
UNIT 30 DEMOGRAPHY

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30.1 INTRODUCTION

From the middle of the eighteenth century Western Europe witnessed a historically unprecedented decrease in mortality, followed by a period of rising fertility and then a secular decline in fertility. It was roughly while the western world was in the process of this momentous transformation that population became a subject of intense debate. Economists and statesmen have at different times in different places been extremely anxious about the consequences of contemporary demographic developments.

These anxieties were largely associated with the internal contradictions of the capitalist expansion. The dilemmas of development, then can for the purposes of this Unit be schematically classified into three broad groups: Overpopulation, immigration and the demographic deformations associated with the continuing hold of older attitudes towards marriage, health and son-preference in a context of modern capitalist growth. Finally, though less closely related to the dynamics of capitalist growth, we have imagined demographic imbalances being attributed to certain ethnic and religious groups for reasons of ideology and political power.

Population has frequently been invoked to explain a variety of social processes—population growth as a check on economic growth, as a stimulant of economic growth, as a cause for poverty, as an outcome of poverty and so on. There clearly seems to be a lack of certainty regarding whether population is the explanatory or dependent variable.

To clarify some of these issues relating to demographic change, it would be necessary to have some rudimentary understanding of the larger processes on which these are premised. First, it becomes necessary to understand the demographic determinants of population change. Next, these determinants or the most significant of these determinants need to be studied in association with the larger dynamics of economic and social change in region or country being studied. When discussing these changes at the global level, in the modern period, these could be reduced to three large processes that have characterised world history: the rise of capitalism beginning first in north-western Europe, the increasing economic disparities between the West and the poorer countries of the world with capitalist growth and imperialist expansion and finally the rapidity of economic change in the developing world without commensurate changes in social attitudes.

Population change can be explained in demographic terms by a simple equation, which demographers call the Balancing Equation:

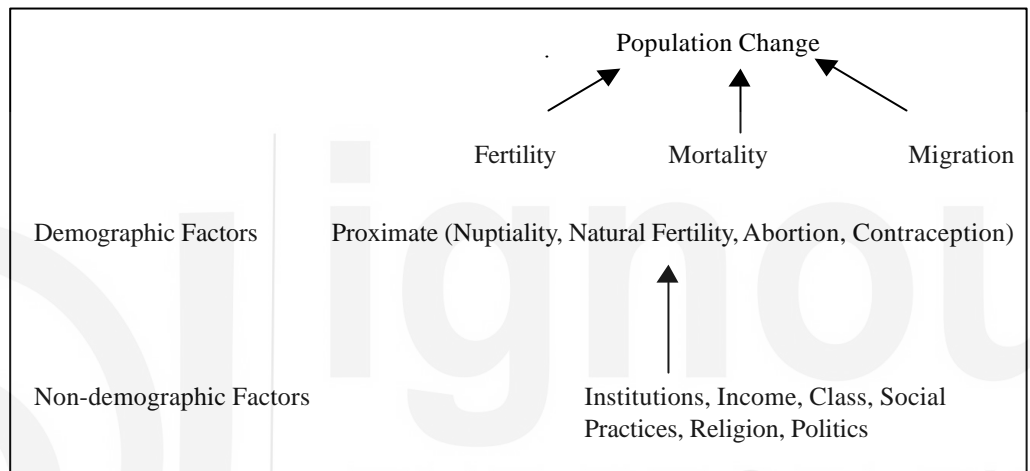
$$P_t = P_0 + B - D + I - E$$

Where P_0 is the initial size of the population

P_t is the terminal size of the population

B, D, I and E denote the number of births, deaths and in-migrants (immigrants) and out-migrants (emigrants) between the two dates.

In other words, population change is the result of three variables- fertility, mortality and migration. At different times in history, in particular regions, one or the other of these variables assumed greater significance than the others. Fertility, mortality and migration in turn, are determined by pure demographic factors and a larger set of social and economic variables.



30.2 THEORIES OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

To understand and place in perspective the discussions on the demographic variable in modern history, we need to look at the two guiding theories of the discipline of demography- the corpus of Malthus' writings on demographic dynamics and the sustained hold of the "demographic transition theory" since the Second World War. The third view, though equally relevant but not part of mainstream demographic discussions, is that put forward by Karl Marx in response to Malthus' speculations.

30.2.1 Malthusian Theory of Demographic Change

The Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) is popularly considered to be the founding father of modern demography. His 1798 work, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, which went through six editions, still provides the main theoretical frame for modern demographic research.

Malthus' main contribution was to enunciate a homeostatic, cyclical view of population movements. The high level of human fecundity made it possible for fertility to outstrip food production bringing about starvation and enhanced mortality in its wake. This crisis ensured the return of equilibrium and the beginning of a new cycle. This vicious cycle was usually prevented by the operation of preventive and positive checks. The "preventive" check in the form of postponed or averted marriages in the "civilized" European part of the world usually allowed these regions to escape crisis. The other route to equilibrium, usually found outside Christian Europe was the so-called "positive" check that took the form of war, disease, sterility from sexually transmitted diseases,

polygamy and vices including infanticide, abortion and contraception. Though this was the main demographic content of the original Malthusian model, it also contained a very significant element of ruling class anxiety about the debilitating influence that the rapidly proliferating poor would have on society. The general Malthusian model of homeostatic population-economy equilibrium through the operation of preventive and positive was to have universal applicability. But it was the class component of the model that made it politically significant. Malthus believed that mortality had been unchanging for centuries, but in class societies, the poor experienced higher mortality and were the first casualty of a subsistence crisis. This ignorant and wretched section of society did not respect preventive checks as they went ahead and had children despite minimal subsistence. Within the logic of this model the Elizabethan Poor Laws then by transferring part of the social surplus to this improvident class encouraged their reckless multiplication. This, in turn, increased the demand for food and raised the price of food for the middle class, thereby raising their mortality. Thus the Poor Laws instead of bettering the condition of the wretched merely increased their population and spread death to the more industrious and worthier sections of society. One direct policy outcome of this line of reasoning was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 where outdoor relief was substituted by urban workhouses.

While Adam Smith's thesis of free trade appealed to the natural man, Malthus saw an unambiguously Divine design behind the forces responsible for equilibrium. For Malthus, contraception was vile and unchristian- a view shared by most Englishmen of the day. In the absence of contraception the only respectable way to control was the preventive check.

Despite being widely held as the progenitor of demography, Malthus was neither the first to postulate a potential strain between population growth and food resources nor was he responsible in any way for the development of the technical tools of demography. What then were the reasons for his popularity?

Though this question can never be answered in full, one major reason is that Malthus was the first to clearly and comprehensively enunciate the fears and anxieties of English intelligentsia of social revolution and assert a civilizational gap between the peoples of the metropolis and the colonies in clearly demographic terms. Further, in the middle of the nineteenth century it carefully saw contraception as vile and clearly accepted a divine design. Being written in the most general terms, Malthusian concepts could be used to understand demographic phenomena in widely different contexts- from Poor Laws in England, to population growth in the New World and to famines in India.

Malthus progressively became more concerned with the absence on the preventive check in the uncivilized world. However, anticipating latter day diffusionists he did hope that the "diffusion of education and knowledge" in the future would bring these people to delay marriage.

30.2.2 Demographic Transition Theory

This brings us to the second enduring shibboleth of demography- the so-called "demographic transition theory". In the post War period, eugenics and the earlier politics of status quo took a severe beating. The resurgence of the Left, the horrors of Nazi race politics and advances in scientific theory were responsible for the quick demise of pre-War eugenicist arguments. The new governments now emphasised welfare. After the War, demography was taken very seriously by government policy makers. In France the INED was created to collect data and analyse population trends. In Germany, however, after the terrible excesses of the Nazis, the state decided to remain neutral in matters of population and family.

Early American demographic anxieties concerned immigration and immigrants. According to Notestein this work was “mainly descriptive and of little long-run significance.” Most of the academics associated with demography in the U.S. were part-time demographers drawn largely from the disciplines of sociology and statistics.

The so-called transition theory that has had such an enduring hold over generations of demographers was first presented in 1929 by Warren S. Thompson, one of America’s leading demographers. However, this prototype failed to recruit many followers. Towards the end of the Second World War in 1944, the “demographic transition theory” was published separately by Frank W. Notestein and Kingsley Davis to become the guiding “theory” of demographic change.

Classical “transition theory” as it was first formulated rested on a tripartite division of human demographic experience. In the first phase both mortality and fertility were high resulting in little or no population growth. In the second phase mortality fell sharply while fertility continued to remain high, leading to a sharp increase in population. In the third and final phase, fertility falls sharply and population goes into secular decline as fertility falls faster than mortality.

