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Population Explosion: Family Welfare and Urban Planning

It must have been evident from the foregoing discussion that the world is in the midst of a population explosion. This section brings out the implications of this explosion for the patterns of resource and energy use, with special reference to the certain specific kinds of landscapes and habitats. The section also suggests the adoption of family planning and urban planning as two of the most efficacious methods of controlling population growth and preventing further environmental degradation.

We have noted in the previous section how population growth in recent times is generally threatening to food security, energy security and, indeed, the sustainability of the planet. However, certain areas are more severely affected by the population pressure on the locally available resources. The world's most populous regions are in the coastal areas. These are critical ecosystems that are being rapidly destroyed. The very survival of the communities in densely populated coastal areas is at stake under the impact of global climate change. In the sea, fish population is getting depleted by the excessive fishing that a huge population inevitably causes. Existing fish reserves will not support further growth in coastal populations.

The remaining forests of the world, too, are threatened by the expanding human population in the adjacent farm lands. Many such encroachments in India have been regularised over the last few decades. But forest loss has long-term negative effects on the quality of air and water, and the shrinkage of forest cover destroys plant and animal species by depriving them of their accustomed habitats. The resultant loss of biodiversity is a major detriment to human well-being as well.

Urban areas constitute yet another specific habitat that has to be addressed in relation to impact of population pressure on environmental degradation. Population increase will continue in urban centres in the near future. The developed world is already highly urbanized with 75% of its population living in the urban sector. The UN has shown that by 2025 there will be 21 mega-cities, most of which will be situated in developing countries. In 1975 only 27% of the people in the developing world lived in urban areas. By 2000 this percentage had grown to 40 and by 2030 state that this it will grow to 56%, according to well-informed estimates. Today, more than 290 million people live in towns and cities in India. There were 23 metros in India in 1991, which grew to 40 by 2001. But the problem is that the modern urban centre creates environmental hazards both for itself and for its surrounding rural areas.

The high population density in urban areas, where nearly half the world's population now lives, leads to serious environmental issues. Urban centres are already unable to provide adequate housing, clean, edible water, drainage systems, growing energy needs, and

ample opportunities for income generation. As a town grows into a city it spreads horizontally destroying its own open spaces and green cover. The modern city also grows vertically through its high rise buildings. This vertical rise too destroys the quality of life in the urban area by multiplying the population density manifold. Urban poverty, too, leads to environmental problems. The number of poor people living in urban areas is rapidly increasing. A third of the world's poor live in urban areas. They live in urban slums, which invariably have unhygienic surrounding caused by a serious lack of infrastructure for hygienic environment viz., adequate water supply and proper sanitation.

As the city horizontally spreads further, it spills outwards into the surrounding agricultural land and natural areas such as forests, grasslands and wetlands, decimating the latter, degrading the surrounding environment, destroying bio-diversity and reinforcing global warming through the proliferation of vehicular and other kinds of urban-specific pollution. And as the population in urban centres grows, they draw on resources from more and more distant rural areas.

Energy use is another area that is severely affected by the population explosion, which is definitely a cause of the rapidly increasing energy use. The phenomenally growing population, furthermore, has developed an energy-hungry lifestyle that increasingly uses consumer goods. These consumer goods require large amounts of energy for their production, packaging, and transport.

The greatest challenge that the world now faces is how to supply its exploding human population with the resources and the energy it needs. It must be amply clear that unless this demographic growth is controlled, the Earth's resources will be rapidly exhausted. One pertinent and wise response to this challenge is to resort to family planning, while the other is to plan the urban expansion.

Family planning is not very uncommon in recent times. At the global level, by the year 2000, 600 million, or 57% of all women in the reproductive age group, were using some method of contraception. However, the use of contraceptive measures is higher in developed countries, i.e., to the tune of 68% of the women as in 2003. In developing countries this percentage was around 55%.

Female sterilization is the most popular method of contraception used in the developing countries at present. This is followed by the use of oral contraceptive pills and, intrauterine devices for women, and the use of condoms for men. India and China have been using permanent sterilization more effectively than many other countries in the developing world.

In response to our phenomenal population growth, India seriously took up an effective Family Planning Program which was renamed the Family Welfare Program. Slogans and awareness-building programmes have disseminated the ideal that each family should not have more than two children. It however has taken several decades to become effective. The decision for the choice of contraceptive method depends on the choice made by the

couple. But in a male-dominated society the choice is often determined by the male partner. Again, among people without adequate education, the choice is not based on advice of doctors or trained social workers, learned in the full range of available methods that are safe.

As the decision to limit family size depends on a couple's background and education, the government has a very significant role to play in building awareness among the people about the needs of family planning. The most important responsibility of the government is to inform the public, through appropriate government departments such as Health and Family Welfare and the Education and Extension workers, about the various contraceptive measures that are available. It is of great importance for policy makers and elected representatives of the people – ministers, MPs, MLAs – to understand the great and urgent need to propagate family planning.

This is related to Government Policy, the effectiveness of Family Welfare Programs, the educational level, and information levels in mass communication. Free access to Family Welfare information provided through the Health Care System, is in some cases unfortunately counteracted by cultural attitudes. Misinformation and inadequate information are reasons why a family does not go in for limiting its size.

The deterioration of the urban environment and the adverse environmental impact of the horizontal spread of the city – the mega-city in particular – can be stalled through judicious urban planning. Environment-friendly urban planning, rational land-use, improvement of slum areas, improvement of water supply and drainage systems, provision for adequate sanitation, development of effective waste water treatment system and an efficient public transport system. Side by side, however, the government needs to devise adequate development options for the agricultural rural sector, instead of sustaining a development agenda that is patently urban-centric. Programmes of rural development, if properly and sincerely developed and implemented, can reduce the current pull that the city exercises on the rural population leading to tremendous overcrowding in the city.

However, it is the ultimately citizen who alone can pressurise the state into undertaking environment-sensitive urban planning. S/he must see to it that the city's natural green spaces, parks and gardens are maintained, river and water fronts are appropriately managed, roadside tree cover is maintained, hill slopes are afforested and architectural and heritage sites protected. To be able to exercise this vigil over the state's environmental governance the citizens themselves need to be aware in the first place about the environment and the need to sustain the planet.