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## Population Policy: Authoritarianism Versus Cooperation [1]

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*Policy decisions taken out of fear result in folly. The author introduces the paper with a plea for critical reflection about the population problem. Policy-makers in various parts of the world have tried to take direct control of birth control decisions within families by using authoritarian methods. China's one child norm and India's sterilization drives during the 1975 emergency are illustrations of the world's two largest nation-states using authoritarian methods. The basic dichotomy of 'solving' a population 'problem' is to use either an authoritarian or a co-operative approach. The author re-examines the 200-year-old debate between Thomas Malthus and the Marquis de Condorcet to theoretically illustrate these two approaches to problem solving. The pressures of a growing population on a finite quantum of natural resources logically leads to decreased food supply, environmental deterioration and over-crowding, particularly in metropolitan cities. The obvious choice of social development options are better female education, greater participation of women in productive employment; and greater autonomy and empowerment of women. The author argues the case for co-operative methods, which can lower fertility rates more effectively than authoritarian methods, which he illustrates with the achievements in Kerala and China. The author ends with illustrations that in India even direct and disguised coercion does not succeed as effectively as co-operation.*

### **Introduction**

"In politics," said Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1830, "what begins in fear usually ends in folly." Coleridge is not my favorite 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 declaration 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.

The concern calls for serious reflection on what might be the best response to "the population problem." But critical reflection is precisely the response to "the population problem." But critical reflection is precisely the response that is missing when policy

makers 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 co-operation. 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 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 favorable 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 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 interests between male and female members of the family, particularly given their typically asymmetric roles in childcare. 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 grand-children 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 co-operation involves the voluntary collaboration of adult family members in general, but particularly of those whose agency and wellbeing 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 co-operative 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 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 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 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 co-operative response through the reasoned agency of the people themselves. Condorcet predicted the emergence of new norms of a 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 education (of which Condorcet was one of the earliest and most vocal advocates) would lead, Condorcet though, to lower fertility rates and smaller families, which people would choose voluntarily, 'rather than politely to encumber the world with useless and irritated 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, relevantly for the topic at hand, Malthus was particularly skeptical of voluntary family planning. While he did refer to "moral restraint" as an alliterative 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 plenty the necessaries of life should either indispose this greater number of persons to marry early, or disable them from nearing 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 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 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]

Skepticism about the family's ability to make sensible decisions about fertility can take us in a variety of directions. It led Malthus to oppose the 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 Malthusian and neo-Malthusian 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 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 co-operative 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 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 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 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 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 behavior; 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.

### **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 the organization regarding the size of "the optimum population. [14] The general approach of "optimum population" not, however, be based on Malthusian empirical presumptions, and can be combined will 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 behavior (starting from any given social state), in

addition to the narrowly defined "end results". However, much of the extensive literature 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 "externalizes," 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 behavior 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 behavior, and that of others whose interests or susceptibilities may be indirectly influenced by this family's behavior. [15] As Jacques Dreze has noted, "We must recognize 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 behavior 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 favor of leaving reproductive behavior 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 Dreze 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 not a reason to dismiss

the possibility that there could nevertheless be a good ground for intervention in reproductive behavior 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 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 behavior. 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 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 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 route would be much more effective and faster than the co-operative 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 fact about fertility and family size is that the lives that are most battered by over-frequent childbirth 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.

### **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 "gainful" activities outside the home, the opportunity of women to earn an independent income, the property rights of women, and the general status of women in the social culture.

These connections have been observed within India as well, and the statistical relations between (10 women's education and women's opportunity to earn an outside income, on the one hand, and 20 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 Dreze, AnneCatherine Guio, and Mamta Murthi, dealing with data from the different districts of India in 1981 (the latest year for which adequately detailed data available). [25]

Among all the variables included in the analysis presented by Dreze, Guio, and Murthi, the only ones that have a statistically significant effect on are fertility are female literacy and female labor force participation. The importance of women's agency forceful from this analysis, especially in comparison with the weaker effects of variables relating to general economic progress.

The powerful evidence in favor 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 women'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]

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 India 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 extremely 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 can still be one of the most important priorities in Indian social change, even if the skepticism 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 skepticism 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 skepticism 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 conformable, 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-a-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-a-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-a-vis their relative power compared with others in the family (or outside it)." [28]

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 favorable 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]

### **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 favored by some population pressure groups. That route was explicitly rejected at the

International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo, but has not made the issue go away. Coercion persists in various forms (not least in India), and it figures, directly or indirectly, in great 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 92 the Chinese birth rate had fallen sharply to 19 per 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 with this approach is a major social 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 had 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 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 programs 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 literacy rates, and female participation in the labor 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 co-operative and supportive programs, 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 program 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 labor force), and so on. The question to ask, therefore, is the difficult "counter factual" 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 co-operative 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 percent) than China (68 percent). 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, 18 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 programs 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 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 co-operative family planning program, and it could use for this purpose comparative good position in terms of social achievements within India: the thief 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 of 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 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 in 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 programs, depriving mothers of more than low children of maternity benefits, reserving certain kinds of health care services to persons who have 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 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 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 co-operation 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 Indira Gandhi's government, along with suspending various legal rights and civil liberties. The policy of coercion in general--including that in birth control--was overwhelmingly 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 programs in India received, as family planning experts have noted, a severe set-back from that brief program 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 co-operative 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 agencies 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.

