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Population Policy: Authoritarianism versus Cooperation

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The Lecture Series

The address by Dr. Amartya Sen is the fourth in the International Lecture Series on Population Issues sponsored by the Population Program of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The lecture series addresses critical issues in population and development that the world will confront in coming years.

Concurrent with the lecture in New Delhi, the Foundation announced its latest round of leadership grants in India, supporting individuals working on population issues. The grants were awarded through the Population Program's Fund for Leadership Development. The fund also supports work in Mexico, Brazil, and Nigeria.

The Fund for Leadership Development in India places significant emphasis on an appreciation of the country's cultural and religious diversity, and the recognition of diversity in its expectations of leadership. It encourages especially the emergence of female leadership.

The inaugural lecture in January 1995 marked the announcement of the annual leadership awards in Nigeria. The second marked the announcement of leadership awards in Mexico, the third in Brazil.

About Amartya Sen

Amartya Kumar Sen was born in India and was educated in Calcutta and Cambridge, England. He is the Lamont University Professor at Harvard University and also professor of economics and of philosophy. Before joining the Harvard faculty in 1987, Professor Sen was the Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford University, and a fellow of All Souls College. Prior to that he taught at Cambridge University, Jadavpur University in Calcutta, Delhi University, and the London School of Economics.

Professor Sen's research has ranged over a number of fields in economics and philosophy, including welfare economics, social choice theory, decision theory, economic measurement, development economics, and moral and political philosophy. His publications include *Choice of Techniques* (1960), *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (1970), *On Economic Inequality* (1973), *Poverty and Famines* (1981), *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (1982), *Resources, Values and Development* (1984), *On Ethics and Economics* (1987), *The Standard of Living* (1987), *Hunger and Public Action*, jointly with Jean Drèze (1989), and *Inequality Reexamined* (1992).

He is past president of the Indian Economic Association, the American Economic Association, the International Economic Association, the Econometric Society, and the Development Studies Association. He is a fellow of the British Academy, of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and of the Econometric Society. In 1990 Professor Sen received both the Giovanni Agnelli International Prize for his research on ethics of modern society and the Alan Shawn Feinstein World Hunger Award for his work on understanding and preventing world hunger.

Population Policy: Authoritarianism versus Cooperation¹

Introduction

“In politics,” said Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1830, “what begins in fear usually ends in folly.” Coleridge is not my favourite poet, but he was, I think, right to point to the blunders we commit out of fear. Something of a folly — indeed more than a folly — is, I shall argue, happening right now through frightened reaction to population growth. Despite noticeable deceleration in recent years, the rates of population increase remain quite high in many parts of the world, and there is an understandable interest in finding ways of bringing down these rates as soon as possible.

This concern calls for serious reflection on what might be the best response to “the population problem.” But critical reflection is precisely the response that is missing when policymakers in different parts of the world rush to take direct control of birth decisions of families through authoritarian intervention. There have been several moves in that direction recently — most famously in China, but also in India and elsewhere. This essay is an attempt to examine the issues raised by authoritarian approaches to the population problem and a comparison of those approaches with that of working through cooperation.

There are many complexities in assessing the seriousness of the population problem, and in arriving at sensible policies to be followed. There are enormous diversities of understanding that divide the general public as well as specialists who write on this subject. There are, in fact, two distinct battlegrounds. The first area of disagreement concerns the seriousness of the population problem, covering such issues as the reading of the pressure of population, the possibility of catastrophe

¹ For helpful discussions, I am most grateful to Lincoln Chen, Marty Chen, Monica Das Gupta, Jean Drèze, Athar Hussain, Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, T.N. Krishnan, P.N. Mari Bhat, Emma Rothschild, Cass Sunstein, and Pravin Visaria.

that may be generated, the impact of population growth on the growth of incomes and on other economic and social variables, and so on.² The second area concerns the effectiveness of different influences through which population growth rates may come down in those countries and regions where they are currently very high. The pros and cons of authoritarian intervention, with which I am mainly concerned here, belong to this second area.

A Fundamental Dichotomy

The arguments in the case for and against authoritarian intervention relate to a basic attitudinal difference on the merits of the decisions that the family itself makes. There is, on the one side, an approach reflecting disparagement, which sees the family's decisions as either seriously undisciplined or incurably biased, and often very wrong for the society as a whole and perhaps even for the respective families themselves. Arguing for a forceful and compulsive intervention from outside the family is a short step from this premise.

In contrast, an alternative approach sees the family's decision-making ability to be basically fine, even though adverse circumstances and external necessities may strongly constrain these decisions. There might, of course, be some divergences between social costs and private ones, but those who take a favourable view of people's ability to think and decide in a socially concerned way tend to expect that these divergences can be much reduced through reflections on social responsibility and the emergence of communal norms on family size. There is also the possibility of reducing the gap between private and social costs through correcting the imperfections of the market and making the prices faced by individuals reflect the social impact of their decisions more fully. It is, of course, true that governmental intervention in the markets and prices can be an indirect route to coercion, especially when the individuals are left with very few real options. But the corrections envisaged are usually much more moderate than

² I have tried to analyze the nature of the population problem in "Population: Delusion and Reality," *New York Review of Books*, September 22, 1994, and in "Population and Reasoned Agency: Food, Fertility and Economic Development," in Kerstin Lindahl-Kiessling and Hans Landberg, eds., *Population, Economic Development, and the Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). See also the other contributions in that volume of essays.

that, in a way that would still leave much of the decision-making to the people themselves. In this general approach, the route to rational family planning lies in supporting and empowering those whose lives and responsible agency are most directly involved, and reflecting to them more fully the social consequences of their own decisions.

There is, however, a source of tension in this approach arising from conflicts and inequalities within the family, and this issue will be rather important in the analysis presented here. There can be a clash of

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interests between male and female members of the family, particularly given their typically asymmetric roles in child care. There can also be tensions between the different age groups and generations, particularly in a “joint family” — for example, the mother-in-law can be much more keen on a larger number of grandchildren than the daughter-in-law, who has to bear much of the burden of this achievement.³ In examining the intrusion of an outside bureaucracy into the affairs of the family,

we must not overlook the divisions and internal tensions within the family. The route of cooperation involves the voluntary collaboration of adult family members in general, but particularly of those whose agency and well-being are most directly involved in these decisions — typically the young women who bear and, to a great extent, rear the children.

