Dealing with Population Growth - Assessing State Control

What is the issue?

- There are various demands in recent days for state control on population, on the grounds of a perceived “population explosion” in the country.
- However, the true picture is different that calls for support rather than control, to make population growth an opportunity.

What is the true population scenario?

- The Economic Survey 2018-19 refutes the above claims of “population explosion”.
- The Survey notes that India is set to witness a sharp slowdown in population growth in the next two decades.
- The fact is that by the 2030s, some States will start transitioning to an ageing society.
- [Generally, nations slowly move toward a stable population as fertility rates fall, which is the case now in India.
- The fertility rates fall over time with an improvement in social and economic development indices.]

What are the demands on state control?

- There were demands -

i. to all political parties to enact population control laws
ii. to annul the voting rights of those having more than two children
iii. for the government to enact a law where the third child should not be allowed to vote and enjoy facilities provided by the government

- The demand for state controls on the number of children a couple can have is not a new one.
- It takes lead from the perception that a large and growing population is at the root of a nation’s problems.
- This is because, with population growth, more and more people chase fewer and fewer resources.

Is state control a wise measure?

- Population growth is seen as a problem that needs to be ‘controlled’.

- But in reality, population is a thriving resource, the life blood of a growing economy.
- Given this, a state control approach will undo all the good work that has been done and lead to a weaker and poorer health delivery system.
- In this light, the implications of state control approach are deep and wide.
- This is because the argument is based purely on numbers and a rule that, it would seem, applies to all sections equally.
- However, in contrast, such an approach would, in effect, have in place a kind of discrimination, worse than physical attacks or social prejudice.
- This is so because it breaks the poor and the weak bit by bit, and in a very subtle way.
- [A citizen will be denied his or her basic rights if he or she is born as the third child.]

How does state control affect the poor?

- Family health, child survival and the number of children a woman has are closely related to the health and education levels of the parents, especially the woman.
- So, the poorer the couple, the more the children they tend to have. This is because, when it comes to the poor, -
    i. child survival is low
    ii. son preference remains high
    iii. children lend a helping hand, and support the economic and emotional needs of the family
- The National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) notes that women in the lowest wealth quintile have an average of 1.6 more children than women in the highest wealth quintile.
- Similarly, the number of children per woman declines with a woman's level of schooling.
- Women with no schooling have an average 3.1 children, compared with 1.7 children for women with 12 or more years of schooling.
- These reveal the depth of the connections among health, education and inequality.
- Evidently, those having little access to health and education are caught in a cycle of poverty, leading to more and more children.
- So, state control on the number of children could burden the weakest more.

What are the alternative measures?

- **NPP 2000** - A forward-looking National Population Policy (NPP) was introduced in 2000 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the Prime Minister.

- The key feature was the government's commitment to citizens' voluntary and informed choice and consent in reproductive health care services.
- This came along with a "target free approach" in administering family planning services.
- This is a position reiterated by various governments, including the present government.
- **Lifecycle framework** - A similar "lifecycle framework" was proposed by the earlier Health Minister, J.P. Nadda.
- It looks to the health and nutrition needs of mother and child well after the pregnancy and childbirth period too.
- It covers right from the time of conception till the child grows, carrying on till the adolescent stage and further.
- This argument is not about denying services but about offering choices and a range of services to mother and child.
- It comes with a clear understanding that the demographic dividend can support growth and drive opportunity for all only when the population is healthy.

What should be done?

- The damage done when mishandling issues of population growth is long lasting.
- Today, as many as 23 States and UTs, including all the States in the south region, already have fertility below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman.
- So, 'support' rather than population 'control' works better at this juncture.
- Family Planning programme in India should be target free and voluntary in nature.
- People should be let free to choose a family planning method best suited to them as per their reproductive right.

Source: The Hindu

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