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India, Policy & Governance

India: A Political Approach to Massive Population Growth

India is currently the second most populous country in the world, close behind China. Within the next ten years, India is expected to overtake China in population due to its huge rate of population growth. This massive population growth along with social and economic problems within the country is causing food to be a scarce resource for many. India cannot produce enough food to keep up with the continually growing population. To help the food problem in India, the population growth rate needs to be reduced, and this can be accomplished through increased education for women in the country and the creation of jobs in the agricultural sector through the government.

The population of India currently sits at 1.34 billion people, with 34% of people living in the cities and 66% living in a rural setting. The living conditions and lifestyle vary greatly between the two areas; however, some characteristics are similar between them. Sanitation is a major problem in the entirety of India, mostly caused by the unsafe disposal of human waste. While some communities have all but solved their sanitation issues, other, mostly rural areas, have no way of disposing of their waste. Access to water is also a major issue for many in India. Even if a family has access to water, with many having to walk at least 30 minutes to obtain it, there is no guarantee that the water will be clean or safe to drink; this is why, unlike the U.S., many families have to boil their water before they drink it, to ensure it is clean and safe to consume. Lastly, the use of wood as a biofuel when cooking contributes significantly to health issues faced by Indians. In contrast to much of the developed world, “Ninety percent of rural households [in India] rely on solid fuel for cooking, compared with less than one-third (31 percent) of urban households,” (“Basic Living Conditions,” n.d.). Because biofuels are used so intensely and most cooking is done indoors, air pollution both outside and inside homes is very common; this often leads to respiratory diseases, among many other potential issues. Again, while these issues are felt by the entirety of India, the problems are often more intense and more widespread in the rural parts of the country.

India is a parliamentary democracy with an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. Like many other countries around the world, “The legislative branch [in India] is responsible for passing new laws and regulations,” (Pariona, 2017). So, the elected members of the legislative branch are responsible for drafting and passing new laws that will impact the entirety of India. Usually, many parties split control of the government in India; however, for the past few years, Indian politics have largely been dominated by one party: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the major right-wing party of the country. Narendra Modi, the current prime minister and leader of the BJP, won his seat by promising economic reform and revitalization, as opposed to social reform or changes in foreign affairs (“India Country Profile,” 2019).

The climate in India varies throughout the country; southern India is usually drier than northern India, with both regions being warm year-round. This allows northern India to grow a more diverse set of crops; mainly rice is grown in the south, while rice, wheat, sorghum, and millet are grown in the north. However, agriculture is essential to both regions in India, with more than 50% of the population dependent on agribusiness. Due to this, one can see how a slight change in the weather from year-to-year could devastate the economy and how a slight improvement in the quality of Indian farms could greatly improve the situation of many families (“Agriculture Role,” 2015).

The typical family in India is much different than that in the United States. While a typical family in the U.S. consists of parents and their children, a family in India consists of three to four generations,

including aunts, uncles, cousins, and more (“Indian Culture,” 2019). The dwelling varies heavily on the economic status of the family, with wealthy families living in much better housing than poor families. Traditional gender roles are emphasized in Indian culture with men supporting the family financially and women taking care of the young children. This fact is causing many social problems in the country. In India, daughters are seen as an economic burden, and wives are often harmed if they do not have a son. For this reason, a disproportionate number of daughters are aborted compared to sons; this has created a large gap in the gender ratio, as there are many more men than women. Women are often not educated on contraception and family planning and are often forced to have more kids than they wish; this only furthers the problem of population growth, as many couples have kids that they cannot support or feed (Chamberlain, 2008).

Overpopulation is a very serious issue in India, and the government is doing little to combat it, mainly due to its being a sensitive topic, as tradition is a large part of Indian society. The problem is becoming extremely severe, as population growth is leading to food shortages and the overuse of natural resources. As population growth is a positive feedback loop, in which an increase in population only leads to the growth rate becoming greater and greater, Indians need to take action to slow it down. The major cities in India are extremely overpopulated; because of this, it is very difficult for families to get the resources that they need to support themselves, when there are so many other families in the same space. And, because of the minimal effort by the Indian government, conditions are only getting worse.