In its pure form, the cooperative approach contrasts sharply with the authoritarian one, and the battle between the two schools of thought can be seen plentifully in the literature on this subject. In practice, the contrast tends to be much less sharp and often quite a bit blurred. Nevertheless, various forms of coercion can be seen fairly

³ Alaka Basu has noted that in South Asia, quite often the important comparison “is not between the decision making powers of women versus the husband or male patriarch, but between the younger wife versus the older woman, usually the mother-in-law” (“Female Schooling, Autonomy and Fertility Change: What Do These Words Mean In South Asia?” in Roger Jeffery and Alaka Basu, eds., *Girls’ Schooling, Women’s Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia*, New Delhi: Sage, forthcoming). She argues that “the real pity is often not that men wield so much domestic power,” but that it is “during the prime reproductive years that female power is at its lowest.”

clearly in the field of birth control in many countries. Sometimes coercion takes a direct form — for example, in the “one child policy” and other legal restrictions in contemporary China, and during Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s “emergency period” in India in the mid-1970s. Quite often, however, that route is indirectly pursued, for example through regulations that disqualify parents of more than the specified number children from receiving public benefits of certain kinds, such as housing or government jobs. This has occurred in several countries, including China and some north Indian states. Sometimes the process chosen is “tied” services, whereby public medical attention is offered along with fairly forceful advocacy of birth control. Another form of effective coercion involves the use of uninformed consent of women, when the nature and consequences of the procedure to be used are not fully explained to the participating women. Another variant involves giving financial incentives for sterilization in circumstances that make them quite irresistible for impoverished people. I shall discuss the issue of coercion in its more frank form, but some of the arguments would apply to more concealed and less extreme forms of compulsion as well.

While the collaborative approach works, in general, through the empowerment of the persons directly involved and through increasing their effective freedom, the coercive strategy works through ordering them around and through reducing their freedom to decide. The two outlooks, in their pure forms, could not be further apart.

A Classic Debate

It may be useful to begin with a brief examination of a 200-year-old dispute between Malthus and Condorcet which relates closely to the contrasting approaches just outlined. Even though Malthus is credited with having provided the pioneering analysis of the possibility that population may tend to grow too fast, it was in fact Condorcet, the French mathematician and great Enlightenment thinker, who first presented the core of the scenario that underlies the “Malthusian” analysis of the population problem. Condorcet aired his questions thus:

But in this progress of industry and happiness, each generation will be called to more extended enjoyments, and in consequence, by the physical constitution of the human frame, to

an increase in the number of individuals. Must not there arrive a period then, when these laws, equally necessary, shall counteract each other? When the increase of the number of men surpasses their means of subsistence, the necessary result must be either a continual diminution of happiness and population, a movement truly retrograde, or, at least, a kind of oscillation between good and evil? In societies arrived at this term, will not this oscillation be a constantly subsisting cause of periodical misery?⁴

Malthus took to this analysis of Condorcet, and quoted it with great approval in his famous *Essay on population*, published in 1798: “Mr. Condorcet’s picture of what may be expected to happen when the number of men shall surpass the means of their subsistence is justly drawn.”⁵

What Malthus did not like was the “solution” that Condorcet foresaw to the diagnosed problem, namely a cooperative response through the reasoned agency of the people themselves. Condorcet predicted the emergence of new norms of smaller family size based on “the progress of reason.” He anticipated a time when “the absurd prejudices of superstition will have ceased to corrupt and degrade the moral code by its harsh doctrines,” and when people “will know that, if they have a duty towards those who are not yet born, that duty is not to give them existence but to give them happiness.” This type of reasoning, buttressed by the expansion of education, especially female

⁴ English translation by Malthus himself, from his *Essay on population*, chapter VIII, Penguin Classics, p. 123. Malthus uses here the 1795 version of Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat Marquis de Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un Tableau Historique des Progrès de l’Esprit Humain*. For later reprints of that volume, see *Oeuvres de Condorcet*, Tome Sixième, Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1847; recently republished, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1968. The passage here is on pages 256-7 of the 1968 reprint.

⁵ Thomas Robert Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population, As It Affects the Future Improvement of Society with Remarks on the Speculation of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), Chapter VIII; in the Penguin Classics edition, edited by Anthony Flew, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 123. The page references to Malthus’s *Essay on population* are from this Penguin Classics edition. See also the illuminating “Introduction” by E.A. Wrigley and David Souden to this essay in volume I of their *The Works of Thomas Robert Malthus* (London: William Pickering, 1986).

education (of which Condorcet was one of the earliest and most vocal advocates) would lead, Condorcet thought, to lower fertility rates and smaller families, which people would choose voluntarily, “rather than foolishly to encumber the world with useless and wretched beings.”⁶

Malthus thought this most unlikely. In general, he saw little chance of solving social problems through reasoned decisions by the families involved. As far as the population problem itself was concerned, he was convinced of the inevitability of population outrunning food supply, and in this context, took the limits of food production to be relatively inflexible. And, most relevantly for the topic at hand, Malthus was particularly sceptical of voluntary family planning. While he did refer to “moral restraint” as an alternative way of reducing the pressure of population — alternative, that is, to misery and elevated mortality — he saw little real prospect that such restraint would work voluntarily. His conclusion was that “there is no reason whatever to suppose that anything beside the difficulty of procuring in adequate

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plenty the necessaries of life should either indispose this greater number of persons to marry early, or disable them from rearing in health the largest families.”⁷

It was because of this disbelief in the voluntary route that Malthus identified the need for — indeed the dominance of — a coercive reduction in population growth rates. He thought this would come from natural causes, that is, from what we can call the compulsion of nature. The fall in living standards resulting from population growth would not only increase mortality rates dramatically (what Malthus called “positive checks”), but would also force people, through economic penury, to have smaller families. The basic link in the argument is Malthus’s

⁶ Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 1795; in Barraclough translation, 1955, pp. 188–9.

⁷ T.R. Malthus, *A Summary View of the Principle of Population* (London: John Murray, 1830); in the Penguin Classics edition (1982), p. 243. Over the years, Malthus’s views varied somewhat on what was taken to be inevitable, and he was clearly less certain of his earlier prognosis as the years progressed. There is a tendency in modern Malthus scholarship to emphasize the elements of “shift” in his position, and there is indeed ground for distinguishing between the early and the late Malthus. But his basic distrust of the power of reason, as opposed to the force of economic compulsion, in making people choose smaller families remained largely unmodified. Indeed, the statement cited here comes from his later work, published in 1830.

conviction that population growth rate cannot be effectively pulled down by “anything beside the difficulty of procuring in adequate plenty the necessaries of life.”⁸

Scepticism about the family’s ability to make sensible decisions about fertility can take us in a variety of directions. It led Malthus to

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oppose the public relief of poverty. Malthus saw the English “poor laws” as contributing greatly to population growth, and having the effect of depressing “the general condition of the poor.”⁹ The reduction of population growth — through a lower birth rate in addition to an increased death rate — was nature’s way of keeping the numbers in check, and public policy could

not enhance the human condition, nor make this coercive reduction of birth rate be replaced by a reasoned cooperation of the families themselves.

