how large, they simply obliterated them from the map, depopulated continents, cleaned up the land, so to say, and settled their own people. That was easy in the Americas and Australia with low levels of technology, they even gave "new" names to these places. Africa was a difficult terrain, nonetheless, they managed to set a foot hold there too and indiscriminately killed its people and animals at the same rate, indeed, treated them as one and the same, and curved up the continent among contending European countries sitting at a table in Europe.

In Asia, they found it a bit difficult to sink their teeth in as long as there were strong central governments as in India and China. It took over two and half centuries for the Europeans or 165 years for the East India Company to conquer a major region of India. Also these land had too many people to "kill" off so easily, therefore, they decided to suck the life blood out of these hoards. In the middle of the 18th century China created 30 percent of the world GDP and India (the Sub-continent) did about 25 percent of the world GDP, which should suffice to assert that these countries were not "poor" to begin with, indeed were among the richest for millennia past and the very reason the Europeans sought out these lands in the first place. As was also true of the Americas. It was for the gold and silver of the Aztecs and the Incas that the Spaniards looted and killed the locals. The pre-Columbian world and definitely the pre-British India and China were far richer than Europe which catered for less than 20 percent of the world GDP by the best estimate. Indeed, it was the *poverty in Europe* that forced the Europeans to seek a better life elsewhere. Hence, brave the oceans, and deserts and jungles to migrate to other lands! And by, killing, looting and destroying the resources of Asia, Africa and the Americas, the Europeans became "rich" and made the rest of the world "poor".

Nor were these countries "new". India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are new only because of the new boundaries drawn on a land that has been populated for over sixty thousand years, and had a thriving civilization for at least six to eight thousand years. China, similarly can trace a continuous line of civilization to five thousand years past. Europe may not acknowledge, but Africa and the Americas also had vibrant culture, economy, politics and history for millennia before the Europeans deemed it necessary to destroy them. Other than new boundaries and new names forced on these lands and peoples, they were definitely not "New". Africa is the very place where humans became sapiens and migrated to Europe much later to become the "white-folks"!

So that the Europeans and the current “Americans” (USA) have been feeding a false narrative from the very beginning. As they did with false statistics too. In much of the literature since the 1950s, statistics of a vast and fast growing population in these new countries was presented to support another false narrative: the “Population Problem”. A population, large or small or how densely it is packed is *never* a “problem”. It’s relation to other factors that may be problematic. A population, a very large population such as that of the USA today, or small one as that of Kuwait or UAE, is not considered a problem, whereas a small population such as that of South Sudan or Malawi is considered as a problem. Nor is density the problem, Europe is far more densely packed than Africa and has been for millennia, but its population is not treated as a problem.

Population, particularly a large population as that of Bangladesh, India or China, is a problem when the country fails to feed its people, meaning in relation to the resources under its command. A large population when it commands enough resources within or outside its borders is not seen as a problem as is true of the USA today with double the population size of Bangladesh. So the problem is not one of the population but of the “resources” and needs to be called a “resource problem” instead, as I have argued elsewhere¹. Most of the so called poor countries with large or even small populations are constrained by resources, so that *the problem they face is one of resources and not of population*. Given enough resources to feed and clothe this population they will not have, what has been wrongly identified as, the “population problem”. This is very well attested by the pre and post OPEC histories of the oil rich Arab countries. Nor would there be a need to “control” that population.

But that’s not to say that there is no such thing as a “population problem”. On the contrary, there are different kinds of population problems. The first of these also have to deal with resources, albeit in a different vein. A country or a region may have huge amount of resources but not enough people or skilled people to deal with those, as in the case of the Arab countries for the former instance and some African countries as examples of the latter situation. Here it is clearly a “population problem”, they do not have enough or skilled population. The country may solve this problem by importing people, skilled and less skilled depending on the resources it has under its command. Kuwait, UAE and Saudi Arabia, for example, have too much resource, albeit of only one kind, but not enough people to deal with these resources, therefore, they have a “population problem” and they are dealing with it by bringing in people, skilled and less skilled, by their millions from the other countries. Africans on the other hand, are yet to master their resources since much of these are under foreign control and they do not have enough skilled people to work on them either. So they continue to be plagued by the “population problem” along with their original “resource problem”, the lack of control over their own resources.