This model of demographic change was clearly evolutionary and functionalist in nature. Fertility decline was seen to be necessarily consequent upon industrialization and modernization. Transition theory was invested with applicability independent of place and time. Unlike its subsequent reincarnation in the 1950s, the transition theory of 1944 vintage clearly saw demographic change as a dependent variable with social, economic and cultural developments as the main explanatory factors. Unlike the early theoreticians of demographic change, Notestein saw all nations in the world capable of development. Predatory colonialism was seen as the culprit for delayed transition in countries such as India. The context was clearly held to be significant. Demographic change was seen to be a cumulative result of social and cultural and institutional change. The dissemination of contraceptive techniques was recognised as important in controlling fertility. However, its effectiveness was always dependant on “the social setting; hence new patterns of behaviour are to be established principally by the alteration of that setting.”

Within a space of just about half a decade, Notestein and subsequently Davis, the twin popular progenitors of the transition theory revised their recently pronounced model of demographic change very significantly. In a report in 1949 he wrote, “.. Fertility control is not a substitute for other ameliorative effort; instead, it is a means that will assist in making ameliorative effort successful- indeed it may turn out to be a necessary condition for such a success.”

The “transition theory” in its original form saw falling fertility as a consequence of industrialization. The greater the level of fertility, the quicker was the required pace of industrialization. The Soviet model, based on “totalitarian methods” was thought to be better at attaining higher rates of capital formation and thus potentially more attractive to newly independent Third World countries. Slower industrialization held the risk of increased poverty leading to Communism. The immediate goal of American demographers was to convince Third World leadership that population control was both possible and necessary.

The subject area of American demography now shifted to the Third World and so did the emphasis from academic demography to population studies focussed on family planning. Fertility control in the Third World now became one of those rare fields with a multiplicity of willing and rich sponsors. This singular emphasis on fertility control as the panacea for the ills of the Third World was soon questioned in terms of its motives and politics. Development as a vital necessary condition for population control was stressed and by the 1970s “revisionists” started questioning the inverse relationship

between population growth and development. Today in the United States there is no one overwhelming issue comparable to the old enthusiasm over Third World fertility control. The questions asked are much more diverse in nature.

The transition theory based largely on Parsonian functional structuralism and its subsequent sociological paradigms of “Westernisation” and “modernization” has continued to be single most important theory for demographers. Sociologists and anthropologists have long stopped taking Westernization and modernization seriously. Historical demography has clearly contradicted the empirical basis of the transition schema. First we find that in nineteenth century France, fertility began on its course of secular decline much before industrialization or any major phase of economic development. This should have been evident to the formulators of the theory of demographic transition as this phenomenon was well documented. The large scale Princeton based European Fertility Project, designed specifically to test the theory, was unequivocal in their finding that economic growth showed no clear relationship with falling fertility. Despite being at variance with the historical record, classical transitional theory maintained that fertility would decline only as a consequence of the cumulative interaction of lowered mortality, growing individualism, socially mobile urban groups, the decline of family and fatalism. These preferred conditions could only result from wide-ranging industrialization and modernization. The demographic transition it was believed had universal applicability. Any historical period or geographical point could be placed and situated on this demographic-economic scale. Dudley Kirk, who was involved with the elaboration of the transition theory at Princeton commented, “In regard to demographic matters the different countries of the world may be considered as on single continuum of development...” This implied that historical specificities and contextual differences had no bearing on the working out of demographic transition.

Though ahistorical and confident in its universal applicability and relevance, the classical version of the transition theory did however privilege the social, cultural and economic over the demographic. Demographic change was clearly a dependent variable in this equation, with modernization as the sole explanation. Demography was seen as firmly embedded in society. This reminds one of Malthusian thinking on the subject as well as Marx’s view that every mode of production had its special laws of population. In clear opposition to Malthus and Marx, the transition theory omitted class differences and regional specificities. To plot demographic transition or the later concept of fertility transition one has to have a base period and society to begin with and a different one at the end of that process. The moment one leaves the neat periodization and certain correlations of the demographic transition theory, and takes note of historical contingencies and complexities, it becomes clear that there is no one homogenous starting specimen that can be designated as “traditional” and its replacement by a “modern” society. Further, since the demographic transition theory is based on partial description and not any abstract analytical construct, any empirical observation that runs contrary to the stated trajectory becomes proof of significant weakness. Further, when the authors of the “theory” themselves mutate it out of recognition, any remaining confidence evaporates rapidly. Finally, in its mutated second birth the theory lacks causal direction. Other than the necessity to contracept, the demographic transition helps us very little in characterising demographic regimes, fixing determinants or predicting change.

Despite the theory not receiving a formal burial from demographers, it has been noted that the term demographic transition theory has increasingly been replaced by “fertility transition” which however is plagued by the same theoretical and methodological weaknesses as the original term.

Since these two guiding “theories”- Malthusianism and “demographic transition” have clearly been indicted for failing to correspond with known history and analytical rigour, alternative ways of conceptualising demographic change have become an urgent need.

30.2.3 Marx's Understanding of Demographic Change

Karl Marx's views on the subject of demography- economy linkages assumes significance here. With tremendous perspicacity, Karl Marx in his discussion of the development of capital, noted that "The law of capitalist production, that is at the bottom of the pretended "natural law of population," reduces itself simply to this: The correlation between accumulation of capital and rate of wages is nothing else than the correlation between the unpaid labour transformed into capital, and the additional paid labour necessary for the setting in motion of this additional capital. It is therefore in no way a relation between two magnitudes, on the one hand, the magnitude of the capital; on the other, the number of the labouring population; it is rather, at bottom, only the relation between the unpaid and the paid labour of the same labouring population. If the quantity of unpaid labour supplied by the working-class, and accumulated by the capitalist class, increases so rapidly that its conversion into capital requires an extraordinary addition of paid labour, then wages rise, and, all other circumstances remaining equal, the unpaid labour diminishes in proportion. But as soon as this diminution touches the point at which the surplus-labour that nourishes capital is no longer supplied in normal quantity, a reaction sets in: a smaller part of revenue is capitalised' accumulation lags, and the movement of rise in wages receives a check. The rise of wages therefore is confined within limits that not only leave intact the foundations of the capitalistic system, but also secure its reproduction on a progressive scale. The law of capitalistic accumulation, metamorphosed by economists into pretended law of Nature, in reality merely states that the very nature of accumulation excludes every diminution in the degree of exploitation of labour, and every rise in the price of labour, which could seriously imperil the continual reproduction, on an ever-enlarging scale, of the capitalistic relation." (Marx, *Capital* Volume I, Chapter 25, Section I).

Marx then went on to note that, "The labouring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which it itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into a relative surplus-population; and it does this to an always increasing extent. This is a law of population peculiar to the capitalist mode of production; and in fact every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population, historically valid within its limits and only in so far as man has not interfered with them." (Marx, *Capital* Volume I, Chapter 25, Section 3)

Thus it is in *Capital* that we first find the argument that socially acceptable levels of population are not independent of the capitalist production process, but are in fact, a function of the latter. Marx, however, attached a rider to this formulation—that this dynamic or "law" of population was peculiar to the capitalist system and that other modes of production had their own laws of population.

30.3 DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE: DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES

While certain common trends can be discerned in the very long term across national and regional population histories, these commonalities disappear when we begin to look demographic developments in the medium and short term. Consequently what we then have is not one single universal story of world population history but a variety of different trajectories with different determinants of demographic change. Western Europe, East Asia and the Indian subcontinent may be taken as representative of various different trends to understand demographic change in the modern world.

30.3.1 Europe

The historical demography of Europe is important to any discussion of the demographic variable in the world context, as it was here in the eighteenth century that population first showed rapid increase followed by a sustained decline.

The population of north-west Europe increased from between 60 to 64 million in 1750 to about 116 million in 1850 growing at an annual compound rate of around 0.6 per cent. Between the French Revolution and the First World War, mortality sharply declined with the availability of new resources and favourable epidemiological changes, creating conditions where population could possibly increase. The introduction of new crops such as potato and maize, greatly contributed to limiting subsistence crises and permitting population increase. Further, during the eighteenth century plague and associated epidemics such as typhus, smallpox, malaria, venereal diseases lost much of their lethal efficacy. Population increased sharply at first but was then limited by nuptiality checks. Next, it resulted in large overseas migration and a sustained decline in fertility. It led to the massive movement of Europeans overseas and also to the demographic transition. This demographic transformation is one of the most significant transformations that Europe witnessed in the last millennium.