That tradition of distrusting the voluntary route and of looking for some “solution” that coerces the families to have a smaller number of children has been a characteristic feature of a group of Malthusians and neo-Malthusians over the last two centuries. Sometimes the advocacy of compulsion is simple and straightforward — as in the official Chinese statements on the governmental policy of “one child family” — while in other writings some attempt is made to undermine the issue of coercion by questioning the appropriateness of that diagnosis because of uncertainty as to what “coercion” might mean. There is, without doubt, some uncertainty here, and formally Garrett Hardin is right to point out that “the word ‘coercion’ is not completely transparent” and that there is an “ambiguity” here.¹⁰ But the end result of that line of reasoning can be, as it often is, to lose the distinction between (1) a big dose of governmental bullying to make people do what they are extremely unwilling to do, and (2) inducing them to take note of the

⁸ Malthus, *A Summary View of the Principle of Population* (1830), p. 243.

⁹ Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Chapter V; in the Penguin Classics edition, 1982, pp. 96–7. On the contemporary debates concerning the role of public support for the impoverished, and in particular the criticism of poverty relief and charitable hospitals by Malthus and his followers, see William St. Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: A Biography of a Family* (London: Norton, 1989).

¹⁰ Garrett Hardin, *Living within Limits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 274–5.

consequences of their own actions, including making corrections of market imperfections when necessary.

Indeed, the classic debate between Condorcet and Malthus remains very relevant today, and as Paul Kennedy has remarked, “This debate between optimists [Godwin, Condorcet] and pessimists [Malthus] has, in one form or another, been with us since then,” and “it is even more pertinent today than when Malthus composed his *Essay*.”¹¹ The contrasting attitudes of coercive and cooperative solutions of the population problem in contemporary arguments relate quite closely to this classical debate.

As a matter of fact, the history of the world since that Malthus-Condorcet debate has not given much comfort to Malthus’s point of view. Fertility rates have come down sharply with social and economic development. Some things “beside the difficulty of procuring in adequate plenty the necessaries of life” have made people choose radically smaller families, and the actual scenario — whether in the West or in the successfully developing regions in the rest of the world — has not been far from the one anticipated by Condorcet. The areas where fertility rates are high today are the poorer countries not yet experiencing much development, particularly those that are socially backward in terms of basic education (especially female education), health care, life expectancy, and women’s empowerment.¹²

Nevertheless, there has been quite a revival of Malthusian thinking in the recent years. Even the fear that the food supply is about to fall behind the growth of world population has been persistently aired, despite the continual *increase* in food per head in the world as a whole and in the major underdeveloped regions in particular. It is especially worth noting that the persistent increase in food supply per head has occurred despite a sharply falling relative price of food in the international market (with the consequent *reduction* in the economic incentive to produce more food). It is not surprising that some of the sharpest increases in food supply per head have occurred in countries

¹¹ Paul Kennedy, *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Random House, 1993), pp. 5–6.

¹² On this see J.C. Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline* (New York: Academic Press, 1982); Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Robert Cassen et al, *Population and Development: Old Debates, New Conclusions* (New Brunswick: Overseas Development Council/Transaction Publishers, 1994).

such as China and India where the domestic production is less influenced by international prices of food.¹³

There are different forms of neo-Malthusian worries that can be found plentifully in the literature — related to food supply, environmental deterioration, residential overcrowding, etc. — but what characterizes the shared basic approach is distrust in the reasoned agency of people to bring about a change in the circumstances leading to the anticipated threats. While some of the threats are wildly exaggerated — especially in the case of the fear of the food supply running out — many of the concerns are by no means dismissable — particularly in regard to some strains on global and local environment. What is at issue is not the case for worrying about these prospects, which is a sensible thing to do; indeed, Condorcet had done it himself, in that famous passage which was used by Malthus to found his alarmist

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thesis. What is less sensible is to jump to the conclusion that coercion rather than cooperation is needed to respond to these worrying possibilities. It is a question of the approach to be taken in understanding how the population issue can be best addressed within the powers of reasoned agency of the people, rather than opting prematurely for a bureaucratic and authoritarian “solution.”

The argument for expanding knowledge and opportunity of family planning methods does, of course, remain strong in the poorer countries in the world. This priority is a part of the commitment to *expand* the freedom of the family to decide on its reproductive behaviour; it is not a component of coercion. Nevertheless, the question can be — and has been — posed as to whether that process would be further helped by actually coercing people to reduce the family size. I shall turn to that question presently, but before that I shall have to consider some general arguments for state intervention in reproductive decisions, which need not be based on Malthusian presumptions.

¹³ In this general picture of rising food supply per head in the major regions of the world, the serious exception has been Africa, which has been bothered by political and economic disruption of unprecedented severity. African problems call for special attention, aimed at making social and economic development possible; the population problem has to be viewed in the light of that general challenge. On this see my paper, “Population and Reasoned Agency: Food, Fertility and Economic Development” (1994), cited earlier.

Consequences, Autonomy, and Family Decisions

The advocacy of force in changing the family's decisions on the number of offspring has sometimes come from modern economists, including the great Swedish economic theorist Knut Wicksell, who combined neo-Malthusian beliefs about the tendency towards overpopulation with elaborate theorization regarding the size of "the optimum population."¹⁴ The general approach of "optimum population" need not, however, be based on Malthusian empirical pre-suppositions, and can be combined with any set of consistent empirical assumptions. Indeed, the idea of the best population size for the society can even be made to incorporate our concern about the *processes* that may be used to influence reproductive behaviour (starting from any given social state), in addition to the narrowly defined "end results." However, much of the extensive literature on optimum population makes rather simple ethical assumptions that give little room for the importance of freedom and autonomy, and treats decisions about family planning in much the same way as the choice of any other economic or social variable, where the process of decision making is not given anything other than derivative significance.