The false narrative of population problem, which in reality is a resource problem, for the new and poor countries, was forcefully supported with a set of misplaced statistics by the academics and the governments of the West, particularly the USA. With population statistics for the 1950s and 1960s it was very easy to show that these countries of Africa and Asia did not only have large populations but that population was also growing fast and remained densely packed, thus, negating all efforts at

¹ “A Dissenter’s Note on the Population Problem”, *Sociology and Development: Bangladesh Perspectives*. Edited by K.A.M. Saaduddin and Board of Editors. Dhaka: Bangladesh Sociological Association. 1990. Pp. 249-255.

development. While on the other hand a rosy and contrasting picture of continued prosperity was painted for the European countries, Australia New Zealand, Canada and the USA with their low population density, low population growth rate and small populations in general (USA has a large population but low density and low growth rate). These statistics went a long way to re-enforce the false narrative, to the extent that even the communists in China came to accept the basic premises.

Given these statistics, to a cursory reader, the case for a population problem and the necessity of population control was done and dusted. Unfortunately, as had been demonstrated long ago by Darrel Huff¹, "statistics are a liar's best friend", all you need to know is how to use, or twist them. Like others, I showed these to be especially true for the population statistics². The data presented usually covered the 1950s and the 60s only, after all, most of these countries did not even *exist* before these times and there were little or no data prior to that for many of them. So, you could not fault the statisticians either. But dig a little deeper and there are enough data to do so. For example why should one be restricted to the data from 1950s and 1960s only? These countries did exist long before then and people lived in them and produced off-springs too. So, why not the 1750s for instance? Interestingly, the data from the 1750 actually turns the story 180 degrees, on its head. Let me quote below extensively from one of my earlier studies³:

"Except for South Asia, parts of China, Indonesia and Egypt, no other country or region in the Third World can be called overpopulated or even densely populated. Indeed, most of the Third World is extremely underpopulated (U. N., 1976). Population density for most of South Asia is actually lower than for most of Europe, as it has been for the past few centuries.

But the most outstanding fact of all, which is rarely mentioned, is the *growth of European population over the last two centuries* (emphasis added). The total European population including its settlements in the new World in 1750 was 158 million, or 21.8 percent of the total world population then. For Europe only this was 144 million, or 19.8 percent of the world total. By 1930, the period by which the industrialization of most of Europe and North America was achieved, the European (only) population had increased to 532 million, or 3.7 times, accounting for 26.5 percent of the world total. While Europe plus the New World increased to 786 million (from 158 million) or 4.9 times, and accounted for 39.1 percent of the world population. Compared to these, the African population increased from 95 to 157 million over the same period, or only 1.6 times (in fact, for a time this had declined to only 90 million [due largely to slave trade and indiscriminate killing by the Europeans]). The Asian population increased from 457 to 1072 million during this period, or a little more than doubled. Percentagewise, African population fell from 13 percent of the world total to 7.9 percent and similarly Asian population fell from 65.3 percent to 54 percent (Woodruff, 1967:103).

If these same statistics are followed to the 1960s, it is found that Europe (only) increased its population to 641 million (from 144 million in 1750) or 4.4 times. Europe plus New World increased from 158 to 1062 million, or 6.7 times. While African population increased only 2.7 times and Asian population only 3.6 times (Woodruff, 1967:103).

Other interesting facts appear from the study of south Asian (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, etc.) demographic history. Between 1871 (the first census year for modern South Asia) and 1921, the population increased by 18.3 percent. It was 47 percent for Europe for the same period. Between 1921 and 1951 the population in India (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh combined) increased by 44 percent. The world increase was 33 percent, North America 45 percent and Europe was 20 percent. According to Davis (1951) the average rate of increase for South Asian population from 1871 to 1941 was 0.60 percent per year, for the world (from 1850 to 1940) it was 0.69 percent. Thus, it was

¹ Huff, Darrel. 1954. *How to lie with Statistics*. Norton.

² See the quote below.

³ Islam, M.Nazrul. 1982. "Domestic Growth Factors, Foreign Economic Influences and Third World Development: A Multivariate Test of Theories of Development". PhD Thesis submitted to the Graduate School, Syracuse University. (Unpublished).

still low for South Asia. From 1871 to 1941 the total South Asian increase was 52 percent, the increase in Britain was 57 percent, Japan had a 120 percent increase. Overall European population increase between 1600 and 1940 were double that of India (South Asia) over the same period (Davis, 1951)."¹

It is clear from these statistics that neither were Asia and Africa “over populated”, nor were the populations growing fast. Indeed, it was the European population that grew at least at double the rate of the Asian population for the last four hundred years, much of it as migrants in other continents. Given the current Asian population at 4.5 billion, just a double of that would make the Asian population stand at 9 billion! The Chinese and Indian (South Asian) would be about 3 billion each. Similarly, the African population would have grown to at least 2 billion. It would be a nightmare for Europe if they were to grow at 6 or 7 times, the rate of European (plus the new world) growth for the last two centuries. Guess where all these extra people would go? To Europe, the USA and the rest of the New World, of course, inundating those continents and allegedly destroying civilization as did the Mongols and the Germanic tribes. Hence population control, or birth “control”, kill them in the womb!