In twentieth century western Europe devastating wars further exacerbated the effects of fertility decline, finally resulting in an ageing age structure and growth rates that will turn negative in the future.

30.3.2 China

Western observers, including Malthus, saw China as a country that was hopelessly caught in the trap of overpopulation and poverty. High population densities, low per capita consumption of food and energy and consequently low anthropometrical indices characterized China in the eighteenth century.

Describing the economic context of demographic change in China, Malthus wrote, "In some countries, population appears to have been forced; that is, the people have been habituated by degrees to live on the smallest possible quantity of food. There must have been periods in such countries when population increased permanently, without an increase in the means of substance. China seems to answer to this description. If the accounts we have of it are to be trusted, the lower classes of Chinese people are accustomed to living on the smallest possible quantity of food and are glad to consume putrid offals that European labourers would rather starve than eat."

Despite this low level of living standards, Malthusian positive checks did not prevent an increase in Chinese population. China's population grew virtually exponentially between 1700 and 1800 increasing from 175 million to 400 million in the same period. Between 1800 and 1950 the population increased more slowly to nearly 600 million. This was followed by a sharp acceleration to over 1.2 billion at present. Studies of Chinese historical demography using new sources such as imperial genealogies have now conclusively shown that mortality in the eighteenth century was similar to and even lower than Western Europe. Despite a sharp increase in population in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mortality levels decreased, in a rather unMalthusian fashion. Public health measures have been credited for this increase in life expectancy. This is not to say that there were sharp peaks marked by crisis mortality. These famines were few and not severe enough to arrest population growth in the long-term. Famine mortality, including the severe 1958-61 famine, was more the product of administrative and political mishandling than of population size.

From the middle of the twentieth century China's mortality started falling at a rate unknown in world history. Infant mortality registered a fall of 300 per cent between 1950 and the present. Male life expectancy similarly increased rapidly from 42.2 years in 1953-54 to 61.6 years in the period 1964-82. Once again increased state intervention, in the form of larger investments in public health, was responsible for this marked fall in mortality. Thus China with its low standard of living instead of proving the Malthusian positive check clearly shows that the Malthusian economy-mortality relationship did not have a universal applicability. It must also be noted here China has also exhibited very high levels of female infanticide and very high levels of sex-selective mortality both amongst the nobility and commoners.

This brings us to fertility. Once again, recent research into Chinese historical demography has shown that fertility in traditional China was quite moderate despite an absence of contraception. Nuptiality, one of the most important proximate determinants of fertility, was very different from marriage patterns elsewhere in Asia and in Europe. While there was early and universal female marriage in China, this was not the case with males. Males married much later and across a longer age span. Richer males married earlier than poorer men across social groups. This social differential in the pattern of marriage observed since the eighteenth century has persisted to the present day. The recent economic reforms and attendant increases in inequity have further raised the proportion of poor single men up to the age of thirty to 30 per cent from 25 per cent in the 1980s.

Other than this check on nuptiality, three mechanisms of fertility control – late beginning, birth spacing and early stopping – effectively controlled Chinese marital fertility.

30.3.3 India

The population of India grew slowly from 1871 to 1921 largely because of the mortality check despite high fertility. In the post 1921 years up to the 1980s fertility remained high but mortality declined leading to rapid population growth and resulting in a very young age population. Women fared badly in terms of mortality relative to men throughout our period. The sex ratio at birth usually falls between 1040 to 1070, internationally. In other words 104 to 107 male babies are born for every 100 female babies. On the other hand male mortality is also generally higher than female mortality in the older age groups. Despite this, India has exhibited a continuous decrease in the proportion of women. This is explained by lower life expectancy at birth for females. This all-India trend however does not hold good for many parts of India, as we shall see in our discussion of regional trends.

India's age distribution has remained remarkably stable with a large and virtually constant proportion of young people. In a closed population such as that of India's, the large proportion of children points to high levels of fertility. The age distribution also suggests a high dependency ratio. Further, the youthfulness of the population also ensured a continued population momentum that would last beyond the onset of fertility decline.

30.4 DEMOGRAPHY: SOCIETY LINKAGES

In this section we try to understand some of the relationships between demographic and social and economic change.

In the Malthusian scheme of things, unregulated demographic growth was certain to result in crisis and a return to equilibrium between food supply and demand. For Malthus this vicious cycle of rapid procreation and resulting death could only be prevented by the preventive check or the safety valve of migration.

This part of Malthus' formulation provided a basis to a large number of writers in the post- War period who feared an imminent population explosion resulting in widespread

scarcity. The United Nations in its publication entitled, *The Determinants and Consequences of Population Growth* (1953) observed, “Especially during the last decade a number of authors have recalled the Malthusian principle of population and expressed the fear that the present population of the earth is drawing near the maximum that its resources can support.” Demographers, economists and statesmen took this warning seriously.

Coale and Hoover in their work on India saw rapid population growth as the cause for the country’s poverty. Population increase resulted in a progressively larger share of the production being used for consumption, leading to a fall in savings and investment. The government of India appears to have taken the thesis of overpopulation as being an obstacle to development seriously. India was the first country to begin a comprehensive programme of family limitation in 1950s.

However, there were dissenting voices. Simon Kuznets’ large-scale study found no association empirically between population growth and development. Around the same time, Boserup provided theoretical arguments and empirical proof to argue that critical level of population pressure was necessary for technological development to take place in agriculture. Others saw population pressure as forcing the development of new institutions that were essential for economic growth.

Recent research now clearly tells us that the Malthusian spectre of population outstripping resources is not true historically at the global level. According to Angus Maddison, between 1500 and 1820 while the world’s population grew at an annual rate of 0.29 per cent, the gross domestic product increased by 0.33 per cent.

Malthus hypothesised the operation of the preventive check as the preferred route to equilibrium. However, history once again tells us that the Malthusian preventive check was in operation in a wide range of societies and not limited to “civilized” Western Europe. Again, we find that other mechanisms such as widowhood, infanticide, abortion and a number of measures were resorted to in regions where the nuptiality check was absent to regulate population. There is also no evidence to suggest that the preventive check was a conscious decision to limit fertility and population growth. Thus, what we do find is that a range of societies characterized by varying levels of economic development resorted to some form or the other of fertility regulation.

High mortality and especially infant mortality was clearly inversely correlated with fertility through “replacement” and “hoarding”. In a demographic regime marked by high and volatile levels of mortality, parents or the society would tend to replace dead children and produce more than the desired family size given the high incidence of mortality. Unless mortality levels were so high as to depress fecundity, high mortality regimes were also characterized by high fertility, though not necessarily population increase.

While the interrelations between the proximate determinants of population growth are fairly well understood, the population-economy relationship continues to pose an enduring conundrum. Malthus saw the overpopulation resulting in poverty and famines. On the other hand according to the theory of demographic transition, modernization resulted in first lowered mortality and rapid population growth followed by sustained fertility decline and slowing down of population growth.

While development or modern economic growth resulting in mortality and then fertility decline over the long run appears logical, this has not always been borne out by available historical evidence. France experienced low fertility levels well before the beginnings of modern economic growth. The Princeton based European Fertility Survey that was designed to test this assertion of the “transition theory” once again failed to find any statistically significant relationship between economic development and fertility decline.

However, the failure to find such a relationship may be related to the choice of economic indices that were available to the Princeton researchers. At a more global scale, taking more sensitive indices of economic development such as the Human Development Index rather than aggregated measures such as per capita income or GDP, recent research finds that fertility transition occurred only in countries with a HDI of 0.6 or more.

Mortality decline is a necessary condition for sustained fertility decline. Thus it is not surprising that only when the population as a whole is freed from the threat of mortality hikes will it exercise the option of family limitation.

The uneven nature of fertility decline between the developed and developing countries has created another contradiction. With the West having experienced fertility decline for more than a century now, its population is rapidly ageing and the proportion of men and women in the working ages is getting smaller. What this implies in economic terms is that these countries now have to import labour. As North-South disparities have sharply increased in the recent past, employment and wages have decreased in the developing world. This has resulted in the West facing a virtual tide of job seeking immigrants trying to enter these richer countries. The cruel contradiction of globalisation has been that while the West wants all factor markets to be liberalised, it fights shy of opening up to labour.

A related dilemma of development that has a bearing on migration is the nature of economic development in the globalized world. The recessionary trends that have marked corporate globalization have greatly increased both unemployment as well as underemployment. Work is also rapidly shifting from the organised to the unorganised sector accompanied by the attendant evils of poor working conditions and low wages especially in Asia. All this further increases North-South disparities and sets up conditions encouraging a poor workforce to move in search of better employment opportunities, which then attracts severe restrictions.