In this framework, the usual arguments based on "externalities," distributional equity, or informational limitation can be easily unleashed to make out an immediate case for direct intervention by the state in the family's personal decisions about the number of children to have. A family's decision to have one more child could influence the interest — or for that matter the sense of propriety — of other people, and this can yield an "externality" based argument for the state to intervene in the reproductive behaviour of the family. It is precisely this easy translation of interventionist arguments, from standard cost-benefit analysis, that needs close scrutiny in the context of family planning. The subject matter does make a difference.

First, family planning is an intensely private subject in which — to borrow a phrase from John Stuart Mill — there is "no parity" between the family's own direct involvement in its reproductive behaviour, and that of others whose interests or susceptibilities may

¹⁴ On Wicksell's enthusiasm for neo-Malthusian interventions, see Torsten Gardlund, *The Life of Knut Wicksell*, translated by Nancy Adler (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1958).

be indirectly influenced by this family's behaviour.¹⁵ As Jacques Drèze has noted, "We must recognise that, for most of us, 'adding a new person to the world' is first and foremost adding a new person to the *family*."¹⁶ Furthermore, family planning consists of actions and decisions that are by their very nature deeply intimate, and involve choices in which others need not be given a *prima facie* say.¹⁷

Reproductive behaviour is thus a matter that immediately and decisively forms a part of the personal lives of the family members, particularly of the mother — or of the potential mother. This is not an argument to ignore all else, but that "all else" has to be very powerfully contrary to outweigh the general presumption in favour of leaving reproductive behaviour to the family in general and to the woman in particular.

Second, the usual procedures of cost-benefit analysis proceed on the assumption of the preferences of the individuals involved being "fixed" — in particular, uninfluenced by the decision under scrutiny. But, again as Jacques Drèze notes, "The decision to have a child is a decision to change the nature of a family," and it is "a decision about extending love to an as yet unknown person and sharing that person's fate, with all its uncertainties and promise." The standard fixed-preference reasoning misses out on a "recognition of what procreation is about."¹⁸ Once again, this is not a reason to dismiss the possibility that there could nevertheless be a good ground for intervention in reproductive behaviour, but it is an argument for being cautious, and in particular for resisting the temptation to make mechanical translation of interventionist arguments based on fixed-preference models to the field of procreation.

It is reasonable to accept the possibility that there must be some

¹⁵ On the general valuational issue of personal matters in social choice, see my *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (San Francisco: Holden-Day, 1970; republished, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1979), Chapters 6 and 6*, and "Liberty and Social Choice," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 80 (1983).

¹⁶ Jacques H. Drèze, "From the 'Value of Life' to the Economics and Ethics of Population: The Path is Purely Methodological," *Recherches Economiques de Louvain*, vol. 58 (1992), p. 158.

¹⁷ There are, of course, activities within the family that cannot but belong to the public domain because of gross violation of the elementary freedoms of the individuals involved, such as wife beating, or child abuse, or refusal to vaccinate a child. But how many children to have is not a subject that belongs to the same class.

¹⁸ Drèze, "From the 'Value of Life' to the Economics and Ethics of Population: The Path is Purely Methodological" (1992), pp. 158–9.

kind of a threshold of influence on other people's interests beyond which state intervention in personal lives might well be plausible. Only a drastic libertarian would reject that possibility without further examination, and we need not embrace that position. But there is a much wider consensus on the need to avoid authoritarian intervention in matters as intimate and personal as reproductive behaviour. In particular, it is not a matter just of fine-tuning conventionally defined costs and benefits: comparing the "costs" to the family members resulting from the violation of their reproductive freedom (given their preferences) with the "benefits" to others (given their interests and desires) that would result from that violation.¹⁹ There are reasons to see the problem rather differently. There are, in particular, grounds to question the status of coercion as a mechanical remedy for "externalities," when the decisions

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involved are central to personal life, and thus require us to consider the importance of elementary autonomy, personal liberty, and the contingency of our preferences.

Much would thus depend on how disastrous we think a further increase in population might be and how immediate the danger is. I have tried to examine these issues elsewhere both in

the global context and specifically for countries in the so-called "Third World."²⁰ It appears that the dangers, especially in the short run and at the global level, are much exaggerated. But there are certainly reasons for concern in the long run at the global level, and even in the reasonably short run for some local environmental issues.²¹ In order to resist the case for coercion, it is not necessary to dispute these worries and apprehensions. It is important, however, to seek a less breathless remedy that

¹⁹ There is, of course, no particular mathematical problem in reformulating the social calculus to take note of such thresholds and partial non-comparabilities, and the issue here is not the analytical format, but the substantive structure we give to it. The extensive range of the general analytics of maximization has been explored in my paper "On Maximization," Frisch Memorial Lecture at the World Econometric Congress, 1995.

²⁰ In "Population: Delusion and Reality" (1994), cited earlier. See also the papers included in the volume edited by Kerstin Lindahl-Kiessling and Hans Landberg, *Population, Economic Development, and the Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

²¹ See also Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution* (1993), cited earlier.

pays attention to issues of long-run sustainability as well as the exact process through which the reduction of population growth takes place.

Women's Agency: A Foundational Linkage

This brings us back to the contrast between the coercive and cooperative routes. Do we have any reason to believe that the coercive route would be much more effective and faster than the cooperative route that relies on the agency of the people directly involved? How does the issue of speed relate to the problem of sustainability of what is achieved? Are there indirect effects of coercion that have to be considered in assessing the case for it? I shall address these issues presently, but before that I must examine a basic relationship between women's well-being and their agency that is central to the problem of fertility.

One of the most important facts about fertility and family size is that the lives that are most battered by over-frequent child birth are those of the women who bear these children. This is especially so in the poorer and less developed economies in the world. It is not only the case that at least half a million women die every year from maternity-related causes through afflictions that are entirely preventable, but also hundreds of millions of women are shackled involuntarily to a life of much drudgery and little freedom because of incessant child bearing and rearing.²²

The impact of persistent child bearing on the freedom and well-being of young women can be very severely negative in the developing countries. The significance of this aspect of the problem requires us to look beyond the family as a decision unit to the specific part that women, particularly young women, may play — or may be allowed to play — in the making of these reproductive decisions. The nature of this role not only includes the power and control that young women may have over these decisions, but also the substantive opportunities they have to consider these problems with adequate assurance, independence, and knowledge.

²² Gita Sen and Carmen Barroso note that an “estimated 100 million women want to avoid pregnancy and have no access to contraceptives” (“The Women's Movement and Reproductive-Health Policies,” paper for the UNIFEM volume for the Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing, later this year). The number would be much larger if we include those who have not yet been given the opportunity to take an informed and independent view of family planning.