Whether this was known or understood by the governments and policy makers in the poor countries or not, in their desperate bid to “develop” and become “modern”, they tried to “control” their populations in earnest in many countries. And, indeed, a few of them like South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Singapore are today counted among the developed countries and China is well on its way to similar development while India likes to think so. How much of that is due to population control can be fiercely debated since China still has a huge population, so does India. But more importantly, the causal connection between population growth rate and rate of development has been known to be the reverse one, Japan and the USA had 120 percent population growth during their development². In my study, quoted above, I too found positive correlation, though not statistically significant, between population growth and development. Indeed, the causal connection, if anything, is in the opposite direction. By most accounts today, development or a higher standard of living itself is acknowledged to lead to the lowering of population growth rate.

This has largely to do with the level of security of the population concerned, which is immensely true of the populations of the other species. Those that are far down the receiving end of the food chain produce off-springs by their thousands, while those on the top, lions, tigers produce a few and some like the elephants or whales few and far between. The same appears to be true of the human population as well. Poverty, poor health conditions and poorer living produce more deaths, child deaths in particular, therefore, to have some children grow to adult age or even at the minimum level of considering social security at old age, families tend to produce more children so that a few can survive and later take care of the old parents. The same has been true of migrant populations all over the world, insecurities associated with migration produces far more off-springs as we saw above in case of the European

¹ Sources cited: DAVIS, K. 1951. *The Population of India and Pakistan*. Princeton, N.J. Princeton, University Press: U.N. 1976. *The Determinants and Consequences of Population Trends*. Vol. 1. New York: United Nations; WOODRUFF, W. 1967. *Impact of Western Man: A Study of Europe's Role in World economy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 103.

² Islam, M.Nazrul. 1982. “Domestic Growth Factors, Foreign Economic Influences and Third World Development: A Multivariate Test of Theories of Development”. PhD Thesis submitted to the Graduate School, Syracuse University. (Unpublished).

colonizers in other continents. On the other hand, better living and health conditions or the economic, political and social security provided by a higher standard of living reduces the need to produce “extra” children. And the need to provide a similar higher standard of living for the children also dictates the need to have fewer children. Lowering of population has little to do with the future growth of the economy, if anything, the opposite is true.

Statistics provided above show that contrary to what is believed, the European population did not “decline” over the centuries, it merely migrated and grew on other continents and at a rate *many times* faster than in Asia and Africa or Europe. Today European population covers four of the six habitable continents and some live even in the not so habitable one, Antarctica. And much to one’s surprise, even in Europe, the population grew at a faster rate during its phase of increasing economic growth and prosperity. In Japan, population grew at a phenomenal rate during Japan’s period of development as is also true of the USA and UK. Indeed, by some accounts it was essential for the economic growth of the UK¹. Population growth in these countries slowed down only *after* attaining a certain level of development.

So that, the low populations seen in the developed countries today are a “result” of social and economic growth, not the other way. The population in countries like Japan and much of the developed Europe continues to drop, which has led to different types of “population problems” like low fertility rate and low population growth rate, smaller labour force etc. While on the other hand, by trying to control of the population to achieve development, as was done by Singapore or China, a new kind of “population problem” has been created. Today one can only hear of the horror stories of the consequences of such deliberate “population control”, which in many ways has, unfortunately, transpired to become the *real* “population problems” now.

To start, this may be best illustrated by the case of Singapore. After its independence, to “develop” and to attain a fast and high growth of its economy, Singapore began to follow a very aggressive policy of “population control”, restricting births to two children. And later even the second child was discouraged, making life difficult for parents with two children and almost forcing sterilization by the age of 40. But Singapore is only a small city state with a very small population to begin with (less than two million at the time of independence in 1965). The forced “population control” soon affected the fertility rate which fell below the replacement rate (of 2.1) and continues to slow down. Today it stands at only 1.16.

