

The perplexing population puzzle

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In 2017, the British magazine *Times Higher Education* asked fifty Nobel Prize-winning scientists, “what is the greatest threat to mankind?” The answer was: “Rapid population growth and environmental degradation.”

However, it was only about five years ago that the vast majority of experts in chemistry, physics, medicine, psychology, and economics believed that the rapidly growing population and degradation of the natural environment is the gravest threat to humanity. Rapid population growth and its possible implications have been echoed continuously for the past few decades.

Based on our last census, Pakistan is currently the fifth largest country in the world in terms of population, with more than 220 million people. According to the World Population Review, Pakistan has the fastest population growth rate compared to the first four major countries on the list, namely China, India, the United States, and Indonesia. If the growth rate of Pakistani citizens at an annual rate of 2.1 per cent continues, then by 2045, the population of this South Asian country is expected to double from the current level.

Although not very different from Iran and Bangladesh in its cultural characteristics and social structure, Pakistan does not have a proud history of population control like those two Muslim-majority countries.

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For example, in 1971, the population of Bangladesh was about 70m, while the population of Pakistan was about 60m. Fifty years later, the population of Bangladesh is 164.7m million, while the population of Pakistan is over 220m. This means that Pakistan had about 50 million more children than Bangladesh.

In 1980, Iran had an average fertility rate of 6.5 children per woman, which according to a 2020 report by the World Bank, decreased to 2.1 children. However, according to the same report, Pakistan still has a fertility rate of 3.1 children per woman, which is an alarmingly high rate.

There are many reasons why the population is not controlled. First, policymakers have not made good policies and effective laws because the population problem is not related to public popularity. Secondly, the data presented by various agencies proved to be flawed whenever the census was conducted. The third failure is at the grassroots level of the institutions implementing the policies.

We saw advertisements for contraceptives and condoms for a long time, which spread awareness widely. But then, suddenly, such ads stopped appearing. Awareness is directly

related to education, whose impact on the population cannot be denied.

The literacy rate among women is also one of the most important factors. According to the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey of 2017 and 2018, women in the country who have not received any education have an average of 4.2 children per capita, while among highly educated women, the average was 2.6 children per woman.

Similarly, the use of contraceptives is also higher in areas with high education rates. For example, according to a survey, the use of condoms as a contraceptive method in the Pakistani capital Islamabad is 18.7pc but only 2.9pc in the former Federally Administered Tribal Area.

In this regard, we also see the failure of state institutions at the local level. Since the population welfare department has been entrusted to the provincial governments, the situation has become more serious. There are institutions responsible for population welfare in every district, but they avoid public awareness campaigns, gatherings at a local level or mobilising ordinary citizens.

If we look at the religious trend in the discussion of population, the lady health workers and midwives convey the message of population welfare programmes in the streets.

They strive hard to spread awareness in society and enable practical cooperation from the public. But to common citizens, their work is undesirable and indecent. Field workers can provide contraceptive products to people but cannot remove from their minds that it is allegedly un-Islamic according to their thinking.

It has been our misfortune that, to date, we have not been able to decide whether population control is Islamic or non-Islamic. In 2015, the Population Council mobilised scholars from all schools of thought regarding the appropriate spacing of childbirths and focused them on the balanced growth of the population instead of controlling it. In addition, they tried to convey the message of breastfeeding for two years to the public through scholars.

Another important social reason for the increase in population is that the birth of boys is preferred over girls in Pakistan. This is the desire of the majority of ordinary citizens. It is a common thought to continue to have children unless a boy (or boys) is born. Therefore, unless awareness is created among the people, this practice will not stop.

According to experts, Pakistan cannot afford to bear the burden of such a large population. Whenever this question is discussed in various meetings regarding future planning, the Pakistani decision-makers start thinking that providing food, water, education, and health facilities for the large population of the future is not the current economic condition.

If the ratio of rural and urban populations is compared, in 1955, only 19pc of the country's population lived in cities which rose to 35pc in 2020. According to experts, by 2055, the ratio of the population of urban and rural areas in Pakistan will be equal.

In view of the residential needs of the growing population, housing societies are being set up in place of agricultural lands. When that happens, where will they get enough wheat to eat? Go to any city in Pakistan, traffic congestion, insufficient number of hospitals and schools, and problems related to clean drinking water and drainage have made life difficult for citizens. If we cannot meet the basic needs of the country's current population today, what will we do tomorrow?

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