Women's Empowerment and Its Determinants

Over the last couple of decades, the importance of women's power and agency has become more widely recognized, partly as a result of a broadening of the women's movements in developing countries. The focus of attention has moved beyond working towards achieving better treatment for women — a more “square deal” — to noting the importance of women's agency. This relates to a clearer understanding of the role of women as active agents of change — as the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of *both* women and men.²³ The reach of that agency can be very extensive indeed, and it does of course *inter alia* include the possibility of reasoned decisions about fertility.

There are different means through which a change in the decisional power of women may come about. The route that has received most attention in the context of fertility decisions is the impact of literacy and schooling of women, partly because of its intuitive plausibility (even Condorcet had pointed to this link 200 years ago), but largely because of the extensive statistical evidence linking women's education (including literacy) and the lowering of fertility, across different countries in the world.²⁴ Other factors considered include, among others, the involvement of women in so-called

²³ This subject is addressed in my paper “Women's Agency and Development Objectives,” included in the UNIFEM presentation at the forthcoming Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing. The importance of women's agency in the economic and social development of India is one of the major themes extensively explored in my forthcoming book, jointly with Jean Drèze, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, Oxford University Press, in press.

²⁴ See, for example, R.A. Easterlin, ed., *Population and Economic Change in Developing Countries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); T.P. Schultz, *Economics of Population* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1981); J.C. Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline* (1982), cited earlier; Nancy Birdsall, “Economic Approaches to Population Growth,” in H.B. Chenery and T.N. Srinivasan, eds., *The Handbook of Development Economics*, volume I (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1988); Robert J. Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, “International Comparisons of Educational Attainment,” paper presented at a conference on “How Do National Policies Affect Long-Run Growth?” World Bank, Washington, D.C., 1993; Partha Dasgupta, *An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution* (1993), cited earlier; Robert Cassen, et al, *Population and Development* (1994), cited earlier; Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain, and Lincoln Chen, eds., *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights* (Harvard Center for Population and Development/International Women's Health Coalition, 1994).

“gainful” activities outside the home, the opportunity of women to earn an independent income, the property rights of women, and the general status and standing of women in the social culture.

These connections have been observed within India as well, and the statistical relations between (1) women’s education and women’s opportunity to earn an outside income, on the one hand, and (2) lower fertility rates, on the other, have been confirmed by several empirical investigations. The most recent — and perhaps the most extensive — study of this connection is provided by an important statistical contribution by Jean Drèze, Anne-Catherine Guio, and Mamta Murthi, dealing with data from the different districts of India in 1981 (the latest year for which adequately detailed data are available).²⁵ Among all the variables included in the analysis presented by Drèze, Guio, and Murthi, the *only* ones that have a statistically significant effect on fertility are female literacy and female labour-force participation. The importance of women’s agency emerges forcefully from this analysis, especially in comparison with the weaker effects of variables relating to general economic progress.

The powerful evidence in favour of these statistical relations has to be distinguished from the social and cultural accounting of these influences, including the common account — not implausible in itself — that both education and outside earning increase a woman’s autonomy. There are indeed many different ways in which school education may enhance a young woman’s decisional power within the family: through its effect on her social standing, her ability to be independent, her power to articulate, her knowledge of the outside world, her skill in influencing group decisions, and so on. Similar linkages can be suggested for the impact of outside earning on a young woman’s decisional control. But plausibility at this general level must not be identified with taking these connections as established. Contrary arguments, disputing these links, can — and have — also been presented, and this is a subject of much controversy in India at this time.²⁶

²⁵ Jean Drèze, Anne-Catherine Guio, and Mamta Murthi, “Demographic Outcomes, Economic Development and Women’s Agency,” Discussion Paper, Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics, 1995; to be published in *Population and Development Review*.

²⁶ Some of these issues have been discussed in an important collection of papers in Roger Jeffery and Alaka Malwade Basu, eds., *Girls’ Schooling, Women’s Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia* (New Delhi: Sage, forthcoming).

More sophisticated ways of characterizing women's autonomy have been suggested, with a more complex linkage to the fertility issue. Some have questioned whether female schooling does, in fact, enhance women's autonomy. Alternative explanations of the observed statistical relations between women's education and lower fertility have also been suggested — for example, the possibility that men who want a smaller number of children may prefer to marry educated women.

It has also been argued that the role of school education as a force for social change may have been oversold. This line of reasoning has a special appeal to many people in positions of influence and power in India, given the predilection of Indian upper classes to dismiss the importance of schooling for the lower order. Not only is school education, especially of girls, one of the most neglected social objectives in India, the Indian upper classes have a long record of being extreme-

Even today only half the adult Indian population is literate, and two-thirds of the women remain absolutely illiterate.²⁷

ly suspicious of the value of basic education for the masses. Despite the promise made by the Indian political leaders before independence to make India fully literate with great rapidity, things have moved with remarkable slowness in this field, in contrast with speedy expansion of governmental commitment in many other areas.

Even today only half the adult Indian population is literate, and two-thirds of the women remain absolutely illiterate.²⁷ The upper class politicians who make up the bulk of the leadership of the major political parties in India — both in office and in opposition — seem to find it perfectly bearable that a default of this magnitude has been allowed to occur and that it is not being remedied with any speed.

The general value of women's education is a much broader subject than its role in enhancing female autonomy or in reducing fertility — potentially important as these connections might be. Female education

²⁷ Even the young are deprived of school education in large numbers, contrary to what official enrollment figures state, as is readily checked from the census results and from the National Sample Surveys (on this see Drèze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, 1995, cited earlier). For instance, more than half of all rural females in the 10-14 age group in India are illiterate. The proportion of rural females aged 12-14 who have *never* been enrolled in any school is above one-half in India as a whole (above two-thirds in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar, and as high as 82 per cent in Rajasthan).

can still be one of the most important priorities in Indian social change, even if the scepticism about its role in strengthening the autonomy of young women, or in reducing fertility rates, were to be entirely vindicated. This has to be asserted with some force, given the history of neglect of school education — especially of girls — in India, and given the social forces that sustain that neglect — and which tend to welcome, with open arms, any ground for scepticism regarding the importance of school education for the masses. Having said this, it cannot, of course, be denied that the questions being raised are serious and deserve careful scrutiny. However, if the scepticism were to be sustained, it would not be adequate merely to dispute the standard “story” that goes with the widely observed statistical relations; it would be also necessary to provide empirically confirmable, and not just speculative, alternative explanations of the observed statistical links, especially between female education and fertility.