But that was not all, the damage was done in other ways too. The policy, by changing the whole population structure, also started to affect the growth and development of its economy as well and there is a major danger that the economy of the city state may collapse in the near future. With a lower fertility rate there is today fewer and fewer young people entering the labour force while on the other hand due to the development of the economy and health facilities, more and more people are living longer after retirement making the dependency ratio larger and larger, while fewer people are working to keep a

¹ Islam, M.Nazrul. 1982. “Domestic Growth Factors, Foreign Economic Influences and Third World Development: A Multivariate Test of Theories of Development”. PhD Thesis submitted to the Graduate School, Syracuse University. (Unpublished).

larger population fed and clothed. "The elderly now make up roughly 13% of Singapore's population but those under 15 years make up only 15%"¹, not enough to support the seniors. So that, now the older people are "eating up" the fruits of development.

To continue on its development path, the government is currently professing the opposite policy, trying desperately to bring up the population figure by encouraging even 3 children families! But again, they are targeting the wrong population of the educated and the rich or those who may "afford" to raise three children. But this is the least interested group. This group of younger population is more interested in pursuing a career and earning more money than getting married and raising children. Even after the government calls for more marriages and more children, few, if any, have responded adding to the woe of the government. And as the Business Insider notes, "Singapore's low fertility rate and aging population have put the country on a dangerous path. If the course doesn't reverse, experts say it could become a "demographic time bomb." These "time bombs" result in shrinking economies and breakdowns in the social fabric."²

Singapore is only a city state with a rather tiny population compared to the larger countries who are facing similar issues. The situation is far worse in a larger population of Japan, where the percent of older population is much higher too. In Japan, the ratio is 27% elderly to 13% young (15 years or less). So that there is even lesser possibility of supporting the older population. With very strict immigration laws the possibility of replacing the lost population through migrants is also very unlikely. While on the other hand, the "workaholic" people of Japan are even less disposed towards marriage and raising children as it costs far more there. Men are so involved with work and career that many women complain of not being able to "date" or get married, let alone having children. Therefore, this has become a country where the population is actually *decreasing*! Japan's population has shrunk by a million people and it has lost trillions in GDP, all within the last five years,³ causing all sorts of complications. The creative Japanese society is trying to cope by inventing new technologies to replace the lost population, including building robots to perform most manual jobs, work in factories or homes. Today humanoid robots are already dealing with the tourists at the airports and hotels and robots will become the greatest attraction in the forthcoming Tokyo Olympics. Japan may soon become a society with more robots than people!

But this type "population problem" faced by Singapore and Japan were always on the cards. The success of industrial revolution in raising the standard of living coupled with improvements in medicine and health care had already altered the demographic profiles of the countries of Europe, particularly those of the Western and Northern Europe. France or Sweden have been suffering from this type of population problem. Low fertility and low growth rate, rates far below the replacement or required growth rate of population, have plagued these countries for decades. But this population problem was not caused by "population control", it was the inevitable result of higher development (or greater security of

¹ Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/singapore-is-on-the-brink-of-a-demographic-time-bomb-2017-12>

² Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/singapore-is-on-the-brink-of-a-demographic-time-bomb-2017-12>

³ Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/singapore-is-on-the-brink-of-a-demographic-time-bomb-2017-12>

life). *Prosperity leads to lower fertility*, so all that the poorer countries required was to prosper, which the West never wanted, and the population would have come down in any case (see Bangladesh below). But by forcing the population control, the academics, the governments and some private institutions in West have merely added to the distress of the new and poor countries, created some additional problems which are today far more serious in countries like in India and in China, where they have turned into horrific situations.

China has today developed to become the second largest economy challenging the US economy, India is vying to do the same but they both continue to have populations in excess of one billion. So whatever population control they resorted to did not affect their growth one way or the other in terms of macro-economics, they attained economic growth in spite of the vast populations! But the induced population control programme has affected the population structure in a major way. In India, for instance, the “Total fertility rate (TFR) has fallen below two children per woman, (below the replacement rate), in 12 states, and has reached replacement levels in 9 other states”¹. The TFR for India as a whole is still at 2.3, in the rural areas it was 2.5 but in the urban, it is much lower at 1.8, well below the replacement rate. In general the fertility is declining rapidly all over, including among the poor and illiterate². However, since the population is still very large the negative impact, as in Singapore or Japan, is yet to be felt or to create much imbalance in the labour force.

However, the “unnecessary” population control has contributed to some uncalled for and irreversible problems. Largely due to the social norm of “son-preference”, population control has led to more sons being born altering the sex ratio drastically in many areas. By the time the government realized this and banned learning about the sex of the child before birth the damage was done and the process continues to be practiced discreetly in the rural areas even now, affecting the future population structure in a big way. By the latest count there are 37 million more men in India while the number of female babies continue to plummet. Washington post adds that “The imbalance creates a surplus of bachelors and exacerbates human trafficking, both for brides and, possibly, prostitution”³. Harassment of girls and the stories of rape have become a daily affair. Delhi is often called the “rape capital” of India. But the problem goes far beyond. In a social context where there are fewer girls, men find fewer brides to the extent that in some villages two brothers are forced to get married to one woman!

