
CURRENT SCIENCE—50 YEARS AGO



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Census of India, 1931.

THERE is an imposing array of statistical tables and graphs in the Census Report of 1931, illuminated by a clever exposition of some of the fundamental problems of human population relevant to them. According to the figures provided in the Report, India occupies the foremost place among the countries of the world in the number of inhabitants and if the rate of increase such as occurred between 1871 and 1881, *viz.*, 47.74 millions were to be steadily maintained, she would almost certainly continue to hold this dizzy eminence indefinitely. But instead of being a matter of satisfaction, it might well prove a source of irritating embarrassment to the statesmen guiding her destinies. The actual increase in the number of population of this country which has occurred in the last decade is estimated at a figure which approaches equality with that of European countries like France and Italy and exceeds that of Spain and Poland. The urban areas have contributed about 19.2 per cent, to this total increase of nearly 34 millions while the remainder represents the increment supplied by the inhabitants of the rural parts of India. A population of such magnitude as 354 millions spread over an area of eighteen hundred thousand square miles must fill the mind of both the government and discerning public with grave apprehensions and even some of the subsidiary problems such as the relative proportions in the number of men and women at their reproductive ages, the number of births and infantile mortality, the agricul-

tural holdings and the occupations of the people, unemployment, migration of the people and a number of other allied questions have an importance and significance peculiar to India. The satisfactory solution of any of these or all of them must baffle the resources of the most accomplished statesmen even if each of the problems should remain without further complications. Judging by the comparative tables provided in the report, the inference may naturally be drawn that further increase of Indian population will render the problems still more complex and their solution must present insuperable difficulty. The grave aspects of these questions, it appears to us, should engage the attention of the people themselves no less than that of the Government and the attack should be made in a spirit of mutual understanding and helpful co-operation.

Almost all the recent writers on the population problem discuss it in relation to the question of food supply. It is argued that in India, the great masses of rural population who live perpetually on the verge of insufficiency would become involved in a serious economic position if further accretions are permitted to occur without let or hindrance. This, however, is a contingency which according to the Census Report has not arrived, but no one can afford to ignore the need for so regulating the growth of population that it is able to subsist on the produce of the land without further imperilling the standard of living. It ought to be the endeavour of the people to raise the standard, if possible, so that their children are provided with the means of obtaining the benefits of education and employment in the professions for which they are best fitted. The remedy usually suggested for checking the indiscriminate and excessive increase of population is the widespread practice of contraceptive methods. Some of the advanced thinkers are so convinced of the efficacy of this doctrine that they lend the weight and authority of their names to the movement which advocates the introduction of birth control methods.

"The present problem in India," writes Dr. J. H. Hutton, "would seem to be less the actual total increase of the population than the increase of that portion of the population, by far the greater part of course, which is occupied in agricultural and allied pursuits." This statement based on a careful analysis of the Census figures, acquires a great significance when it is remembered that in India even at the present

moment the profession of agriculture continues in most parts to be looked upon by the rural community as an end in itself rather than "as a mere means of production of victuals, hence the real danger of a growth of population which must suffer discomfort because this end becomes rapidly more difficult of realisation." If the argument in favour of the limitation of population by artificial methods is based exclusively on the means of subsistence, then its advocates do not appear to have a strong case.

It seems to us that at the present moment, the remedy suggested to limit the population of India

within reasonable bounds, purely for economic reasons, does not receive support from the Census figures and the interpretation of them. However, birth-control methods might be found necessary to form part of the social programme of this country if Western conditions and ideals of life, the economic fever and fret of competition were reproduced here on the scale of the most advanced European countries where this doctrine of regulating the birth of babies is generally accepted. In India the conditions are still not quite favourable for universally welcoming this wild goose that lays no eggs.

NEWS

PRESERVING VARIABILITY

Subsistence farmers in the Third World have been cultivating today's major food crops for over 10,000 years. By observing the natural process of mutation and by careful seed selection over the centuries, these farmers have developed astonishing crop variability. This diversity has been necessary for survival. No one wheat or rice variety provides adequate protection against monsoon failures, pests, rusts or blights.

Practical farmers welcome a dozen or more varieties of wheat to their fields, because, come drought, flood or rust, something will make it to harvest time. Despite recent impressive advances in genetic engineering, most agronomists would continue to argue that science cannot begin to match the variability of nature. (*Appropriate technology for health, Newsletter 13, 1983; World Health Forum, 1984, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 58*)

LOW-COST DOMESTIC WATER PURIFIER

A simple and safe water purifier from Britain, intended for people who face problems of pollution and low water pressure, is capable of treating 675 litres an hour. Tested to a pressure of 4 bar, the Aquarius 150 could be of particular assistance to village communities with poor-quality water in developing countries. It is said to produce drinking water at a much lower cost than any other similar product known to the manufacturer.

Two pressure sand filters remove all solid matter from the water, which then passes through an activated carbon filter, for removal of colour, taste and odour. A transparent sodium hypochloride tablet dispenser is supplied for water sterilisation if required. The address of the manufacturers of the Purifier: Aquarius Water Purification Co, 544 Moston Lane, Moston, Manchester M10 9RG, England. (*British Industrial News, No. 145, March 1984, p. 19*)