Demographic changes are path-dependent. We find that regions and countries that underwent the mortality transition early also began on their course of sustained fertility decline much before traditionally high mortality regions. The path-dependence also extends to other features of demographic change. Patriarchal China and the northern Indian sub-continent have traditionally been characterized by pronounced son-preference. With the beginning of fertility decline and the reduction in the desired family size, we find new technologies, such as pre-natal diagnostic testing being employed to destroy female fetuses resulting in alarmingly skewed sex ratios.

Finally, in many of the countries of the developing world, in a context of increasing social disparities, demographic arguments are erroneously marshalled to hold certain communities responsible for the ills of society. Attempts have been made to biologically reduce their reproduction or more brutally by outright physical extermination- Nazi Germany being the most revolting, but by no means the only case in point.

30.5 SUMMARY

Demographic change is thus one of the most pressing problems facing the modern world today. The problems are different, specific to societies and countries and are closely related to wider economic and social changes. Attempt to understand demographic change without reference to time and region-specific context has failed.

The relationship between development and demographic problems is so closely intermeshed, that both in the past and in today's world, population being more visible and easily quantifiable than the underlying processes of global economic, political and social change, is held culpable for a range of problems.

30.6 EXERCISES

- 1) How is demographic change important to an understanding of world history?
- 2) Discuss Malthusian theory of demographic change. Can it be applied universally?
- 3) What are different historical contexts which have led to different demographic patterns in areas like Europe, India and Asia?



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UNIT 31 ECOLOGY

Structure

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31.1 INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution changed the lives of people in Europe in a most dramatic way. It brought them from the countryside to the city in search of jobs; it changed their life patterns, created new tastes and recreations. Most significantly, it saw the organization of production of goods on a scale never known before. Factories required fuel and raw material. As new industrial townships came up there was a huge demand for construction material like bricks, in the manufacture of which large quantities of wood were required. There was also a growing need for food grain to feed the growing urban population.

How did all this impact on nature? In a very big way because it was Mother Nature alone that could provide all the materials required for this major change. The most noticeable change was the conversion of wooded or forest lands to cultivable tracts. Millions of hectares of land were brought under cultivation. The well-known historian E.J. Hobsbawm, in his book *Age of Capital 1848-1875*, tells us that Sweden more than doubled its crop area between 1840 and 1880, Italy and Denmark expanded it by more than half, Germany and Hungary by about a third. In southern Italy and its islands, about 600,000 hectares of trees disappeared between 1860 and 1911. Forests and grasslands, which were teeming with biodiversity, were made to give way to the simplifications of commercial agriculture. This brought major ecological changes, which we will discuss later in this Unit.

New industrial cities brought unhealthy living and pollution in its wake. In England and later in Europe, writers, poets and painters recoiled at the ugliness of the new urban centres. Some writers like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell described the squalor in their novels. Here is an account of an English industrial town in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *North and South*:

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay...Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell. Quick they were whirled over long, straight, helpless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. Here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out black 'unparliamentary' smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain.

The Romantic poets and painters turned their faces away from the squalor and desperately sought to return to nature. They believed that outside the city survived a lost innocence, which they respected and venerated. Their passion moved the general public. From 1865 onwards numerous societies like the Commons Preservation Society, the Lake District Defence Society and others, which we will refer to later, emerged. But there was no setting the clock back. Capitalism had come to stay and it was like a hungry giant, whose appetite for raw material and markets was insatiable. This hunger could only be fed by exploiting the colonies of Asia, Africa and the Americas, which were very rapidly coming under European control.

This was one of the dilemmas of development. On the one hand there was progress. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the centuries of major developments in science and technology. While one branch of science concentrated on uncovering the laws of nature, another was committed to harnessing nature to the needs of capitalist development. The lives of men and women were being transformed as never before. There were new conveniences to be enjoyed but there were, at the same time, new health hazards and new natural disasters to contend with. The negative consequences of the new developments were recognized rather early in the day – in fact in the nineteenth century itself. The problem of nature was understood to be a serious one and policy makers had to strike a balance between maintaining the existing natural order and disturbing it. At the same time development could not be compromised, especially at a time when each nation was involved in the race to surpass the other.

What made the whole issue more complex was Imperialism. Since this was the era of imperialist expansion and colonial exploitation, the dilemmas of development would involve not just Europe but Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australia as well. Given the equation between the imperialist powers and their colonies, it was only to be expected that the ecological changes would be on a much larger scale in the colonies.

31.2 HOW EUROPE PERCEIVED THE NEW LANDS

In fact, these changes had begun even prior to the Industrial Revolution. Even as the Europeans moved out of their homelands, fired by a new spirit of adventure or because of a sudden population increase, as occurred around the 1750s, or because of religious persecution at home or in order to make profit through trade, they triggered off many ecological changes in the new lands they entered. Their attitudes towards the new regions they inhabited were varied. Some saw the lush green tropical areas as the lost Eden. The French navigator, Louise Antoine de Bougainville arrived in Tahiti in the South Pacific in 1768 and thought that he had been transported into the Garden of Eden. The natural abundance of the tropics seemed to contrast with the frugality of nature in Europe. Another type of reaction, at the other extreme, was of hostility towards the existing flora and fauna. The marshes and swamps were seen as breeding grounds

of disease and must be cleared. A third type of reaction was of interest in the exploitability of these natural resources and their commercial value. Here, nature was seen as inexhaustible and waiting to be put to “productive” use. If, in the process of tapping natural resources, much of the existing natural vegetation and animals were destroyed, that could not be helped. The superior forces of Europe were merely prevailing over the inferiorities of the rest of the world. It was an assertion of Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest.

31.3 THE IMPORTING OF NEW PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES

When the settlers came to the New World, (North and South America), Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and other lesser-known parts of the world, they brought with them the plants and animals they were familiar with. These plants and animals formed an important part of their diet. For instance, the Europeans brought in the pig to many colonies, because it was a rich and convenient source of food.

But soon the species multiplied so rapidly that it became a menace, competing with human beings for the land and its resources. The new animals also needed certain kinds of fodders and grasses for their sustenance. These grasses were often imported from the home countries and would spread like wild fire. Existing grasses and weeds were wiped out as a result. Alfred Crosby in his *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, explains how, along with other regular plants, a large variety of weeds also found their way across the seas into the new lands. In the case of Australia, the onslaught of European plants and weeds began in 1778 when the first expedition sailed from Britain to Botany Bay. Most of the northern parts of Australia as well as its interior were too hot and dry for European seeds and grasses. So it was in the southern coasts and Tasmania that Europe’s flora took root. They wiped out other indigenous plants in this region.

Like the weeds and the pigs, rabbits could also be uncontrollable. In 1859 some rabbit species were released in southeast Australia. They multiplied in such alarming numbers that they began competing with the sheep for grasses and herbs. It was much the same story in New Zealand, which had been annexed by the British in 1840. Here, since there were no large native predators, all the Old World livestock that had been introduced – i.e. horses, goats, pigs and sheep – multiplied very rapidly and soon outstripped the human population. What made the New Zealand story even more distressing was the fact that the flora and fauna here was extremely unique, since they had evolved in isolation for some 80 million years.

Sir Cecil Rhodes, the British colonialist who made a fortune mining diamonds, introduced the Himalayan Tahr, a long-haired mountain goat to South Africa in the 1920s. It was considered an exotic specie and some three or four specimens were brought for a zoo at the base of the Table Mountains. The goats, however, escaped from the zoo and multiplied. Soon they had established a colony and began to run riot, threatening the natural habitat of the region. These goats are now considered such a menace that the South African National Parks authority has taken a decision to eliminate these animals. But that decision has triggered a controversy and a group of animal lovers in Cape Town have now formed a support group called Friends of the Tahr (FOTT) to rehabilitate this near-extinct species.

So there were two types of ecological changes: the intended and the unintended. Both had very far-reaching consequences and usually upset the ecological balance of the regions where they appeared. As we have seen above, even the intended changes ended up having unintentional repercussions. And these repercussions could affect not only plant and animal species but also entire races of humans, as will be seen below. And this in turn could have important political consequences.

31.4 THE WIPING OUT OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Just as the introduction of new animal and plant species sometimes resulted in the wiping out of the indigenous species, so too the coming of Europeans to the New World could mean the extermination of large sections of the existing population in that region. In Central and South America, for instance, the Aztecs and the Incas were suddenly exposed to the smallpox virus when the Spaniards arrived in the second decade of the sixteenth century. Since they had no immunity to this disease, it spread rapidly and caused huge loss of lives. This led to political collapse and demoralization, as a result of which it became possible for a few hundred Spanish adventurers led by Hernan Cortes, to defeat the 5-million strong empire of Montezuma in the Mexico region. As for the Incas of Peru, the reigning Inca as well as his son and heir fell victim to smallpox and since there was no clear successor, the Spanish conqueror Francisco Pizarro was able to exploit the ensuing disunity to conquer the area with ease.