This excess of men in the population is very likely to affect the economy of India by distorting the labour market, property values and even basic consumptions. This may also get to affect the world economy at large. The Washington Post continues, “consequences are not confined to China (see below) and India, but reach deep into their Asian neighbors and distort the economies of Europe and the Americas, as well. Barely recognized, the ramifications of too many men are only starting to come into sight”⁴.

¹ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/fertility-in-india-is-declining-rapidly-says-national-health-profile-2018-60921>

² <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/fertility-in-india-is-declining-rapidly-says-national-health-profile-2018-60921>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/too-many-men/>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/too-many-men/>

In China, where the government followed the “population control”, especially the “one-child” family, very fiercely, including forcing abortions and sterilization on millions. The government claims that its one child policy has prevented some 400 million births¹! Similarly “An estimated 210,000 girls may have “gone missing” due to China’s “Later, Longer, Fewer” campaign, a birth planning policy predating the One Child Policy”². The resulting situation has turned to extremes of what may go wrong if one tempers with the natural process.

First and the most obvious problem is with that single child in the family. As the economy improved a lot of attention was given to the child, including feeding it a bit too much. As a result a large percentage of these children are today obese. Most of these single children are reaching the work force now but as the traditional social security system in China dictates, the child has to take care of the elderly parents, particularly if they are retired. Also due to better health care being available the grand parents may also be living so that the brave son now has to take responsibility of at least four other persons, perhaps six. The situation worsens when he gets married and remains the only bread earner. The wife, who is also similarly single, is likely to bring the added maintenance burden of her parents and grandparents too. The result is that the single son, now a super hero, has over nine people to care for! Even in a fast developing economy like China one can only dream of finding such a well-paying job, so everyone suffers.

This, unfortunately, is the story of the “lucky” child. Others are not so fortunate. A large number, in millions actually, of children have to forego a normal childhood, particularly in the rural areas, simply because their parents have to work far away in a city and they (the single child) get to meet the parents only on special holidays for example the New Year. They grow up with their aging grandparents, deprived of the normal love and care of the parents or siblings.

In a far greater way than in India, the “son-preference” played havoc in China with mindboggling disaster no one could have predicted only a generation ago. Even the Washington Post laments, “Out of China’s population of 1.4 billion, there are nearly 34 million more males than females — the equivalent of almost the entire population of California, or Poland, who will never find wives and only rarely have sex”³. That is to put it very mildly. The reality of the situation is heart wrenching. In the prospect of living out a life of loneliness, often ridicule from the rest of the society, most of these men give in to their fate and lead a very lonely and secluded life.

One has to be very lucky or very rich to get married in today’s China. To be in the marriage market a young man must be able to convince the would-be-bride of his affluence, often by buying at least two houses, and hence the boom in real estate business, there are more buyers for the second and the third apartment than the first today. In spite of that, the marriage is never assured. Often the only recourse for the, again, lucky and rich ones, is to seek a bride abroad, in the poorer countries like

¹ <http://en.people.cn/90882/7629166.html>

² <https://www.cgdev.org/article/new-study-finds-china-population-control-policies-one-child-policy-was-responsible-200000>

³ (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/too-many-men/>)

Vietnam, Philippines or even Indonesia, to “buy” a bride of a totally different social and cultural background, who do not even speak the language. Stealing a bride, particularly in the rural areas, is becoming very common and human trafficking is getting rampant. The whole village often cooperates to hide the stolen bride. But the only option for many of these millions of unlucky bachelors, after a hard days of work, is to go back home to their beloved “sex doll”!

Tell that to the 34 million Poles and the Californians!

No, tell it to the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, the UNO and the US Government, who forced the population control on the unsuspecting “new” and the poor countries with false narratives and misplaced data. But, appallingly, they still find it convenient to blame the poor countries who so foolishly followed their “advice”. And, it is all too easy to blame the Chinese commies, after all they were stupid enough to accept those lies. The Washington Post says it clearly, “China’s official one-child policy, in effect from 1979 to 2015, was a huge factor in creating this imbalance, as millions of couples were determined that their child should be a son”¹.

What Singapore, Japan, India and China are facing today is the real “Population Problem”!