While other countries are progressing in the field of women’s rights, India is lagging behind; Indian women often don’t have the same rights as women in other countries. The discrimination against women is worst against those in their childbearing years. A tremendous amount of pressure is put on women to have sons so that the boys can help the family financially; if the mother has a daughter instead, the mother is sometimes abused. The discrimination of women in India often goes overlooked as, “[In 2013] the most powerful political figure, two billionaires, three of the most dominant regional politicians, several prominent CEOs, and half of local government representatives [were] women,” (Jaishankar, 2013). Because there are these few powerful women, many overlook the inequality actually present in the country; however, when one dives deeper into the role of women in Indian society, he/she can see that many of the problems plaguing the country and causing its food crisis are rooted in this deeper social divide between Indian men and women.

Education of children and young adults is a huge tool a country can use to improve many aspects of its society. Unfortunately, the Indian education system is lacking in many regards. Education in the country has improved slightly over the past few years, and it now places in the top half of all countries—around 50th percentile (“The Indian Education,” 2017). Only about 50% of Indian children consistently attend school through the end of secondary school—a very low percentage when compared to other, more developed countries. Unlike schools in the United States, many Indian schools are not strict about attendance, and because of this, many children don’t attend school consistently in favor of other priorities, such as helping the family; however, ultimately, this is holding the country back. If the government of India focuses on providing the vast majority of its children a well-rounded formal education, the country is much more likely to progress socially and economically, in turn helping its food crisis.

The best solution for India’s massive population growth and food crisis is increased education for women, in both family planning and reproductive rights and higher education. Only 6% of Indian citizens graduate from higher education, and the number is even lower for Indian women. Because of the lack of educational opportunities women have in the country, they are more likely to stay at home and conform to the gender roles that are in place, leading to the feedback loop discussed earlier. If the government subsidized educational opportunities for women to go to college and become skilled in an art, they would be able to get a job, provide for the family, and focus on something other than homemaking. This would slowly break the stereotype of Indian women staying at home, taking care of children, and would allow

them to further their careers. For women with the ability to travel to a university, this would greatly help the situation; it would definitely be more difficult for rural women to take advantage of this opportunity (Sundar, 2018).

The other educational opportunity needed for women in India is access to family planning. Family planning is the education of women on contraception, the options available to them during and after pregnancy, and the consequences of having children, and if implemented, will greatly reduce the number of children each woman has. In other parts of the world, family planning has been proven to lower fertility rates drastically, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Family planning was introduced in parts of Africa, and one country saw its fertility rate drop from 7 children per woman to nearly 4 children per woman, proving it very successful. This could be introduced into both urban and rural households, unlike the higher education initiative; however, both initiatives aim to give more opportunities and options to women to draw them away from focusing solely on having children. This, in turn, will slow population growth drastically (“Three Successful,” 2012).

For both of these solutions, the national and state governments would need to take the lead. Universities for higher education would need to be constructed or changed to allow more women to enter the schools. This could be done by the individual schools by actively admitting more women or by the government by mandating that schools either increase the emphasis they put on gender and status of the family from which the applicant comes or by placing a quota on the number of women each school must accept. For education on family planning, government representatives could be trained and sent to communities to educate women in small classes, or a member of the community could volunteer to be educated on the topic and then spread the knowledge to those in that community.

The money to support these programs would need to be funded through taxes; government money would need to be reallocated to include these, or the national and/or state governments would need to increase taxes, likely the income tax. India already has a progressive tax system, so the extra tax money would likely mainly come from the upper classes. The traditional cultural norms of India would need to be kept in mind when implementing this policy, as many might desire to keep the traditional thinking that women should only stay at home and raise children. It could be difficult to convince these people that better education for women is a good thing. These would be the two biggest hardships to the implementation of this plan: raising taxes and breaking the traditional cultural norms of the country. The wealthy families of India would need to be convinced that taking a bigger percentage of their income to support these programs would ultimately be beneficial. One way this could be done more easily is to hold a forum in which these families could come and share what they think the extra tax money should be used for; if one answer sticks out with a clear plurality or majority, a compromise could be struck by providing most of the additional revenue towards the education of women but allocating some towards the issue they feel is most important. Convincing social conservatives that this plan would benefit India might be an even more daunting task. This could be accomplished by showing the direct effect this change would have on both the economy and India’s standing in the world. More progressive candidates running for public office could also help change the minds of these traditionalists. If these don’t work, the government could promise tax breaks to these traditional-minded people; however, this would have to be used sparingly and as a last resort, as if these tax breaks outweigh the added taxes the upper class is paying, the plan would have no effect. Lastly, one roadblock one may not think of regarding this plan is whether or not the women will actually receive this education willingly. At first, they may be reluctant, but if a government representative can speak about the advantages of the plan either in person or through the media to these women, they will likely be more supportive of it. So, while these plans do have barriers, if they are implemented, more women could focus on their careers, which would reduce the fertility rate, and as a result, the food crisis in India would be improved.

