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OPINION

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A DYNAMIC APPROACH TO FAMILY PLANNING

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ONE of the problems India has to tackle with real dynamism if it is to achieve what every Indian wants: namely an improvement in the standard of living for everybody, not just for those favoured by education or economic circumstances, the population explosion must be ended. This is a fact which had been recognised by the late Pandit Nehru; a fact which Sanjay Gandhi tried to tackle, but with a zeal so extreme that it lost his mother the election. To do him justice, Sanjay Gandhi's desire to stem the birth rate was laudable, even if the methods to which he resorted were not.

Nothing has changed in India between 1977 and today. The need to stop the population explosion is as great as it has always been. Something must be done, but it is unlikely that the methods which were so unpopular a few years ago will be resorted to again. It is, therefore, a hundred times more important to find some method by which "Family Planning" can be effectively carried out in India, for India's own sake.

Many methods have been tried and so far, with the exception of forcible sterilisation, none have been really effective in reducing the birth rate of the backward and the poor. This is not surprising because of many factors which anyone who really knows India must be so familiar with that I do not propose to go into details of the reasons for failure. I expect that 'Opinion's' readers are fully conversant with the problems. However, I will recap a few salient points which I have observed on the spot, all of which illustrate why the Family Planning programmes seem doomed to be restricted to the urban educated and the industrial proletariat while making a negligible impact on the countryside.

1. The IUD is not really suitable for poor Indian village women because they are already so anaemic that it causes bleeding, let alone, if improperly introduced, infections.
2. The condom, when distributed, as I have seen in parts of Gujarat, by virginal looking nurses in white uniform so immaculate that they might have been nuns, will not find many takers because of the embarrassment it must cause the men when they have to go and ask for their supply. I remember one particular case where the nurse in charge of Family Planning told me that men never came a second time, which is what I would have expected.

3. The rhythm method, dreamed up by European well-wishers, was a great farce because illiterate and innumerate women kept pushing the beads of their menstrual necklace, if they bothered to push them at all, in a haphazard way, so that in the end no reliance could be put on the "safe period".

4. Contraceptive foam tablets and jellies for women have to be fresh, dry and available. This under Indian conditions is asking for a great deal when it comes to the villages.

5. The diaphragm method is too sophisticated for women whose hands are roughened by construction work, and they are the women who after all are most in need of contraception.

I could go on and on like this.

What options are left for the Government of India to pursue if it is to make a significant attack on the population explosion? There are in the end only two. One is sterilisation, but this ought never to be compulsory, and abortion. Abortion has been made legal in India but there is a problem. Abortion after the early stages of pregnancy is risky and requires proper medical attention. However, abortion in the early stages of pregnancy can be easily performed without any real danger to the woman. In France there is a technique called the "bicycle pump" technique by which aspiration of the fertilised egg at a very early stage of pregnancy can be performed by almost anybody, though not by the woman herself, with hardly any risks. However, for a method of this kind it is essential for pregnancy to be detected at an early stage.

The early detection of pregnancy is not difficult, skilled, or expensive. The London Underground is plastered with advertisements for pregnancy testing kits. These kits are both inexpensive and so simple that any nitwit can use them. The principle on which this early diagnosis of pregnancy works is that almost as soon as a woman becomes pregnant her urine contains certain chemicals which can be detected by dipping a chemically treated piece of paper in the urine. If the paper turns a certain colour it means the woman is pregnant. The instructions are of course given with the kit. The principle is so simple that it does not even require any equipment beyond the chemically treated paper, which means that the poor village woman could do the test while urinating. I understand that WHO has developed a kit which is dirt cheap and which will provide testing for twenty times.

Indian village women, like most village women everywhere, are keen to control their fertility once they have produced the number of children of the sex they require to provide them with security in their old age. I have not forgotten the doctor in Ramanagaram who was carrying out Dr. Stone's rhythm method experiment telling me that after five children (with, say, three boys) for every live birth she had discovered that there had been as many as eight abortions. This suggests that the extra child was born because the abortion had not been successful.

I have just read a book by Professor Freeman on a survey he conducted recently in an Orissa village. This book contains an absolutely horrendous description of an abortion which was performed when the girl—who was not married—was five months gone. The girl nearly died, which of course is one way of putting a stop to the population explosion but not a way any government would wish to encourage. The reason why the abortion was done at five months was that it took the girl more than three months to discover that she was pregnant and some time for the go-between to provide the abortionist. Had the girl in that Orissa village been equipped with a pregnancy testing kit she would have known she was pregnant as soon as she missed a period. Moreover, had the bicycle pump method been propagated so that it could be locally administered, she would have got rid of the unwanted baby without having to spend nine agonising days bleeding alone on the floor in a shed.

