7.1

Population Growth, Variation among Nations

This section examines the interface between the growth in human population and the environment. Given the pace at which population is increasing, an intense pressure is already mounting on the world's finite natural resources. Unless awareness is massively generated in about this pressure and the need for environmental conservation, this population pressure will only reinforce environmental degradation and can also lead to terrible conflict over the control of natural resources.

The global human population at present is around 6 billion. It will cross the 7 billion mark by 2015. The world population is growing by more than 90 million per year. Present projections show that if our population growth is controlled, it will still grow to 7.27 billion by 2015. However, if no action is taken it will become a staggering 7.92 billion.

It is not the demographic figures alone that need to be stressed, but an appreciation of the impact of this demographic growth on natural resources. The needs of this huge number of human beings cannot be supported by the Earth's natural resources, without degrading the quality of human life. Let us see the implications of this population growth on the availability and the condition of natural resources.

In the near future, fossil fuel from oil fields will run dry. Existing agro systems will become too overburdened and will not be able to meet the demands for food. Pastures will be overgrazed by domestic animals. The industrial growth required to meet the demands of the massively rising population will reinforce pollution of soil, water and air. Industrial gases in particular will cause greater global warming and will eventually lead to a rise in sea levels, flooding all low-lying areas and submerging coastal agriculture as well as towns and cities. The seas will experience a decline in the fish population. Larger ozone holes will develop due to the discharge of industrial chemicals into the atmosphere; this development in its turn will affect human health. The population pressure will contribute to water the depletion of fresh water and may lead to water 'famines'. The demographic pressure will also reinforce the degradation of ecosystems leading to extinction of thousands of species which have a great role in the sustainability of the planet.

The environmental consequences of global population growth will also have political ramifications. The pressure on natural resources will escalate conflict between and amongst countries and will eventually make them go to war. The control over regional biological diversity, which is vital for producing new medicinal and industrial products, will lead to grave economic conflicts between biotechnologically advanced nations and the bio-rich countries.

The gravity of the situation has been heightened because the dominant development strategies of the world today have failed to address the problematic interface between population growth and the environment. These strategies focus on the economic performance of the developing countries. But the 15 per cent of the world population, who earn 79 per cent of all the incomes in the world, are based in the developed countries. This 15 percent along with the rich people in poorer countries consume per capita more energy and resources than they need.

In view of the failure of the existing development paradigms a new ethic based on the ideal of a more equitable distribution of resources needs to be formulated. We also need to create a mass environmental awareness movement, so that the ordinary people themselves can evolve informed strategies to avert environmental degradation and bring about a change in people's way of life.

In the first half of the 1900s human numbers were growing rapidly in most developing countries, including India and China. In most African countries, too, the growth rate was very high. In contrast, in the developed world population growth had slowed down. In the developing world, poverty alleviation programs have failed to solve economic problems as more and more people had to be supported on Earth's limited resources. In rural areas population growth led has to increased fragmentation of farm land and unemployment. In the urban areas it has led to inadequate housing, an increasing level of air pollution created by the burgeoning motorized traffic and water pollution deriving from sewage and unmanageable solid waste.

By the 1970s most countries in the developing world had realized that if they had to develop their economies and improve the quality of life of their citizens they would have to curtail population growth. Though population growth shows a general global decline, there are variations in the rate of decline among countries. By the 1990s the growth rate was decreasing in countries such as China and India. In the 1990s it was India that registered the greatest decline. However, the birth-rate continues to remain high in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. The differences in the rate of population control among the different countries can be variously explained in terms of cultural, economic, political differences. However, in many cases, the lack of government initiative in family planning contributes to the failure to control the birth-rate.