So, country after country, in a bid to develop, to become modern like the West, with childlike innocence (stupidity, in reality) followed the nonsense dished out by the West and its academics about the “population problem”. No one told them that their society and cultural norms may be a detriment. Nor did anyone tell them that prosperity and consequential development in health care would inevitably bring the populations down in any case. Nor were they told that the population growth rates could go below the replacement rates someday creating all sorts of problems, even though some European countries were already facing the problem of population shortage for decades. Today, some of these Western academics are elated that due to the success of population control the world population may *never* reach the currently predicted high of 11 billion.

Historically, large populations never destroyed any society, population shortage did. Large populations, or population pressure will invariably find a way out, most likely through migration, but may also lead to conquest of other lands. The history of the human kind has been one of migration. But conquest of other lands is always on the cards. Over the last five centuries, as the European population increased, they first conquered other lands and then sent its excess population to these other continents and making the continents their “own” both in name and in substance. The Europeans at the same time purposively blocked the same for Asia and Africa by killing and destroying the populations there (they did move a few million Africans to the other continents but as slaves to do their bidding and it has not turned out for the good of anyone involved but the Europeans).

Killing of millions in the “new world”, the Americas and Australia, is a well-documented fact but the same was also true of the colonial Asia and Africa as well (see below). The killing is equally true today in the “new” and “poor” countries, killing them in the womb (China prevented 400 million births!) through

¹ (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/too-many-men/>)

dishing out false narrative and false statistics, the lie called the “population problem”, so that migration by the Asians and Africans can be restricted to the minimum, preferably, to zero. The other nightmarish possibility, the conquest of Europe and its colonies, the Americas and Australia, invading the USA, as Mr. Trump puts it, by the Asians and Africans never ever arising. The real reasons for population control!

Bangladesh never faced a “population problem” as defined by the Western academics. It always had a large population because of its fertile soil and the economy in general was always robust enough to support a large population through the millennia. What it faced at its independence from the Brits was the “resource problem”, it no longer had the economy that supported a large population. That economy was looted and destroyed by the Brits, who also depopulated the country. Bengal faced its worst famine within ten years of its occupation by the East India Company, in 1776. More than one third of the population or an estimated 10 million died! Warren Hastings, the then Governor, noted that the whole country from end to end looked white, whitened by the millions of skeletons lying around in barren fields! (Yet, the East India Company succeeded in collecting more than double the tax of the previous year!). Many later famines followed, killing more millions.

Similarly the Brits also destroyed the economy by looting and making it subservient to the economy in the UK. Bengal, mostly present day Bangladesh, based in and around Dhaka, was the richest of the countries, generating half of the Sub-continent’s GDP or about 12-13 percent¹ of world GDP on the eve of British conquest². (For a comparison, Britain then generated only about 1 percent of the world GDP.) The current GDP of the USA is about 15 percent of the world GDP, so Bangladesh in its precolonial days was close to what the USA is in the world economy now and that was true of the Bangladesh economy for millennia past. The bay south of Bangladesh was (and still is) called the “Bay of Bengal” for a reason! How many countries have seas named after it? Today Bangladesh generates barely 0.3% of the world GDP. For much of the past 40 years it averaged about 0.12%³ and when the Brits left in 1947 it must have been far lower.

The city of Dhaka in the 18th century, with a circumference of 40 miles⁴, a huge city by even today’s standard, was said to have a population of nearly one million, definitely one of the largest if not the largest city in the world at the time. Murshidabad, the then newly built capital of Bengal, much smaller than Dhaka, was noted by Robert Clive, who conquered Bengal for the Brits, to be larger and far grander than London. Kolkata was the city newly set up by the Brits and by their lackeys, the Zamindars (landlords who, thanks to the Brits, effectively owned all the land of Bangladesh) to suck Bengal dry. While Kolkata grew and prospered at the expense of Dhaka and Murshidabad to become the second largest city in the “Empire”, and the world for a time, only after London, it destroyed Dhaka and Murshidabad, turning them into varitable jungles in the process. So that, by the end of the near 200 year British exploitation Dhaka was barely surviving with 20 to 30 thousand inhabitants, even grand

¹ Wikipedia

² Wikipedia

³ https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Bangladesh/gdp_share/

⁴ Wikipedia

buildings had been claimed by nature, and Bangladesh had transformed from the richest to the poorest country in the world!