The next solution to help India's food situation would be for the government to subsidize jobs in the agricultural sector. Especially in rural areas, many Indian women look for jobs but are unable to find any available. To combat this, local and state governments should give money to communities to start their own farm for the village. This would give women jobs to earn money for their family, which would help, as discussed earlier. The food produced by these farms would either be consumed by the village, if that village was suffering from a scarcity of food, or, if that village was fed well already, it would be sold back to the government to be dispersed to people who need it. The women get money, and the hungry people around India get food. Again, this project would need to be funded by taxpayer money, either by reallocation or by increasing the income tax of wealthy people. To make this project sustainable, it should be tested in a few small communities first; if it begins to help the people living there, it should be expanded to more places. Of course, this idea could only work in places where crops could grow, and the type of crop would need to be altered depending on where in India this is occurring. Overall, however, this could greatly help women in need of jobs and hungry people in need of food.

For both of these plans—the education of women and the establishment of community farms—ordinary citizens could play a tremendous role. Firstly, something as simple as spreading the word about these initiatives could make a tremendous difference. If the family and friends of jobless women can convince them that getting an education would benefit everyone in society, they would be much more likely to pursue it. The same thing goes for persuading wealthy people; if their family and friends talked about how contributing money could help India in the long run, they would be more likely to openly give more money to the government. Another way for citizens to get involved in the success of these ideas is to voice their support to government officials. Citizens can actively encourage the government to set aside money for these initiatives in addition to supporting and voting for progressive candidates who will focus on these priorities. Lastly, ordinary individuals can step up and be a leader to help these plans get started. Any citizen willing and able should be able to volunteer their time to get trained by the government in family planning and then teach others in their community. In addition to this, leaders can also step up in regards to the community farm plan; certain individuals will be able to be the leaders of the farm and ensure that everything is running smoothly and efficiently. These people will also be the ones communicating between the community and the government to share how the plan is progressing, any problems they are running into, and how to improve it for other communities. While much of the change needed to put these plans into action will be on a larger scale, the actions of ordinary individuals can and will have a huge impact on the success of these initiatives.

Lastly, while these plans help India become self-sufficient by itself, the process will likely be faster and easier with foreign aid to the country. Foreign aid to India could come from any of its allies, but convincing the lawmakers of another country to spend money to help solve India's food crisis is a daunting task. The most efficient way to do this is to convince the other country that delegating money towards India will benefit them in some way. For example, leaders in India could persuade U.S. leaders that if they give aid to India, India could improve its economy and become a better trading partner for the U.S. Countries could also exchange aid for military or diplomatic support; however, this might be more controversial. Money isn't the only resource other countries could provide India; they could also provide the resources necessary to build new schools and universities or start the community farms. Again, ordinary citizens of these other countries can definitely help the cause. They can spread information about the food crisis in India, therefore making the public and lawmakers more aware of the problem. In some countries, if it is safe to peacefully demonstrate, citizens can protest in an effort to get lawmakers to allocate money towards India. Even if citizens don't want to get extremely involved politically, they can still vote for candidates who prefer an interventionist foreign policy, leading to a better chance of foreign aid to India being proposed and passed.

India is suffering a food crisis because of extremely high population growth. Overpopulation is occurring in many places, and the Indian government has done very little to stop it. While many would say that the

largest obstacle to combating this problem would be changing the centuries' old mindsets of those in power—mostly men—action can definitely be taken to help the existing situation. Having more educational opportunities for women and educating women on family planning will help lower the fertility rate, slowing population growth. This, along with community farms where food will be grown, will help India become more sustainable. Ordinary citizens in both India and other countries can help spread information about the food crisis and these proposed solutions in an effort to increase the chance of them being implemented. Overpopulation is causing widespread food scarcity in India, but by slowing population growth and increasing food supply, the food crisis can be solved.

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