31.5 WERE HUMAN BEINGS DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE OR ONLY INDIRECTLY?

The larger question that is raised by writings like those of Alfred Crosby is the extent to which human beings can be held responsible for ecological disasters. The title of Crosby's book - *Ecological Imperialism – The Biological Expansion of Europe* is significant. It seems to suggest that the ecological impact of imperialism was not man-made but due to the biological changes that occurred when men and women moved into the new areas. Diseases like smallpox, measles, typhus and influenza were of common occurrence in Europe in any case and they only found a more congenial environment in the new areas that the Europeans travelled to. Critics of the Crosby type of explanation such as David Arnold in his book *The Problem of Nature*, say that it underplays the destructive aspect of human actions. Arnold argues that in the case of the Aztecs and the Incas, the other policies of the Spaniards i.e. of massacres, of forced labour in mines and plantations and the destruction of indigenous agriculture were also contributory to a significant population decline even before the arrival of smallpox in 1519.

The European conquerors also weakened the native population by appropriating their food reserves. Since most of these areas had a subsistence economy, i.e. the people produced just enough to meet their own immediate food requirements, their precarious nutritional balance broke down. They now became more susceptible to illnesses and subsequent death.

There is no doubt that major ecological changes were being triggered off in the areas occupied by the imperialists. Even if they were unintended, they suited imperial interests. The wiping out of indigenous plant and animal species and the killing off of native populations all fitted into a pattern and rendered easier the tasks of accommodating the surplus population of Europe and of creating a subsistence base for them.

31.6 THE IMPACT ON EXISTING ECOSYSTEMS

Since most of the colonies had been acquired to fulfil the needs of industrialization, especially the growing demand for raw materials, the ecosystems of these areas were bound to be affected. All parts of the earth have their own natural ecosystems. These could be very small, like a simple pond, or an entire rain forest or a desert – it could even be the whole earth. Ecosystems have been compared to machines that run on and on automatically, checking themselves when they get too hot, speeding up when they get too slow and so on. However, when outside forces disturb these ecosystems, the equilibrium is affected and the entire system could collapse.

Environmental historians like Donald Worster, in *The Ends of the Earth*, tell us that for a long time the most dramatic environmental alterations came from the massive conversion of natural ecosystems into croplands. As mentioned before, immense tracts of forests and grasslands were cleared and brought under cultivation. The bio-complexity of these regions was lost. Species of plants and animals began to disappear at an alarming rate. As Worster puts it: “First it was one species every year, then one every day, soon it will be one every hour, one every half hour, one every 15 minutes.” There were plants on which man had depended for food, for medicines, for building materials and so much else for centuries. They now disappeared without a trace. Not only was the natural process of evolution suspended, it was even reversed.

Let us take up some examples of the effects of modern capitalist development on the colonies.

31.7 COAL MINING

During the period of the industrial revolution coal was the major source of energy. As the industrial revolution gathered momentum, the demand for coal went up dramatically. Where was this coal to be obtained from? There were parts of Europe, which were rich in coal like Poland and southern Russia, and mining was carried out here. But another major source of coal was the Appalachian mountains of the United States. Here, the method of strip mining was used to extract coal. Vegetation was obviously removed to enable the mining to take place and once that happened, there were major landslides. These landslides destroyed neighbouring farmlands and even roads. River systems were also affected as sedimentation increased and the flowing capacity of streams and rivers was reduced. Apart from all these was the pollution – sulphuric wastes were generated and these entered the water system. It is estimated that in the Appalachian region, the waste from the mines polluted some 16,000 kilometres of waterways.

These were the effects of coal mining on the regions from which it was extracted. What about the places where coal was being used as a source of fuel? The burning of coal releases carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which seriously affects the ozone layer. As is well known, it is the ozone layer that protects the earth from the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun. When the ozone layer gets depleted it can cause a variety of health problems.

31.8 CHANGING THE FACE OF NATURE: THE NEW ENGLAND EXAMPLE

New England was that part of North-Eastern America around present-day Massachusetts, which was colonized by Britain in the seventeenth century. The impetus for this colonization came from the Puritan movement for religious reform in England. In

the first quarter of the seventeenth century the Puritans faced discrimination from the local Anglican Church in England. Some of their leaders felt that the Puritan salvation lay in America, where they could set up a model church and state. Since 3,000 miles of ocean separated them from England, they would be free to govern this new land as they wished, with no interference from the home church. This was how the English settlement of New England came into being. By the early 1640s more than 20,000 Englishmen had made the pilgrimage to New England. The rates of population growth were also rather high.

This region had several kinds of furred animals, which were not known in Europe. There was the ocelot – a medium-sized cat with a striped deep yellow or orange coat; the coyote – a wolf-like wild dog and the bobcat – a small cat with a spotted reddish-brown coat. The skins of these animals began to become popular for fur coats in Europe and as they entered the European fur market, the large-scale destruction of these animals began. It is estimated that beaver skins comprised over half of England's total fur imports between 1700 and 1775. Soon, beavers vanished from New England, their original habitat. Beavers are also builders of natural dams, and when the beavers disappeared, other species such as otters and muskrats were either flooded or frozen out. Many varieties of ducks and other birds that used to breed in beaver ponds also became extinct. The ponds themselves shrank into marshes and finally became meadows. Even larger animals like the moose (a large-antlered deer found in North America) and other varieties of deer were affected by the disappearance of beaver ponds because they used to escape from flies by standing in the cool water. Tree stumps that were cut down by beavers for building ponds used to sprout tender stalks and leaves on which deer, rabbits and hare fed.

By 1800 most game animals had dwindled in the New England area and by the mid-nineteenth century they had vanished. These included the white-tailed deer and the buffalo. The moose and the caribou disappeared a little later – i.e. by the beginning of the twentieth century.

But the Puritan settlers welcomed all this and rejoiced when the shrieks of the wild panther were replaced by the sound of Sunday church hymns and the busy hums of machines.

31.9 TURNING FORESTS INTO CULTIVABLE LAND – THE CASE OF NORTHERN INDIA

Most colonial states derived a large amount of their revenue from agriculture. Hence it was in the State's interests to expand the area of cultivation. For this it was necessary to clear forestlands. In British India an 1894 document, which codified Governmental land use policy, clearly stated that there should be no hesitation in sacrificing forests where the demand for arable land could only be fulfilled in this way. Ironically, at the same time, Wilhelm Schlich, who was the Head of the Indian Forest Department, was waxing eloquent on how forests reduced the temperature of air and soil, regulated climate, increased rainfall, helped reduce violent floods and prevented occurrence of land slips, avalanches and siltation of rivers. He went on to add – all this in his *Manual of Forestry* — that forests also assisted in the production of oxygen and ozone and thus helped to improve the health of the country!

But to get back to our story of the Ganga Jamuna Doab. This region, in present day Uttar Pradesh, is the area lying between the Ganga and the Yamuna rivers. From the foothills of the Himalayas the two rivers flow parallel to each other for about 500 kms, separated by 80-120 kms of land. As they move eastwards the two rivers run closer to

each other until they finally merge at Allahabad. The Doab region was one of the most fertile regions of Northern India

The English East India Company acquired control over this region in 1801 and what followed thereafter was a series of blows to the sensitive ecological system of the Doab. There was a thick forest belt between Bulandshahr and Kanpur, incorporating the districts of Aligarh, Etah, Mainpuri and Kanpur, at the beginning of the 19th century. The predominant tree species of this region was the *dhak* – *butea monosperma*, — more popularly known as the Flame of the Forest. Since the soil here was rather saline, the only vegetation that could survive and thrive was the dhak tree. But the new conquerors decided to bring these areas under cash crop cultivation – indigo, cotton and sugarcane. Besides the revenue incentive for bringing the land under the plough, an additional argument advanced was that the clearing of the forests would help to control crime. In this part of northern India there were several bands of dacoits who were believed to be seeking refuge in these jungles. By the 1840s, a substantial portion of the *dhak* jungle had disappeared and by the 1880s there were hardly any trees left outside the properties of the large landlord.

What happened to this region when these forests were cut down? Climatic changes began to occur. By the 1840s there was a visible rise in temperature and the intensity of the loo or hot wind that blew in the summers increased. It loosened the surface of the now unprotected soil which was then washed away in the monsoon rains. The subsoil lost its water retaining capacity and ponds and lakes began to dry up. All this led to the severe drought of 1837-38, which came as the climax of a succession of dry years. The number of cases of malaria increased dramatically due to the stagnant water in dried out riverbeds and lakes.