Bangladesh was left so poor that in the 1950s just after the Brits left, this land of the fabulous plenty was not able to feed its own population of about 45 million. It required food aid from abroad to the tune of 20 percent to feed its people for the next three to four decades while all the economic indicators put Bangladesh as the “poorest of the poor”. Yet, today, in an independent Bangladesh, within the same land area as of the past, it can feed a population of more than 160 million people or 3.5 times the population of the 1950s. Bangladesh again produces enough to feed its people. So, the fact remains that it was always resourceful enough to feed its population, over thousands of years. Therefore, Bangladesh never had a “population problem” as defined by the Western scholars, nor did it have any resource problem until the Brits completely destroyed its economic structure and plundered it thoroughly for about 200 years.

But, unfortunately, Bangladesh was no exception to fall for the lure of prosperity through “population control” and still continues in the same direction. Indeed, Bangladesh is considered to be one of the exemplary successes in “population control” and much of its achievement in “development” is often attributed to the effective execution of population control programmes. Due largely to the various conditional “aid” programmes from the Western countries, particularly the USA, population control, dubbed as “family planning” got intertwined with most activities of the government and by the 1970s, family planning was the largest government department in terms of the people employed. From door to door services like advising the men and women on family planning to distributing free condoms and employing religious and community leaders to voice their support, a sustained campaign has been carried on through the past seven decades. Fortunately, however, these were far less aggressive than in Singapore, China or even India, the “family planning” was largely optional and left as a personal matter, though there were few occasional reports of coercion by the family planning workers and volunteers, the role of the government remained primarily to raise awareness and to provide the necessary support.

When I was born in the later part of the 1940s, the life expectancy in Bangladesh (the political area) was barely 26 years. I was the first of the eleven children born to my parents, seven of us survived to adult age, three died in their early childhood and one was still-born. Of the seven surviving ones the first to expire is my immediate younger brother, who passed away last year at the age of 71. Indeed, 71+ is the current life expectancy.

In my cohort, ten or twelve children per family were all too common. I remember one of our neighbours during my childhood had 11 boys in the family, we called it a football team, and it was rumored that they were still trying for a girl child. By the time my cohort began their own families about the 1970s, the number of children per family was already on the decline to about six or seven children and by the end of their own reproductive cycle most of my cohort, including my siblings, and nearly everyone I know, including members of the working class, ended up with two children, some with just one child and a significant number with no children at all. The official statistics reflect this very clearly, “Over the last 50

years, fertility rate of Bangladesh was declining at a moderating rate to shrink from 6.95 children per woman in 1970 to 2.01 children per woman in 2019¹” The picture seems to be true of the middle class in general, the lower and upper classes may vary somewhat with larger number of children, but rarely exceeding four.

Again, fortunately, Bangladesh did not resort to the “one child” family nor was it plagued by “son-preference” in the same order as China or India. The sex ratio, therefore, is more balanced though somewhat in favour of males but not to any great extent to off-set the male-female distribution. Also, since most migrant workers are males, this further helps to balance the ratio. On the other hand, more than half of my cohort seem to have reached their seventies, yet, the 65+ population is still less than 5%. With over one-third below 15 years (34.3%)², the economically active population continues to grow for now. Even after a net out-migration of nearly half a million per year and the growth rate at 1.1 percent³, the Bangladeshi population statistics are considered very good, at least for now.

The population reduction programme in Bangladesh attained such successes purely through voluntary and personal choices. The government programmes did raise the awareness as was also true of a number of other social issues. The balanced change in the demographic factors was largely attained through voluntary participation and in the same manner as with other social issues, because of increased awareness and other social developments. Immunization, safe drinking water, literacy, women’s education, women empowerment all developed simultaneously and each facilitated the growth in the other sectors. *People choose to have smaller families as it appeared more convenient*, no one forced anyone I know, or me, to limit the family.

Bangladesh did a better job in all areas of social variables over the last decades in spite of the lack of growth in its economy, especially in comparison to the rest of South Asia. As Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen notes, “Bangladesh’s social indicators such as gender equity, women’s empowerment, mortality rate, life expectancy, immunization etc. are remarkably better than India” and are the highest in the region. And that happened despite the lack of similar growth in its economy (GDP). “In 1990 India’s GDP was 50% higher than Bangladesh but by 2015 it was 100% higher⁴”.

So that the population control or “family planning” programme did not propel Bangladesh to the height of economic development. In terms of development, particularly of the economy, Bangladesh is nowhere even close to any of the Asian developed countries, or India, yet it has attained much of the demographic and social developments paralleling these countries. So, population control did little, if anything, to affect its economic growth or social development. The current population structure was possible because of the other and prior social developments. Also, the social developments attained such great success despite the lack of economic development. It is only recently that certain amount of

¹ <https://knoema.com/atlas/Bangladesh/topics/Demographics/Fertility/Fertility-rate>

² <https://countrymeters.info/en/Bangladesh>

³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW?locations=BD>

⁴ <https://www.thedailystar.net/top-news/bangladesh-ahead-india-social-indicators-amartya-3540>.

growth is noted in the economy and much of that *follows and was permitted* by the prior and overall social developments which had little to do with population control.