### Notes:

[1]. For helpful discussions, the author is most grateful to Lincoln Chen, Marty Chen, Monica Das Gupta, Jean Dreze, Athar Hussain, Patricia Jeffery, Roger Jeffery, T.N.Krishnan, P.N. Mari Bhat, Emma Rothschild, CassSunstein, and Pravin Visaria.

[2]. The author has 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.

[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."

[4]. English translation by Malthus himself, from his *Essay on population*, chapter VRI, Penguin Classics, p. 123. Mal uses here the 1795 version of Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat Marquis de Condorcet's *Esquisse d'um Tableau Historique*

Condorcet, *Tome Sixième*, Paris: Firmin Didot Freres, 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 education, As it Affects the Future Improvement of Society and Remarks on the Speculation of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers* (London: J. Johnson, 1978), Chapter VIII; in the Penguin Classics edition, edited by Achony Flew, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: 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* (London: William Pickering, 1986).

[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 view varied somewhat on what was taken to be inevitable, and he clearly less certain of his earlier prognosis as time 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 force of reason, as opposed to the force of economic compulsion, in making people choose smaller families remained largely unmodified. Indeed, the statement cited comes from his later work, published in 1830.

[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 temporary debates concerning the role of public support for the impoverished, and in particular the criticism of workhouses and charitable hospitals by Malthus and his contemporaries, see William St. Clair, *The Godwins and the Belshams: A Biography of a Family* (London: Norton, 1989).

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

[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); Patha Dasgupta, *An into Well-being and Destitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Robert Cassen et al, *Population and Development: Old Debates, New Conclusions* (New Overseas Development Council/Transaction 1994).

[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 n of unprecedented severity. African problems call for special attention, aimed at making social and economic development possible; the population problem has to be in the light of that general challenge. On this see my paper, "Population and Reasoned Agency: Food, Fertility and Economic Development" (1994), cited earlier.

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

[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. Dreze, "Form the 'Value of Life' to the Economics and Ethics of Population: The Path is Purely Methodological," *Recherches Ecopiomiques 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]. Dreze, "From the 'Value of Life' to the Economics and Ethics of Population: The Path is Purel, Methodological" (1992), pp. 158-9.

[19]. There is, of course, no particular mathematical problem in reformulating the social calculus to take note of such thresholds and partial non-comparability's, and the issue here is not the analytical format, but the substantive structure we give to it. The extensive range of the general analytic 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 appears 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.

[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.

[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 Dreze, *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 1 (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 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, Andrienne Germain, and Lincoln Chen, eds., Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights (Harvard Center for Population and Development/Intentional Women's Health Coalition, 1994).

[25]. Jean Dreze, Anne-Catherine Guio, and Mamta Murthi, "Demographic Outcomes, Economic Development and Women's Agency," Discussion paper, Center 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).

[27]. Even the young are deprived of school education in large numbers, contrary to what official enrolment figures state, as is readily checked from the census results and from the National Sample Surveys (on this see Dreze 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 percent in Rajasthan).

[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 works mean in South Asia?" cited earlier). See also Tim Dyson and Mick Moore, "On Kinship structure, female autonomy and demographic behavior in India," *Population and Development Review*, 9 (1983).

[29]. See T.N. Krishnan, "Demographic Transition in Kerala: Facts and Factors," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.II (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 Behavior 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 Asia* (1995)<sup>1</sup>- cited earlier.

[30]. Dreze, 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 author's *Population: Delusion and Reality* (1994).

[32]. The discussion that follows draws a lot on my paper "Population: Delusion and Reality" (1994), and my joint book with Jean Dreze, *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 nibble. On a nearby wall, the government dynamites painted a warning: "Those who do not obey the family planing police will he those who lose their fortunes." ("Birth control in China: Coercion and Evasion," *The New York Times*, June 25, 1995.)

[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, line *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 Drtze and Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (1995), Chapter 4.

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

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

[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 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 is more likely (as was discussed in the contrasting situation in China vis-a-vis that in Kerala).

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

[41]. On this see the references cited in Dreze 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.

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