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Population Control: Lessons from the Past

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ABSTRACT

When PM Modi hinted at family planning during his republic day speech earlier this year it drew attention to a long standing problem of population explosion. Although growing population is a global concern, Asian countries pose a mighty challenge with their high population density, slow growing economies and immense pressure on natural resources. India and China together account for more than a fourth (36%) of the world's population. Both countries adopted a family planning program that initially started off as a voluntary effort but soon turned into an involuntary and often forced procedure. Policing its citizens' bodies to cap population growth is not only a grave human rights violation but fails as a policy. These super power nations adopted similar strategies that have spawned various social dilemmas in their respective countries. In India where the state imposed sterilization was only possible after the declaration of Emergency in 1975, its repercussions ensure that a coercive population control policy is still unimaginable. Ironically the policy of policing its women's wombs that acted as a catalyst in China's economic rise is the same policy that now threatens its economic success. This article will walk through the history of family planning in India and China and conclude with lessons one can learn from these social experiments

Although growing population is a global concern, Asian countries pose a mighty challenge with their high population density, slow growing economies and immense pressure on natural resources. Asia houses five of the ten most populous counties in the world. Western nations took a special interest in curbing the population growth of the Asian and African continents, not only because of their present numerical superiority but also incremental increase to world population in the future is more likely in these continents.

In India, over population has been a major developmental concern for over 5 decades now, most politicians believed that population control and economic growth were closely related and one can not be achieved without the other. India's policy on family planning can be divided into 3 stages.

- Stage I- Experimentation 1950s-1970s

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- Stage II- Hyper implementation 1970s
- Stage III- Dormant 1980s onwards

India's population in 1951 was 361 million with a projected growth rate of 1.26% per year for the next decade². Based on these statistics India was the first country to launch a family planning program nationally in 1951. Although the first two 5 year plans included family planning in its objectives, it became significant only after 1965 when an exclusive department for family planning was established.

At the time family planning was a subject under state list, most Indian states had considered the idea of compulsory sterilization as a means to lock population growth, but no concrete policy was ever passed. During the 1950s-1970s vasectomy camps, positive and negative incentives, and compulsory sterilization were used as a method of contraception in various states.

According to Mr. R.A Gopalswami³, mass sterilization was the best possible method for population control in India, since it required only a minor surgery that needed no hospitalization. In the initial years, the Central government sponsored family planning program focused on

- (i) Creating awareness about family planning using media
- (ii) Monetary incentives for families that agreed for family planning.

The international oil crisis, below average rainfall and plummeting food supplies all added to the economic crisis of India in the 1970s. In this backdrop, the Central government viewed family planning and compulsory sterilization as a part of a larger poverty alleviation program. The 1976 Constitutional Amendment Act gave the Central Government powers to execute family planning programs. This marks the beginning of hyper implementation.

Post the constitutional amendment, Chief Ministers across India were allotted targets for establishing sterilization camps and received awards if they sterilized more men than their stipulated target. Apart from direct incentives, the government mounted pressure on its employees when circulars stating the promotion and salaries would be withheld of employees who weren't sterilized. Students whose parents had refused to undergo sterilization were detained and free medical aid was available only on production of a sterilization certificate.

Such stringent policies could be imposed only post the declaration of emergency in 1975 by

² India: "The Emergency" and the Politics of Mass Sterilization, Prajakta R. Gupte

³ Commissioner for the 1951 Census of India, India's lead urban demographer

PM Indra Gandhi. As a result of extreme enforcement policies, the number of sterilization increased from 1.3 million in 1975 to 2.6 million in 1976 and then to 8.1 million in 1977⁴.

Although not the only reason, the aggressiveness of the family planning program cost Mrs. Gandhi the national election of 1977. Her political party's vote share dropped from 44% in 1971 to 35% in 1977. The most vehement resistance to the sterilization policies came from the rural parts of the country, Congress' vote share significantly dropped from the Northern states of India, where the enforcement of the policies was forceful.

With a similar objective of pacing population growth with economic prosperity, China's one child policy was implemented in 1979. The policy was in practise for 35 years before being amended. During this period, the Chinese government claims that 400 million births were averted.

China's family planning program started with a law on contraception and abortion in 1953 which took a back stage owing to the famine(1959-1961) and political upheaval. In 1975, the Chinese government re-focused its attention to the population boom and started a birth control campaign, with the slogan- "Late, long and few", encouraging citizens to marry late, keep long gaps between children and have no more than two children.

Although the campaign was fairly successful, the Chinese government moved from a suggestive campaign to an obligatory family planning practise. The infamous one child policy was passed in 1979, placing a de facto limit of one child per family.

In order to enforce the law, the government incentivized single child couples by offering longer maternity leaves and interest free loans, while imposing fines on couples that conceived another child without the requisite permits. Due to its wide outreach, the party used "neighbourhood watch" programs wherein neighbours were enticed by monetary rewards to spy on their neighbours and report to the government of any suspicious pregnancies within their communities.

Although the policy is laced with exceptions these were generally ignored. The policy allows for couples to have a second child if both the parents were single children, or the first born is handicapped and the policy is not applicable in the rural areas.

Purely based on achieving its objectives, China's OCP was a soaring success. Considering that the objective of the OCP was to pace China's population growth with its economic

⁴ V. A. Pai Panandiker and P. K. Umashankar, "The New Politics of Population: Conflict and Consensus in Family Planning" in "Fertility Control and Politics in India," Population and Development Review 20 (1994): 89-104.

development, the policy has achieved beyond its intended outcomes. The family planning program is often credited with taking the country's meager economy to the mammoth it is today.

At the inception of the policy, the fertility rate in China was 6, meaning that on an average a Chinese woman birthed 6 babies, while in 2018, this was dropped to 1.69⁵. The government further claims that OCP prevented the birth of 400 million babies.

This government mandated family planning initiative has led the country to many social woes. It seems that China has traded one population problem for another. It is projected that by 2050, one in three Chinese will be over 60 years old, with such big numbers the socialist government might not be able to provide for all its elderly. This leads to a precarious situation wherein one single child is responsible to provide for 6 elderly (one set of parents and two sets of grandparents).

One of the unforeseen outcome of the OCP is the skewed sex ratio. Traditionally a patriarchal society, the OCP forced many couples to either abandon their female child so as to try for a male heir and in some extreme cases even led to female infanticide and selective abortions.

At a time when China is an undisputed manufacturing hub of the world, it's shrinking labour pool and soaring wages will definitely have a detrimental effect on its export heavy economy. The Chinese leadership in its attempts to forestall the impending crisis announced that couples were now "allowed" to have three children, completely ignoring the fact that a similar relaxation in the policy earlier in 2016 failed to produce the desired outcomes.

While India was the first nation to initiate a national family planning program, China's one child policy was the most ambitious birth control project in the world. Both the superpower nations sought to pace population growth using government interventions so as to match the economic growth of their respective countries. Although the government intervention in India was fairly short lived its political consequences still haunt the Indian National Congress. The four decade long OCP has surfaced many social problems such as skewed sex ratio, aging population and workforce shortage.

Despite these brutal policies, China and India are still the most populous countries in the world. While the statistics still show a grim picture, they hide a more complex and positive trend. Growing urbanization, higher level of education, participation of women in the workforce and alleviation of poverty have all contributed to slowing the growth rate of India as well as China.

⁵ Hannah Beech/Jiuquan, "China's one child crisis: why the world's most populous needs more people" in *Time Magazine*, December 2, 2013

Good governance and nature have a way of balancing the human demography much better than any forceful inhuman body policing.