I understand that the Overseas Development Ministry is not very responsive to the idea of pushing the pregnancy testing kit as part of its aid programme to India because it is still having second thoughts about having provided funds for the sterilisation campaign which created such resentment that it swept Mrs. Gandhi out of office. However, I do not see why if the Government of India were to approach the British Government, suggesting that it would welcome finances for the WHO pregnancy testing kit as part of aid why ODM should refuse.

In Britain there is going on at present a rather exciting debate on abortion, with the population on the whole fairly evenly divided irrespective of party. Fortunately, it looks as if the efforts of a zealous MP to make abortion more difficult are going to fail. However, the issue is a very sensitive one, so sensitive that I do not think that the British Government would be prepared to push, or to be in a position where it might appear to be pushing, contraception for others even if this is what others need. One of the reasons which springs to mind, besides religious and moral objections, is that it might sound convenient to those in the developed countries to try and limit the population of the less developed countries in order to be able to cut down on the amount of aid, small as it is.

What I am driving at is that the Government of India—whoever is at its head—has a vested interest in tackling Family Planning in an effective manner.

I am suggesting that the most effective manner, so far available, is to combine a massive distribution of WHO pregnancy testing kits with a great deal of propaganda on the radio etc., on how to use the kit, and to train as many people as possible to perform early abortions by the aspiration method. The advantage of the kit is that, because women can use it themselves, they need not tell anybody, be it husband or mother-in-law, that they are pregnant. However, once they know they are pregnant, if they do not want the child, and if there is someone trained in the bicycle pump method of abortion within reach, they can, as many

girls have done in France, walk to their abortion and, after a half hour's rest, walk back without anybody being the wiser. The effect on the birth rate of readily available abortion needs no brief. Everybody knows what it has done for Japan. I do not see why the same should not be true for India. Therefore the Government of India ought to press ahead with these two simple and cheap methods of controlling fertility.

THE INTERIM BUDGET

P. V. R. RAO

THE Finance Minister has attempted to preempt any criticism of his first budget by pleading an 'interim budget' and contending that Government would need "some more time to assess the damage suffered by the economy and to evolve a cohesive medium term strategy for revival and restoration of its health". Yet, his speech, while introducing the budget, reflects the struggle within his conscience between the honest gentleman he undoubtedly is and the political environment and exigencies within which he must work. It is two months since the Government assumed office; and the galloping inflation as well as the state of economy depicted by Government calls for urgent action; but the presentation of an interim budget practically postpones any effective action for another three months. The Finance Minister, while disclaiming any interest in recriminations, has roundly castigated the previous Government for its mismanagement of the country's affairs, but has decided to continue those very policies for a few more months — till the elections to the State Legislatures are over! Even so, the study of the budget which has been presented discloses some interesting features.

The budget continues expenditure at present levels and has even increased it to a limited extent in certain directions; and, without changing the general level of taxes, manages to reduce the gap between receipts and outgoings by more than 50% — from Rs. 2,700 crores to Rs. 1,235 crores. The public seem so happy at the absence of any additional levies that they have accepted this 'near miracle' with relief. As magicians are careful to explain, magic is merely an intelligent exercise in dexterity. Before, however, elaborating on this point, the Finance Minister deserves to be congratulated on the positive role he must have played in framing the budget. The imminence of elections in a number of States, while precluding any additional levies forthwith, must have also subjected the Finance Minister to considerable pressure to increase budget allocations in particular directions. The announcement by Government a few days back expanding the terms of reference to the Agricultural Prices Commission seemed to indicate that Government perhaps wanted to go one better than Shri Charan Singh in fixing support prices. That the budget limits the outlays on subsidies in this regard to existing

levels suggests that, for the time being, the Finance Minister has been able to resist effectively the many pressures to increase outlays to which he must have been undoubtedly subject.