The best case in point is the phenomenal success of the garment industry, which caters for over 80% of the export earnings of the country and is second only to China, was made possible simply because of the huge participation of the women in the labour force, women getting out of the house from the rural areas and migrating to the urban centers, often alone, still not possible in much of South Asia. Also, to be noted is the remarkable success of the poverty reduction programmes, which, particularly under the auspices of the NGOs, was squarely directed to the women, who proved to be far more effective than men. Without the achievements of the social developments like, women empowerment, women education, women participation in the labour force, and gender parity in general, neither of these economic developments would have been possible. "Population control" had nothing to do with these. Indeed, lowering of population followed in the wake of those other social developments, so that even my house help, who migrated to the city all by herself in search of a job twenty years ago, also has two children, both girls and going to high school now.

And, contrary to what the population control advocates would have you believe, for Bangladesh that large population has also turned out to be a blessing for the country. It has translated into a huge out migration of the labour force, as was also true of all history and of Europe too for centuries on, to earn and send the money back to the country. From 1976 to 2018, a total of 12,199,124 Bangladeshis have migrated overseas for employment¹. For quite a while the remittance sent home by this labour force was the major source of foreign earnings for the country until exports from the garment sector surpassed it only recently. Such remittance has significantly altered the life of millions of families in the rural areas and continue to play a crucial role in the rural economy and the economy of the whole country. So that even under so much induced poverty, large population of Bangladesh was not a "problem" rather turned out to be an asset.

Recent figures show a 7%+ growth rate of the economy over the last few years and it is likely to grow even faster (prediction for 2019-2020 is 8%+). Given that this growth is sustained over the next decade or so, Bangladesh economy will be among the top 25 or even top 20 countries. The current demographic structure will likely continue to support that growth further. *But the balance is too fine for comfort.* The total fertility rate, barely at the replacement rate, will most likely continue to go down and judging from the examples of Japan, Singapore as well as Europe, once it goes down it cannot be raised even with incentives. Similarly the growth rate at only 1 percent is also precariously balanced and will likely follow the fate of the developed countries, soon enter a phase of negative growth of population. Sex ratio and the still large youth population to replenish the labour force may avert any immediate crisis and give a picture of false security but the growing number of senior population (65+ age) may turn into a liability

¹ Tasneem Siddiqui, Marina Sultana, Rabeya Sultana, Sanjida Akhter. 2019. Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2018: Achievements and Challenges. Dhaka: Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

in the very near future, as has happened with Japan and the other developed countries across the world. There will not be enough young people to bear the load of the large and ever growing number of seniors.

The senior population to follow my cohort will be increasingly larger and live much longer, while the youth, with lower than replacement fertility, will grow smaller and smaller and soon fail to sustain the burden of shouldering the load of the old. More importantly they may not be enough in number to produce the goods in a growing economy required to support the whole population. There is also a clear preference among the young to migrate for better opportunities abroad. Given the current rate of total net out migration (of -3.04 per thousand)¹, which may off-set any gains in the labour force, the future may be even bleaker. The controlled migration often allowed by some European countries has not worked to replenish their labour force. For Bangladesh, with an economy just on the rise, the lack of growth of the labour force may spell disaster and put the economy on a tail-spin.

All these may force Bangladesh into a “population problem” in the sense I have described above and is currently facing Japan, Singapore or China. Holding on to its strict immigration laws, Japan is seeking technological solution and given their ingenuity they may even succeed but the population will not grow back, it will only fall further as the seniors eventually die off. Singapore with its small population has fewer options, it has failed to excite the young to marry and produce enough children and may have to either follow Japan for a robotic revolution or allow fresh migration which may not be so advisable for a small city state, it may not be able to hold on to its economic growth. China and India with very large populations may be able to deal with their current crises as there is still a huge labour force waiting to get in the labour market. But Bangladesh does not have the same luxury. Population control or not, we have lowered our population to a fine balance today which will only head towards a lessening of the population and unless we take measures to correct these, basically to *increase the population*, which may not be easy even after incentives, with a still poor albeit growing economy, we are only courting disaster and heading towards a “population problem” in earnest.

Nazrul Islam

¹ <https://knoema.com/atlas/Bangladesh/topics/Demographics/Fertility/Fertility-rate>