With the disappearance of the *dhak* tree, the soil also became more saline and in due course of time, the fields became less and less productive. By the 1820s, this process had gone so far that entire villages had to be abandoned. Moreover, due to intensive cultivation, which left little time for fallow periods, the productive capacity of the soil was also greatly reduced.

The Doab story, thus, is one of causing ecological damage to fulfil the needs of development. But very soon, development was itself the victim of this assault on nature and agricultural productivity, which far from being increased, was actually reduced. As a result the whole policy for this region had to be reviewed.

31.10 THE COMING OF THE RAILWAYS

The modern world is generally associated with faster and more efficient means of transport like steam navigation and the railways. From the 1840s an ever-expanding network of railway lines began to criss-cross the European continent and shortly thereafter spread to those parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which were in the hands of the imperialist powers. In India it has been estimated that the total length of rail track increased from about 5,000 kilometers in 1870 to 20,000 kilometers in 1890 and thereafter, in every decade, about 10,000 kilometers of rail track were being laid. Railways were an extremely effective means of maintaining administrative control over far-flung and hitherto inaccessible areas. They also helped to transport raw materials and finished products from the rural hinterlands to the ports with greater ease.

The sight of a steam engine hurtling down the countryside was awe-inspiring and magnificent. It came to be associated with the might of empire and technological advancement. But what implications did the coming of the railways have for the natural environment? Railway tracks are usually laid on beams of wood, which are called

sleepers. In recent times metal sleepers have replaced wooden sleepers but throughout the nineteenth century, when the railway network was expanding rapidly, wooden sleepers were in use. It is estimated that each mile of newly laid track required 1760 sleepers. The *sal* and *deodar* trees of northern India and the teak of southern India were found to provide ideal wood for the sleepers since they were strong enough and resistant to termites and fungal decay. An average tree could provide between five to ten sleepers. This meant that thousands of trees would be cut down for railway construction and sometimes whole forests would be devastated. In some cases more trees would be cut than could be easily transported out of the forest by unscrupulous contractors. These would be left to rot in the forests and contribute to forest fires and further destruction.

In the early years of railway construction forests were ransacked indiscriminately. But very soon the colonial state realized that such methods would be disastrous in the long run and so it began enacting legislation which would enable them to manage forests in such a way that they were assured of long-term supplies of wood. Forests began to be reserved but this meant that even people who had been using the forests for centuries for firewood, fodder, honey, fruits, roots and numerous other produces, were now prohibited from entering these forests.

31.11 THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Man knew the disadvantages and hazards of overexploiting nature from early times. In Ancient Greece, where large areas of countryside were turned into a barren waste during the Peloponnesian War (431-421 BC), Theophrastus of Erasia, who was Aristotle's biographer and botanical gardener, developed a theory in which he linked deforestation with the decline of rainfall in Greece. Coming to more recent times, in Germany, there was a shortage of wood after the Seven Years War of 1756-63. The government of the time realized that the woodlands would have to be preserved and hence decided to exercise state control over the forests. But here there was a twist to the tale. The forest was now to serve the needs of the national economy – especially its industrial needs. The larger, national interest was projected as being more important than local, regional needs. In the process the idea developed that forests had to be preserved from man, i.e., there was an attempt to restrict the rights of traditional forest users. This caused resentment among the local people and there were many protests over access to forest resources. Thus, just as traditional artisans were protesting against the displacement caused by industrialization, so too the forest dwellers felt threatened by the new forest laws and state takeover of forests in the countries of Europe and later other parts of the world. This tussle continues even today.

State takeover of forests and the harnessing of forest resources for industrial development had its effect on the nature of the forest. Often, mixed forests had to give way to monoculture stands of species like pines, which were more suitable for construction and industrial needs. Not only were the requirements of the local inhabitants overlooked but the very health of the forest was compromised in the process. The natural biodiversity that existed until then was destroyed.

Thus we can say that though the importance of the forest was realized it was still regarded as an exploitable resource, to be modified and distorted to serve the interests of the "nation". Who constituted the "nation"? The powerful classes that were emerging and consolidating themselves at this time. The less powerful, traditional groups were being steadily marginalized by the industrial development of the period.

But these other groups did not remain silent, as Ramchandra Guha tells us in his book *Environmentalism: A Global History*. In the United Kingdom a large number of public associations emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Scottish Rights of Way Society, formed in 1843, intended to protect walking areas around the city of Edinburgh. The Commons Preservation Society, begun in 1865, wanted to prevent the encroachment of cities on woodland and heath. For the protection of rare birds, beautiful plants and threatened landscapes, there was the Selbourne League, formed in 1885 and named after Gilbert White of Selbourne, a famous eighteenth century naturalist. There was also the Coal Smoke Abatement Society, started in 1898 as an independent pressure group to make the government enforce pollution control laws on erring factories. Largely because of all these efforts, Guha tells us, it has been possible to save “at least some parts of England from the contaminating effects of urban-industrial civilization.” But the colonial state in India was not fettered by such pressure groups and attempts at conservation could only emerge from within the state apparatus itself.

This is not to say that Indians did not realize the ill effects of industrialization. Even though the Industrial Revolution had largely left India untouched in the colonial period, and there were nationalists who saw industrial development as the need of the hour, Mahatma Gandhi was opposed to such a path of development. In his *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909, he saw industrialization as being destructive of nature. Some twenty years later he wrote:

God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.

Some of his followers like Mira Ben and Sarla Behn were very active in the environment protection campaign. Mira Ben’s Pashulok Ashram, situated between Hardwar and Rishikesh, was witness to some of the most devastating floods from the upper reaches of the Ganga which not only swept away bushes and trees but also cattle and human beings along with their dwellings. She realized that this fury of nature had its origin in the wanton destruction of forests in the mountains. She also realized that the solution to the problem lay not in the planting of trees like the pine, but in more ecologically appropriate trees like the oak. The Himalayas had also become ecologically unstable because of the replacement of mixed forests by monoculture. As more and more women and men came to be influenced by her ideas as well as those of Sarla Behn, who had set up an ashram for educating hill women in Kausani, Almora district, the powerful Chipko movement took root.

31.12 SUMMARY

The dilemma of whether to preserve the environment or exploit it for development, which revealed itself in a strikingly sharp manner in the nineteenth century, continues to be an important issue for policy makers and the people even today. The Industrial Revolution and the growth of empire changed the face of nature irrevocably in almost all parts of the world and we are now left with its lasting impact. But with the growth of democratic institutions, public awareness and political accountability, it is no longer possible for governments to ignore the voices of protest that are emerging from various quarters. But often it is a bitter tussle. The controversial Sardar Sarovar Dam and the Narmada Bachao Andolan illustrates this clearly. Which is more important? The benefits that this ambitious project will bring to some parts of the country or the ecological damage and the displacement of large numbers of people living in the areas which will be submerged?

31.13 EXERCISES

- 1) What is the linkage between the process of industrialization and ecological damage? Discuss briefly.
- 2) Describe the process of European colonization of new lands and the environmental losses with respect to one particular area discussed in this Unit.
- 3) How has the progress of modernity led to the awareness towards ecological issues? Outline the issue with specific instances.



UNIT 32 CONSUMERISM

Structure

- 32.1 Introduction
- 32.2 The Character of Commercialization and “Consumption” under Industrial Capitalism
 - 32.2.1 Early Days
 - 32.2.2 The Late 19th Century and After
- 32.3 Representation of “Consumption”
- 32.4 Material Culture
- 32.5 The Rise of the Consumer Movement and Material Politics
- 32.6 Summary
- 32.7 Exercises

32.1 INTRODUCTION

In modern times, the term “consumerism” has been associated with a preoccupation with the acquisition of goods and commodities. Traditionally, it has been used with negative connotations – as a “problem” that indicates a lack of discretion among “buyers” and “consumers” regarding what goods to buy and why to buy them in an increasingly commercialized environment. Among Marxist thinkers especially, what happened has been linked to exploitation under industrial capitalism.

“Consumerism” has been associated with the growth of industrial capitalism in Europe from the 18th century and its global spread thereafter – a development that was accompanied by economies of scale and increases in production and productivity. As indicated in the Unit on Industrial Capitalism (Block 4), such increases were sustained by growth in demand, both in the immediate neighbourhood of centres of production and further a-field. Improvements in technology and extensive use of the division of labour enabled manufacturers to produce on a large scale for “wants”, “needs” and “fashions”. Commercialization of leisure and the penetration by innovative manufacturers, of religious practices, public health, and education reinforced the habits of acquisition and increasing “consumption”. In European society, in these circumstances, availability of goods ceased to be a substantial problem. Rather, more important were means to ensure that they were in demand and “consumed”. If this was not achieved, “gluts” and economic depressions would take place, affecting employer and employee alike.