The Budget provides an increase in total Plan outlay from Rs. 7,108 crores to Rs. 7,393 crores. In this context, the Finance Minister has relied on the assurances given by the State Governments to the Planning Commission that they would keep the resources at the assessed levels and adhere to the commitments made by them to mobilise additional resources to finance these outlays. Unfortunately, those State budgets, which have already been presented, leave large uncovered deficits and do not generate confidence that these assurances will be fulfilled. Also, the Central outlay on the Plan, which is worked out at Rs. 6,573 crores, is supported by a budget provision of Rs. 4,570 crores only. The balance of Rs. 2,003 crores is hoped to be met by the internal resources generated by the public sector undertakings. Increased contributors by public sector undertakings is an annual refrain indulged in by successive Finance Ministers, invariably belied in practice. Even in 1979-80, their performance was adverse to the tune of Rs. 268 crores. I have not been able to identify the increase assumed in the budget in this respect; and there is no indication how the public sector undertakings are expected to make this substantial contribution in the coming year. This is not a criticism of the public sector; but for Government vision and initiative, the many activities undertaken by public sector undertakings, both in nature and magnitude, would not have come into existence at all. But adequate contribution by public sector undertakings requires a revamp of management organisation and practices to improve efficiency and productivity and a proper pricing policy for the goods and services provided by such units. In the absence of any indication of the steps to be taken in this direction, the contribution the public sector units will actually be able to make remains an elusive factor.

The reduction in the budgetary gap has been achieved by assuming more buoyant tax receipts (Rs. 506 crores), more market borrowings and small savings (Rs. 614 crores) and increased external assistance (Rs. 278 crores). The increase in tax receipts is over and above the revised budget figures. The Finance Minister has been bemoaning the state of economy; and last year, because of poor performance, there was a substantial fall in excise revenue. Such a fall indicates a slow-down in the tempo of economy, which cannot but have its impact on the tax receipts in the current year. The Finance Minister can only hope to achieve the target figures if he has some measures up his sleeves to prime the economy. But the budget speech gives no indication of any such measures.

A major factor contributing to the increase in the budget deficit is the increased outlay on the import of crude oil and various oil products. While prices to consumers of some oil products have been increased, there has been no corresponding increase of prices of other products. The country's appetite for oil is growing unabated, while a ceiling in respect of the price to be paid to the oil producers is no-where in sight. This

increasing dependence on imported oil with its mounting costs bodes ill for the country's economy; and it is regrettable that no measures to counter the situation seem to be yet in the offing. Government policy with regard to coal and oil seem to vacillate from time to time depending on the momentary supply position. A firm, long-term plan to reduce our dependence on oil as a source of energy by substitution of coal and by rapid development of nuclear power is overdue.

Even with all the excercises utilised by the Finance Minister, the uncovered deficit in the budget is still very large. Also, when the final budget is presented, the Finance Minister will be forced to provide for additional outlays in certain areas; such outlays will be essential to revitalise the economy. Speculation is rife about the magnitude of the taxation effort the Finance Minister will undertake. It is clear enough that the problem is quite beyond any mere taxation effort; the financial and other policies of Government will play a dominant and crucial role. The various options open to Government are clear enough; and any effective solution cannot be immediately palatable. In a democracy, a massive majority is by itself not sufficient for the adoption of requisite measures; a determined leadership is also needed. Will the Finance Minister be able to devise an appropriate mix and sell it to the Prime Minister and his own other colleagues?

COMMENT

When Mr. Venkatraman, the present Finance Minister, talks slightingly about "financial mismanagement" by the Janata government, he does not remember, or rather chooses to forget, that for two whole years after its inception it kept prices steady despite heavy deficit financing and some adverse world conditions. It was only after the most unfortunate change in the Finance Ministership, when Mr. Charan Singh took over from Mr. H. M. Patel, that prices began to rise again. Public memory is short, but few turning their minds back to that two years period will fail to recollect the public satisfaction when prices first ceased to rise and then actually remained steady month by month. A unique feat in financial management it was and accomplished without fuss or fanfare. With much anguish one saw Mr. Charan Singh's heavy hands destroying the delicate machinery and balance. Perhaps he knew no better, perhaps it was intentional, as in his insensate search for Prime Ministership, he cared not what damage he did to the party. Probably the hidden inspiration came from Mrs. Gandhi who finally swung her strength behind him and made him Prime Minister only to reduce him to a minority when he refused to withdraw the cases against her and Sanjay. In any case Mr. Venkatraman ought to keep in mind Saadi's saying, "Do not denigrate the good work of your predecessors, so that your good work may also be remembered." Possibly Mr. Venkatraman is a modest man; knowing his own capacity he may not expect anything very much from it. Still

let him take heart. He will have good reason to congratulate himself if at the end of his term of office, he is half the financial statesman Mr. H. M. Patel proved himself to be.