If this complex issue were to be pursued more fully, it would also be important to distinguish between different aspects of this problem. In particular, it would be necessary to pursue the *distinction* between:

- (1) women’s power to make decisions in *different* fields (fertility decisions constitute one field among many — autonomy covers other areas as well);
- (2) women’s *direct* decision-making roles vis-à-vis the influencing that can occur through more *indirect* routes;
- (3) the power of *younger* women — whose lives are most directly affected by fertility decisions — vis-à-vis older women in the family;
- (4) the *congruence* and *conflicts* of interests and opinions within the family which may make the independent agency of younger women less or more crucial; and
- (5) women’s *absolute* power to decide on these matters vis-à-vis their *relative* power compared with others in the family (or outside it).²⁸

²⁸ On the last, Alaka Basu notes that “from the fertility change point of view, perhaps what is crucial is the absolute level of female autonomy irrespective of the gap between male and female authority levels” (“Female Schooling, Autonomy and Fertility Change: What Do These Words Mean In South Asia?” cited earlier). See also Tim Dyson and Mick Moore, “On Kinship Structure, Female Autonomy and Demographic Behaviour in India,” *Population and Development Review*, 9 (1983).

However, for the purpose of the arguments presented here, it is not crucial to resolve all these different issues. Nor is it necessary to determine *exactly* how — and precisely the *extent* to which — women's education (or outside employment, or property rights, or political participation) will influence women's autonomy or the fertility rates. There is ample evidence to indicate that fertility rates tend to come down quite sharply when some of these predisposing social conditions are changed. The important point to note is that authoritarian intervention and bureaucratic denial of reproductive freedom are not the only routes to lower fertility, and reduction can occur with shifts in decisional procedures within the family.

The case of Kerala, the most socially advanced state in India, is particularly worth noting here, because of its remarkable success in fertility reduction based on women's agency. While the total fertility rate (a measure of the average number of children born per woman) for India as a whole is still as high as 3.7, Kerala fertility has now fallen below the "replacement level" to 1.8 — even lower than China's fertility rate of 2.0. There is considerable evidence that Kerala's high level of female education has been particularly influential in bringing about the decline in birth rate, from 44 per thousand in 1951-61 to 18 by 1991.²⁹ Furthermore, the importance of female agency roles and literacy in the reduction of mortality rates leads to another, more indirect, route through which women's agency — including female literacy — may have helped to reduce birth rates: via reducing mortality rates.³⁰ Kerala also has some other favourable features for women's empowerment and agency, including a greater recognition, by legal tradition, of women's property rights for a substantial and influential part of the community.³¹

²⁹ See T.N. Krishnan, "Demographic Transition in Kerala: Facts and Factors," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 11 (1976), and P.N. Mari Bhatt and S.L. Rajan, "Demographic Transition in Kerala Revisited," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 25 (1990). For somewhat different interpretations, see also Leela Visaria, "Regional Variations in Female Autonomy and Fertility and Contraception in India," and S. Irudaya Rajan, Mala Ramanathan, and U.S. Mishra, "Female Autonomy And Reproductive Behaviour In Kerala: New Evidence From The Recent Kerala Fertility Survey," in Roger Jeffery and Alaka Basu, eds., *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia* (1995), cited earlier.

³⁰ Drèze, Guio, and Murthi find, in the paper cited earlier, a very strong negative relation between female literacy and under-five mortality rates, across all the districts of India.

³¹ On these and related general issues, see my "Population: Delusion and Reality" (1994).

What Does Coercion Achieve?

Coercive measures are often advocated for reducing fertility rates in the poorer countries. They have received attention in international debates and have been favoured by some population pressure groups. That route was explicitly rejected at the International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo last year, but that rejection has not made the issue go away. Coercion persists in various forms (not least in India), and it figures, directly or indirectly, in a great many proposals that address the population problem.

In the context of discussing the imperative need to reduce birth rates in the world, China's achievement in cutting down fertility rates over a short period through rather Draconian measures receives understandable admiration. It is often suggested, by particular pressure groups, that India should emulate China in this important area. The fear of an impending crisis makes many policy advocates seek forceful measures in the Third World for coercing people to have fewer children, and despite criticism from diverse quarters, including women's groups, China's attempts in that direction have received much attention and praise. A comparison of China's and India's experiences is thus of direct relevance to the current topic.³²

Fairly Draconian measures have certainly been used in China to force the birth rate down. Coercive methods such as the "one child policy" have been tried in large parts of China since the reforms of 1979. Also, the government often refuses to offer housing and related benefits to families with too many children — thus penalizing the children as well as the dissident adults.³³ By 1992 the Chinese birth rate had fallen sharply to 19 per

³² The discussion that follows draws a lot on my paper "Population: Delusion and Reality" (1994), and my joint book with Jean Drèze, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995).

³³ Sometimes the enforcement of family size restriction has been very severely punitive. A recent report in *The New York Times* reports:

The villagers of Tongmuchong did not need any convincing on that day when Mrs. Liao, the family-planning official, threatened to blow up their houses. Last year, in the neighboring village of Xiaoxi, a man named Huang Fuqu, along with his wife and three children, was ordered out of his house. To the horror of all those who watched, the house was then blasted into rubble. On a nearby wall, the government dynamiters painted a warning: "Those who do not obey the family planning police will be those who lose their fortunes." ("Birth Control in China: Coercion and Evasion," *The New York Times*, June 25, 1995.)

thousand, compared with 29 per thousand in India, and 37 per thousand for the average of poor countries other than China and India. China's total fertility rate is now 2.0, just below the "replacement level" of around 2.1, and much below India's 3.7 and the weighted average of 4.9 for low-income countries other than China and India.³⁴

How good a solution is this to the population problem? There are several problems to consider here. First, the lack of freedom associated

The fear of an impending crisis makes many policy advocates seek forceful measures in the Third World for coercing people to have fewer children.

with this approach is a major social loss in itself. Human rights groups and women's organizations in particular have been especially concerned with the lack of reproductive freedom involved in any coercive system.³⁵

Second, aside from the fundamental issue of individual freedom, there are specific consequences to consider in evaluating compulsory

birth control. Coercion works by making people do things they would not freely choose to do; if they would have done something anyway, there would be no need to coerce them. The social consequences of such compulsion, including the ways in which an unwilling population tends to react when it is coerced, can often be quite terrible. For example, the demands for a "one child family" can lead to the neglect — or worse — of infants, thereby increasing the infant mortality rate. Also, in a country with a strong preference for male children — a characteristic shared by China with India and many other countries in Asia and North Africa — a policy of allowing only one child per family can easily be particularly detrimental for girls; for example, in the form of fatal neglect of female children. This, it appears, is exactly what has happened on a fairly large scale in China.³⁶

Third, it is not by any means clear how much *additional* reduction

³⁴ The figures cited here are from *World Development Report 1994*, Table 26.