On the other hand, the regular use of commercial methods to make goods desirable, some argued, encouraged an obsession with purchase and consumption – often distorting habits of discretion and a sense of proportion. The consequence would be “consumerism” (i.e. defined as the near-compulsive concern with consumption) – which might be economically profitable, but would lead to distorted social perspectives. The manufacturer’s concern with mass consumption, it was argued, led to a decline in interest in quality, ensuring that “consumerism” bred so-called “mass culture” (i.e. culture that catered to the lowest common denominator in society) as a common social reference point. “Consumerism” as defined above could also lead to poor management of household budgets and impoverishment.

Such a perspective encouraged a critical approach on the character of consumption under industrial capitalism – and the attempt to avoid indiscriminate consumption under socialist industrialization. The critical vision stirred a concern with the rights of the consumer. And this in turn made questions of consumption a matter for politics – as it was anyway at another level, given that in societies where needs and wants were continuously the object of discussion and representation, public figures were concerned about the symbolism that advertisers and manufacturers toyed with and what goods they projected. Consumption came, consequently, to be associated with citizenship, since it was connected with social status and politics.

Duly, the critique of consumerism has been met with perspectives that sharply differ with it – perspectives that argue the benefits of variety in the market for the consumer and the necessity of regular consumption for economic and social stability. The popularity of the critique has consequently varied considerably.

Most recently, writing on consumption, “material culture” (the attitude of consumers, producers and society in general to the world of manufactured “things”) and “material politics” has firmly established that whatever the value of the critical appraisal of consumerism, manufacturers’ practice and consumer experience cannot be easily straitjacketed. This is all the more true in regions of the world where consumer societies of a sort have existed in the past (India, China, Africa) and which came to industrial capitalism late and in unusual circumstances.

32.2 THE CHARACTER OF COMMERCIALIZATION AND “CONSUMPTION” UNDER INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

This Unit deals with two major aspects of the problems presented by consumption and the various definitions of “consumerism” in modern Europe. Firstly, what were the major features of the context in which these problems came to be posed? Secondly, how have these problems been treated at different times?

32.2.1 Early Days

Production and consumption of a variety of goods of everyday use was well established in Europe and other consumer societies in Asia and Africa by the mid 18th century. In addition, in Europe, a variety of exotic goods – often brought from China (mainly porcelain) and India (spices, and cotton goods) - were luxury products in high demand among the aristocracy.

Various historians have indicated that during the 18th and 19th centuries, manufacturers, endowed with sophisticated industrial technology, used the great renown of luxury goods among classes outside the aristocracy, and rushed to meet local demand with large scale production of goods on the foreign pattern that were produced locally. Such devices, together with close attention to machine production of basic metal goods (buttons, cutlery etc.) appealed to middle classes and stimulated their inclination to buy.

The Units on Industrial Capitalism have indicated that the subsequent significance of these changes in consumption for the “revolution” in economic life in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries varied substantially from country to country. If “home demand” was important in the way textiles, and iron and steel played the role of “leading sectors” in the Industrial Revolution in Britain, low levels of income and social differences made “demand” less important as a motor of change in France, Germany and Russia. Here, concentrations of capital (in investment banks) and the initiatives of the state played a major role in what transpired, with the state often acting as the prime consumer (as in

the case of Tsarist and Soviet Russia). However, once initial changes had occurred in the character of the regional economy, exploitation of “demand” and “consumption” in everyday life became essential to the further development of European societies.

The process came slowly, and in fits and starts. In Britain, from the mid 18th century, as indicated by the instances of Manchester textile manufacturers, in the enterprises of Matthew Boulton (associated with metal goods) and Josiah Wedgwood (associated with the pottery manufacture) sustained and careful surveys of markets were normal and production for them by small manufactories working on strict principles of the division of labour, was the rule. Hence, one description of the Boulton business would stress regular travel by its owners to establish the contours of the market. And it would also stress various initiatives taken to establish the reputation of the firm’s products:

Scarcely a day passed but Boulton received letters of introduction of merchants and gentlemen from every quarter and as their house was only emerging from obscurity, Boulton was desirous of promoting its reputation with all in his power and therefore paid a particular attention to all their customers both foreign or domestick and to all their connections whatsoever in so much that his house at Soho for many years seemed like an inn for the entertainment of strangers.

The description would present further details of how Boulton invited powerful members of the European courts to his manufactory (the Duke and Duchess of Villaformosa, Count Orlov, Catherine the Great’s favourite, Prince Poniatowski of Poland etc.). Well aware that such notables would be emulated by the gentry and middle classes of their societies, the Boultons attempted to present their goods to various markets through this route to establish a taste for such products.

Elsewhere in Britain, in order to extend the range of such products, crafts were fitted into a putting out system that gave the trader or merchant preference – allowing them to understand patterns of demand and taking initiatives to use prevailing patterns of consumption to greatest effect.

Meanwhile, in almost all major states of modern Europe, the period upto 1870s was dominated by small-scale producers who gradually moved away from a position as craftsmen dealing in quality goods. In France and Germany, following the economic expansion of the 1850s and 1860s, craftsmen targeted a large market. As Shulamit Volkov has pointed out, carpenters restricted their range of products, in order to produce more that had a regular demand. The same came to be true of shoemakers. Technology was applied to achieve economies of scale. Only in food processing was this transformation not to be noticed until the 1890s – when refrigeration gradually came to permit the same in this quarter.

The increased output (often according to a set pattern) was presented to the buyer through a range of routes. In Britain, potential consumers were targeted by manufacturers, but they were normally approached by the itinerant trader, who provided the less well endowed buyer with credit (payment was made on an “instalment plan”). These drapers worked together in societies and associations in order to protect their interests against defaulters: the Highland Society of London (formed 1778), and English Guardian societies such as the London Society of Guardians for the Protection of trade against Swindlers and Sharpers (formed in 1776).

Among labouring classes, minimum levels of consumption were ensured by associative action among certain trades to ensure that sickness and unemployment could be tided over. This was especially so among various unions and societies - the Boilermakers, the Amalgamated Engineers and the London Compositors for instance. Among these

and others, Friendly Collecting Societies existed, as did Industrial Assurance Companies. All of them were protected by law and took subscriptions to provide assistance to their members in times of distress. The big unions (e.g. Amalgamated Engineers) provided pensions to members by the beginning of the 20th century. Such institutions and initiatives clearly improved the spending capacity of the working class, while, elsewhere at this level, the usual run of Christmas Clubs, Goose Clubs etc. encouraged saving for the great extravagance on a special occasion. Building Societies and Freehold Societies enabled the household with the small income to plan the purchase of land or a home.

The mid 19th century in France and Germany also witnessed the “democratization” of demand on the British pattern. This followed from the high agricultural prices of the time and the overall increase in employment. In Germany, the trend persisted well after 1871, sponsored by the high levels of public and municipal activity paid for by French reparations after the war of 1870. Craft enterprises became focused and streamlined to take advantage of this phenomenon.

The change in employment and settlement patterns already indicated in the Units on demographic trends and industrial capitalism made the distribution of consumer goods easier. The concentration of populations in cities and small towns (in the Midlands and North of England, the Paris Basin in France, and the Rhine country in Germany) provided more ready and regular demand for manufactured goods than dispersed communities of the countryside.

32.2.2 The Late 19th Century and After

The late nineteenth century saw the persistence of many of these institutions and habits. In Britain, for instance, itinerant traders continued to be of importance well into the 20th century. Known numbers increased from 9459 in 1831 to 69, 347 in 1911. From the 1850s, however, three major changes are noticeable in this pattern. Firstly, consumption was not strictly the preserve of firms and individuals. Local government and the state also became regular consumers. This developed an old habit – purchase for the administrative and military establishment. Municipal construction, and the development of amenities (gas distribution, parks and gardens, bridges, institutions to provide medical treatment and education) became significantly marked.

Equally, though, capacities for individual consumption received a boost. Initiatives were taken to provide opportunities to subjects/citizens for savings, and important variations were noticeable in trading practice to tempt the consumer with small income. In Britain, savings schemes included the Post Office Trustee Savings Banks, with their “Home Safes”, and a range of other Savings Banks. By the time of the inter-war period, mortgage banks (such as the Abbey Road) had also made their mark.

