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Population is not a problem, but our greatest strength

Amit Varma | TNN | Jun 9, 2019, 05:00 IST



When all political parties agree on something, you know you might have a problem. Giriraj Singh, a minister in Narendra Modi's new cabinet, tweeted this week that our population control law should become a "movement". This is something that would find bipartisan support — we are taught from school onwards that India's population is a big problem, and

we need to control it.

This is wrong. Contrary to popular belief, our population is not a problem. It is our greatest strength.

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The notion that we should worry about a growing population is an intuitive one. The world has limited resources. People keep increasing. Something's gotta give.

Robert Malthus made just this point in his 1798 book, 'An Essay on the Principle of Population.' He was worried that our population would grow exponentially while resources would grow arithmetically. As more people entered the workforce, wages would fall and goods would become scarce. Calamity was inevitable.

Malthus's rationale was so influential that this mode of thinking was soon called 'Malthusian.' (It is a pejorative today.) A 20th-century follower of his, Harrison Brown, came up with one of my favourite images on this subject, arguing that a growing population would lead to the earth being "covered completely and to a considerable depth with a writhing mass of human beings, much as a dead cow is covered with a pulsating mass of maggots."

Another Malthusian, Paul Ehrlich, published a book called 'The Population Bomb' in 1968, which began with the stirring lines, "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now." Ehrlich was, as you'd guess, a big supporter of India's coercive family planning programs. "I don't see," he wrote, "how India could possibly feed two hundred million more people by 1980."

None of these fears have come true. A 2007 study by Nicholas Eberstadt called "Too Many People?" found no correlation between population density and poverty. The greater the density of people, the more you'd expect them to fight for resources — and yet, Monaco, which has 40 times the population density of Bangladesh, is doing well for itself. So is Bahrain, which has three times the population density of India.

Not only does population not cause poverty, it makes us more prosperous. The economist Julian Simon pointed out in a 1981 book that through history, whenever there has been a spurt in population, it has coincided with a spurt in productivity. Such as, for example, between Malthus's time and now. There were around a billion people on earth in 1798, and there are around 7.7 billion today. As you read these words, consider that you are better off than the richest person on the planet then.

Why is this? The answer lies in the title of Simon's book: 'The Ultimate Resource'. When we speak of resources, we forget that human beings are the finest resource of all. There is no limit to our ingenuity. And we interact with each other in positive-sum ways — every voluntary interaction leaves both people better off, and the amount of value in the world goes up. This is why we want to be part of economic networks that are as large, and as dense, as possible. This is why most people migrate to cities rather than away from them — and why cities are so much richer than towns or villages.

If Malthusians were right, essential commodities like wheat, maize and rice would become relatively scarcer over time, and thus more expensive — but they have actually become much cheaper in real terms. This is thanks to the productivity and creativity of humans, who, in Eberstadt's words, are "in practice always renewable and in theory entirely inexhaustible."

The error made by Malthus, Brown and Ehrlich is the same error that our politicians make today, and not just in the context of population: zero-sum thinking. If our population grows and resources stay the same, of course there will be scarcity. But this is never the case. All we need to do to learn this lesson is look at our cities!

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This mistaken thinking has had savage humanitarian consequences in India. Think of the unborn millions over the decades because of our brutal family planning policies. How many Tendulkars, Rahmans and Satyajit Rays have we lost? Think of the immoral coercion still carried out on poor people across the country. And finally, think of the condescension of our politicians, asserting that people are India's problem — but always other people, never themselves.

This arrogance is India's greatest problem, not our people.

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