³⁵ On the general subject of reproductive freedom and its relation to the population problem, see Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain, and Lincoln Chen, eds., *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights* (1994), cited earlier; see also Gita Sen and Carmen Barroso, "The Women's Movement and Reproductive-Health Policies" (1995), cited earlier.

³⁶ For evidence in this direction, and references to the empirical literature on this subject, see Drèze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995), Chapter 4.

in the fertility rate has actually been achieved through these coercive methods. It is reasonable to accept that many of China's longstanding social and economic programmes have been valuable in reducing fertility, including those that have expanded education (for women as well as men), made health care more generally available, provided more job opportunities for women, and stimulated rapid economic growth. These factors would themselves have tended to help in the reduction in the birth rate, and it is not clear how much "extra lowering" of fertility rates has been achieved in China through compulsion. For example, we can check how many countries in the world which match (or outmatch) China in life expectancy achievements, female

It is not by any means clear how much additional reduction in the fertility rate has actually been achieved through these coercive methods.

literacy rates, and female participation in the labour force actually have a *higher* fertility rate than China does. Comparing all the countries in the world for which data are given in the *World Development Report* 1994, there are only three such countries: Jamaica (2.7), Thailand (2.2), and Sweden (2.1) — and the fertility rates of two of

them are not materially different from China's figure of 2.0. It is thus not really clear what the *extra* contribution of coercion is in reducing fertility in China. The authoritarian admirers of China give it too little credit for its cooperative and supportive programmes, while falling for premature admiration of its coercive practices.

This is not to deny that China has, in fact, achieved something in its birth control programme that India has not been able to do. In terms of national averages, it is easy to see that China with its low fertility rate of 2.0 has got population growth under control in a way that India, with its average fertility of 3.7, simply has not achieved. The point to note here is that we would expect the fertility rate to be much lower in China given its higher percentage of female literacy (almost twice as high as India's), higher life expectancy (nearly 10 years more), larger female involvement in gainful employment (three-quarters more, in terms of share of the total labour force), and so on. The question to ask, therefore, is the difficult "counterfactual" one of the likely results that would have been observed in India had it done more in these supportive areas, to expand the possibility of cooperative reduction of fertility rates. This is, of course, a highly speculative question, but perhaps not entirely, since there are areas within India that have done much more than the Indian average.

In particular, the state of Kerala does provide an interesting comparison with China, since it too enjoys high levels of basic education, health care, and so on. Kerala's birth rate of 18 per thousand is actually lower than China's 19 per thousand, and this has been achieved without any compulsion by the state. Kerala's fertility rate is 1.8 for 1991, compared with China's 2.0 for 1992. This is in line with what we could expect through progress in factors that help voluntary reduction in birth rates. Kerala has a higher adult female literacy rate (86 per cent) than China (68 per cent). In fact, the female literacy rate is higher in Kerala than in every single province in China. Also, in comparison with male and female life expectancies at birth in China of 68 and 71 years, the 1991 figures for Kerala's life expectancy are 69 and 74 years, respectively. Further, women have played an important role in Kerala's economic and political life, and historically, also in property relations and educational movements.³⁷

It is also worth noting that since Kerala's low fertility has been achieved voluntarily, there is no sign of the adverse effects that were noted in the case of China — for example, heightened female infant mortality and widespread abortion of female foetuses. Kerala's infant mortality rate (16 for girls, 17 for boys) is much lower than China's (33 for girls, 28 for boys), even though both regions had similar infant mortality rates around the time of the introduction of the one-child policy in China. Further, while in China the infant mortality rate is lower for males (28) than for females (33), in Kerala the opposite is the case, much in line with what is observed in the more advanced countries.³⁸

It is also necessary to examine the claim in support of compulsory birth control programmes that the speed with which fertility rates can be cut down through coercive means is very high; in contrast, the voluntary processes are expected to be inherently slower. The world, we are told, does not have the time to spare. But this piece of generalization is not supported by Kerala's experience either. Its birth rate has fallen from 44 per thousand in the 1950s to 18 by 1991 — a decline no less fast than that in

³⁷ See Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being: How Kerala Became a 'Model'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and V.K. Ramachandran, "Kerala's Development Achievements," in Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, eds., *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, forthcoming).

³⁸ For sources of these data and some further analysis, see Drèze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995).

China. It could, of course, be argued that looking at this very long period does not do justice to the effectiveness of the “one-child family” and other coercive policies that were introduced in 1979, and that we ought really to compare what has happened between 1979 and now.

Kerala, in fact, had a *higher* fertility rate than China in 1979 (3.0 as opposed to China’s 2.8), and by 1991 its fertility rate of 1.8 is as much *below* China’s 2.0 as it had been above it in 1979. Despite the added “advantage” of the one-child policy and other coercive measures, the Chinese fertility rate seems to have fallen more slowly than in Kerala.

Another Indian state, Tamil Nadu, had an even faster fall, from 3.5 in 1979 to 2.2 in 1991. Tamil Nadu has had an active, but cooperative, family planning programme, and it could use for this purpose a comparative good position in terms of social achievements within India: the third highest literacy rate among the major Indian states, high female participation in gainful employment, and low infant mortality (also third among major states in both respects). Coercion of the type employed in China has not been used either in Tamil Nadu or in Kerala, and both have achieved much faster declines in fertility than China has achieved since it introduced the “one child policy” and the related measures.