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So the Government of India has made it clear to the nations of the world that it will regard as an unfriendly act any sale or giving of arms to Pakistan. In whose interest is it acting? Surely an independent Pakistan is almost as much a necessity for us as an independent India. Pakistan under the Russian paw would mean imminent danger to us. We choose not to stand shoulder to shoulder with it in its struggle to escape the Russian yoke, a foolish policy but still understandable in view of long bitter history. In addition we now discourage those who would help it in its hour of need, a thoroughly indefensible move on our part, which could be justified only by the belief that however great the threat to it from outside, whatever urgent dangers it faces from abroad, the only way in which it will use its arms will be to attack us. With Russian troops pouring down the Khyber, it will still be planning an invasion of Kashmir! With Russian MIG's making an inferno of its airspace, it will still be preparing to bomb Indian cities. By this mentality, we are making it clear beyond doubt that our main purpose is to ease things for the Russians, that we wish to remove the slightest obstacle in their path. Alas for India; its neutrality, long suspect, is now definitely dead. The Russians in Afghanistan we have already declared, are no danger to us; we now go a step further and say, in effect, that the Russians in Pakistan will also be no danger to us. Does Indiraova repay thus the many favours the Russians did to Indira?

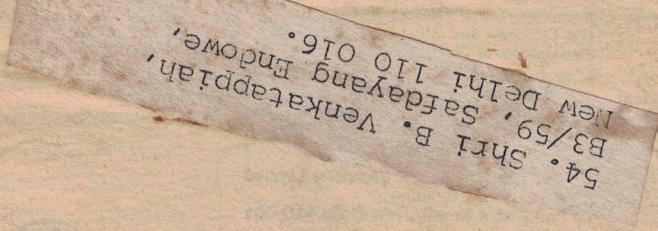
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Routine changes, just routine changes, blandly says the Minister, when questioned about the many transfers the Indira government has made and is making; no political implications at all, he assures us. He knows, he knows the officers know, and he knows many of us also know, that the real reason behind most of the transfers is undoubtedly political, to reward those who stood behind Indira and her gang, to punish those who opposed her and it, or just did their duty according to the law and the constitution without fear or favour. The spoils system has in fact been introduced with a bang into the hitherto largely secluded impartial public service. Krishna Menon, it is said, once asked a GOC angrily, when the latter had put forward arguments against something he wanted to do, "Are you for me or against me?", and received in reply a blank, incredulous stare. At which he became angrier and beating the table with his fists demanded an answer. In the coldest of tones he was told, "Sir, as individuals neither you nor I enter into this. I am a member of the defence forces of India, you are by law the civilian head responsible to the people for administering them. You ask for my opinion on a particular matter. I as in duty bound give it to you as honestly and fairly as I can. You may of course disagree with it, but you are surely going beyond the limits of your authority when you impugn my motives,

suggesting I am giving the answer I do, because I am opposed to you personally. My brief answer to your question is "I am neither for nor against you. I am for India." Krishna Menon got up and stamped out muttering, we'll see, we'll see! The later unhappy experiences of that distinguished officer are not relevant here. Krishna Menon was only one in his time. Now we seem to have whole tribes of his type in the Central Government and administration. Morale? Bah, who bothers about morale in these days? Your eye on the main chance, flatter, wheedle, give advice as desired, serve the interest of your political master, and let's have no nonsense about impartiality and independent thinking, the two primary virtues of the good appointive servant from ancient times. So means Indira by her actions, however well-meaning and dripping with virtuous sentiments her words sound at the meetings of government servants she occasionally addresses.

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So we're to have nuclear weapons after all, if a plain meaning can be drawn from Mrs. Gandhi's replies to questions in Parliament, as reported in the Press. But we're also to have an in-depth research project to tell us about the nuclear capabilities of our neighbours, especially China and Pakistan. Whether the first will follow and be dependent on the second or the two will proceed simultaneously, is not quite clear. In any case, without any research project, in-depth or shallow, even this comparatively ignorant servant of the people can assert that Pakistan will have its first hydrogen bomb in May this year, and that China has at present sufficient nuclear capability to destroy every city and town in North and East India from Calcutta to Amritsar in a very short time. So if the decision to go ahead with nuclear weapons has been at last taken, implement it with all speed possible. Let your research projects go ahead, if you feel you must, but don't let them defer the implementation. The whole history of this region might have been quite different had you, as urged so strongly and frequently, gone in for nuclear weapons when China did or even a little later. But you preferred 'a little sleep, little folding of the hands in peace'. May you and we not have to pay a price for that unconscionable delay! God's mercy be upon



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