Within India, contrasts between the records of Indian states offer some further insights on this subject. While Kerala and Tamil Nadu have radically reduced fertility rates, other states in the so-called “northern heartland” (such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan) have much lower levels of education, especially female education, and of general health care. These states all have high fertility rates — between 4.4 and 5.1.³⁹ This is in spite of a persistent tendency in those states to use heavy-handed methods of family planning, including some

³⁹ There is some decline in fertility in these northern states as well, though it is far less rapid than in the southern states. Monica Das Gupta and P.N. Mari Bhat have recently drawn attention (in their paper “Intensified Gender Bias in India: A Consequence of Fertility Decline,” Working Paper 95.02, Harvard Center for Population and Development, 1995) to another aspect of the problem of fertility reduction; to wit, the tendency for it to accentuate the gender bias in sex selection, in terms of sex-specific abortion as well as child mortality through neglect (both phenomena are much observed in China). In India, this seems to be much more pronounced in the northern states than in the south, and it is possible to argue that a fertility reduction through coercive means makes this more likely (as was discussed in contrasting the situation in China vis-à-vis that in Kerala).

coercion (in contrast with the more “collaborative” approach used in Kerala and Tamil Nadu). The regional contrasts within India strongly argue for collaboration (based *inter alia* on the active and educated participation of women), as opposed to coercion.

The Temptations of Coercion

While India has managed, with a few exceptions, to escape falling for the enticement of seeking to coerce its way to success in the field of family planning, it is clear that this prospect greatly attracts many activists in India. In the middle 1970s, the government of India, under Indira Gandhi’s leadership, tried a good deal of compulsion in this field. The northern states, as was mentioned earlier, have various regulations and conventions that force family control measures, particularly in the irreversible form of sterilization, often of women.⁴⁰

Even when coercion is not part of official policy, the government’s firm insistence on “meeting the family-planning targets” often leads administrators and health-care personnel at different levels to resort to all kinds of pressure tactics that come close to compulsion.⁴¹ Examples of such tactics include verbal threats, making sterilization a condition of eligibility for anti-poverty programmes, depriving mothers of more than two children of maternity benefits, reserving certain kinds of health care services to persons who have been sterilized, and forbidding persons who have more than two children from contesting panchayat elections.

It is quite extraordinary that the last measure — recently introduced in Rajasthan and Haryana — has been widely praised, even

⁴⁰ Aside from the imperative need to reject coercive methods, it is also important to promote the *quality* and diversity of non-coercive means of family planning. As things stand, family planning in India is overwhelmingly dominated by female sterilization, even in the southern states. To illustrate, while nearly 40 per cent of currently-married women aged 13-49 in south India are sterilized, only 14 per cent of these women have *ever* used a non-terminal, modern contraception method. Even the *knowledge* of modern methods of family planning other than sterilization is extraordinarily limited in India. Only half of rural married women aged 13-49, for instance, seem to know what is a condom or IUD. On this see Drèze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995), cited earlier.

⁴¹ On this see the references cited in Drèze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995). See also Gita Sen and Carmen Barroso, “The Women’s Movement and Reproductive-Health Policies” (1994), cited earlier.

though it involves a strong violation not only of personal liberty but also of basic democratic rights. Even the government's draft National Population Policy, despite placing emphasis on the need to reject coercive methods, gives support to this measure as one means of meeting the overriding goal of bringing the total fertility rate down to 2.1 by the year 2010. There is a strong possibility of the proposed measure being adopted at the all-India level, and extended to diverse forms of political participation going beyond the contesting of panchayat elections. Indeed, there is proposed legislation now in the Indian parliament that would bar anyone from holding national or state office if

The people who suffer most from these coercive measures are often among the poorest and least privileged in the society.

he or she has more than two children. The patent unfairness of this proposed regulation has been pointed out by many critics — including its effect of debarring large numbers of leaders of less privileged sections of the Indian community and operating particularly against rural leaders — but the legislation has not yet been withdrawn. The lesson that fertility reduction calls for cooperation and

collaboration, rather than compulsion and coercion, has not been at all learned.

The point is sometimes made that in a poor country, it is a mistake to worry too much about the unacceptability of coercion — a luxury that only the rich countries can afford. It is not obvious what this argument is based on. The people who suffer most from these coercive measures are often among the poorest and least privileged in the society. The regulations and the way they are operated are also particularly punitive with respect to women's exercise of reproductive freedom. For example, the assembling of poorer women in sterilization camps, through various kinds of pressures, is a practice of remarkable barbarity and injustice practiced in many rural societies in north India, as the deadline for meeting "sterilization targets" approaches.

It is not clear how the acceptability of coercion to a poor population can be tested except through democratic confrontation. While that testing has not occurred in China, it was indeed attempted in India during "the emergency period" in the seventies when compulsory birth control was tried by Mrs. Gandhi's government, along with suspending various legal rights and civil liberties. The policy of coercion in general — including that in birth control — was overwhelm-

ingly defeated in the general elections that followed. The impoverished electorate of India showed no less interest in voting against authoritarian extremism than it takes in protesting against economic and social inequality. Furthermore, voluntary birth-control programmes in India received, as family-planning experts have noted, a severe set-back from that brief programme of compulsory sterilization, since people had become deeply suspicious of the entire family-planning movement. Aside from having little immediate impact on fertility rates, the coercive measures of the emergency period were, in fact, followed by a long period of *stagnation* in the birth rate, which only ended in 1985.⁴²

Since the advocacy of coercion, in different forms, has been growing in India, it is important to emphasize that it achieves little and destroys a lot. It does not seem to work faster than what can happen through the cooperative route, and its other consequences, including side effects, can be quite horrendous. The alternative is to facilitate ways of relying on those whose well-being and agency are most directly involved, particularly young women. This has worked elsewhere, and there is no reason why it will not work in India as well. To some extent, it is already happening in some parts of India, and these parts are being a lot more successful than the states which are falling for coercive measures. Cooperation can contribute something that coercion cannot provide.

⁴² On this, see the demographic and sociological literature cited in Drèze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995).

The Population Program of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

The Population Program supports the search for new ways to address the complex challenge of global population growth. The program flows from two central ideas: (1) population issues arise from the interaction among social, cultural, economic, and environmental forces, including the roles and status of women; and (2) locally conceived initiatives are most likely to generate solutions to these multidimensional problems.

Guided by an advisory committee composed primarily of leaders from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the program emphasizes activities in four focus countries (Mexico, Brazil, Nigeria, and India) and in four interrelated areas:

Women's Reproductive Health, which supports strategies that encourage women — especially poor women traditionally underserved by programs — to participate fully in decisions that affect their health and reproduction.

Population and Natural Resources, which supports initiatives that explore the parallel phenomena of population growth and natural resource degradation and the strong links among these phenomena, poverty, and the roles and status of women.

Communications and Popular Education, which supports the use of diverse media and local participation to inform people about reproductive health and sustainable development.

The Fund for Leadership Development, which supports emerging leaders in the population field whose initiative, pragmatism, and commitment are likely to produce constructive responses to the interrelated problems of population, reproductive health, and natural resource management.