At another level, the urban environment became the target of a new system of trading and distribution – through the “department store”. The best example of this was Fortnum and Mason’s of London and the Bon Marche in Paris. These department stores, in some cases, began to form branches in various towns, and “chains” of stores emerged in the commercial network. The shops run by Jesse Boot that dealt in pharmaceutical products were an example in Britain. This “chain” began in the pre-1914 period and persists to the present day. Woolworth is another such chain which exists in the US and Britain. In post-1945 France, the Monoprix and Uniprix chains are the equivalent. The significance of these shops was that they displayed a large range of goods (while the standard store specialized in two or three major types of goods) – encouraging a general redefinition of needs and wants among those who passed through them. The store also paid attention to attractive presentation. This had already been achieved through advertisement and discussions in newspapers and through the small billboard. But the

large space given over to specific ranges of products in department stores increased the impact of the profile. Association of quality with the name of the store also drew in customers who were also otherwise bewildered by the variety of the market and the problem of shoddy produce.

The desire of the state to take advantage of the interest in consumer products for its own purposes also led to investments in specific goods in France under the Third Republic and Germany under National Socialism. From the 1920s, the radio and, from the 1950s, the television both added a new dimension to such activities and to the advertising of products.

32.3 REPRESENTATIONS OF “CONSUMPTION”

The availability of a vast number of goods and commodities in the market place was often celebrated. Manufacturers not only pointed to the merits of their products, but also to the remarkable system of production that went into those products – a system of production that not only made them fashionable but miracles of modern science. Boultons and Wedgewoods consistently laboured this aspect of their output.

Other views of consumption developed from perspectives associated with the idea – widespread among intellectuals at this time – that industrial capitalism broke down “communities”, and created individuals who faced the world alone, or as members of “society”. In such “society”, individuals were more open to the suggestions of the market than was the case when they were members of “communities” where they followed “traditions” and “rituals”, and where individuals were less self-conscious. Large or medium-sized towns saw the breakdown of communities and the creation of a world of individuals whom the market manipulated to think of needs and wants that they had hitherto never conceived. Advertisement by producers and traders were designed to tempt individuals into a preoccupation with buying and consumption.

Some of this may have been admitted by many who approved of the changes of the time, but they did not see it with foreboding or worry. In the early days of industrial capitalism, optimistic as ever, Adam Smith argued:

“Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far as may be necessary for that of the consumer”.

He also noted, though, as David Miller has pointed out, that ‘the human propensity to consume was the consequence of a fascination for “baubles and trinkets”, a passion for accumulating objects of “frivolous utility” and “a vehicle for deception with false promises that wealth will bring happiness”. Smith called for caution and discretion:

“Money will at best “keep off the summer shower”, “but not the winter storm”, leaving humans more exposed than before to anxiety, fear and sorrow, disease, danger and death”.

The new atmosphere of acquisition and consumption attracted disapproval and warnings elsewhere. In the 18th century itself, condemnation of exotic luxury items was often evident. Adam Anderson, in his *Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce*, in the 1760s, decried goods that were not clearly “useful and excellent for the Ease, Conveniency or Elegance of Life”. Luxury, consumption and acquisitiveness were condemned by Wesleyans, Quakers and other Non-Conformist Protestants in England, who considered such behaviour sinful. Critics associated with the Romantic Movement – including major figures such as William Ruskin – argued that the obsession with the market worked against what was “natural”. The German poet

Schiller expressed similar sentiments when he called for the recognition by man of what was ideal in him rather than be diverted by the superficial demands and standards of society. Early socialists of the 19th century expressed similar sentiments: in France (Prudhon and Fourier) and in Britain figures such as William Morris, who stressed the virtues of individual creativity and expression, and made craft industry a fashion, repudiated the virtues of machine-made goods.

More fundamentally, Karl Marx, making the distinction between “use value” and “market value”, argued that consumption merely refined the process of exploitation through which manufacturers extracted surplus from the working class. Looking closely at the world of acquisition and consumption in Europe and the United States, Thorstein Veblen, the American essayist, spoke of the appearance of a wealthy leisured class that indulged in conspicuous consumption, and also of an acquisitive society where consumption was not moulded by requirements but by somewhat witless emulation and imitation. Veblen disapprovingly argued that consumption was the product of the wish to impress and to improve social status.

Many came to argue at the end of the twentieth century that rampant consumption motivated by such inclinations rather than discretion, bred a respect for goods and occupations that smacked of a lack of serious thought and refinement. This was the hallmark of what was called “mass culture”, which was considered (by figures as different in their opinions as Adorno, one of the principal philosophers of Frankfurt School and F.R. Leavis an important English literary critic) to have had a disastrous impact on society.

On the other hand, following Smith’s more optimistic assessments of consumption and its character in the 19th century, followers of the “marginal utility” school of economic thought were worried that people would not consume enough to ensure economic and social stability. This was a notion that was echoed in the work of J.M. Keynes in the period between 1918 and 1939. Commentators such as Simmel argued that fashion was not, contrary to Veblen, merely the consequence of the desire to establish status as much as a means of establishing one’s own identity in a world in which individuals did not wish to wholly set themselves apart from others. In his somewhat difficult language, he would term it as a phenomenon that:

“represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change”.

Most recently, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has taken issue with the perspectives of Marxists and others who have stressed the distinctions between “use value” and the value created by the market – stating that “use” is seldom free of a market culture of sorts. They also have pointed to how consumers often deal independently and as groups with the products that are recommended to them – transforming them, and finding a value for them that is wholly outside the value that advertisement suggests. Baudrillard still warns though, of problems, given the way commerce has come to surround the consumer through media blitz and social manipulation. As David Miller has pointed out, he is better known today:

‘for his argument that the massive spread of consumer goods as acts of symbolism has reached such a level that where goods once stood for persons and relationships, they now come to replace them. Such is the power of commerce to produce social maps based on distinctions between goods that actual consumers are now relegated to the role of merely fitting themselves into such maps by buying the appropriate signs of their ‘lifestyles’.

32.4 MATERIAL CULTURE

Whatever the merits of these points of view, in recent comment and research, a number of writers concerned with “material culture”, “material politics” and “consumption” have pointed out that the experience of consumer society in modern times has been varied and cannot easily be straitjacketed into the framework of the opinions covered by these debates. The approach of producers and buyers to manufactured items took on different shapes over time.

True, the subjection of crafts to the putting out system placed the focus of the production system squarely on the trader who had an interest in the product primarily from the point of view of saleability. Hence what was considered exotic or unusual (as in the case of Chinese/Indian imports) decisively influenced patterns of production. Meanwhile, inventive producers – St. Gobain the glass makers, Boultons, the metal workers, and Wedgewoods of the ceramics’ industry – followed the market also, but they also tried to create a demand for specific products that they understood they could make.

The critics of the consumption that was bred under the circumstances point out that buyers were influenced by the utility of goods, but also by the status they conferred. In the 20th century, advertisement made the associations of a product still more important than before. And what transpired became a problem of some size and scale. Consumers came to be faced with a bewildering choice of goods not only when it came to everyday needs and requirements but also when they dealt with occasions such as birth, marriage and death (christening robes, bridal wear, coffins) and the way they took their leisure (sportsgear, theatre equipment etc.)

But the authority of the manufacturer/trader should not be overstressed. As the strength of itinerant trades in Britain and France indicate, persuasion that took into account personal taste still continued to be very important. Studies of 18th century France at the time of the Ancien Regime and the Revolution also indicate the impediments consumers encountered, as politics often sought to direct and regulate the presence of manufactured items.

32.5 THE RISE OF THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT AND MATERIAL POLITICS

In fact, those who were worried about the way manufacturers and the market could draw the consumer into a net that ensnared him in different ways – both making him buy goods he did not really “want” and also providing him with shoddy goods – quickly sought to set up bodies that would prevent this. In the 19th century itself, in France, shoddy goods led to recourse to law, and also to judgments that were hostile to manufacturers. In Britain, the period from the mid-19th century witnessed a rash of legislation to prevent deception of the buyer: the Sale of Food and Drugs Act (1875), the Sale of Goods Act (1893), a series of Weights and Measures Acts (1878-1936), and, dealing with purchase on the basis of part payment, the Hire and Purchase Act (1938).

Movements at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries to protect consumers have been identified with various personalities: Percy Redfern and Beatrice Webb in Britain, Charles Gide and Jean Prudhommeaux in France, Louis de Brouchere in Belgium. And Percy Redfern’s sense of things is common to most of these activists in one way or another:

“We the mass of common men and women in all countries also compose the world’s market. To sell to us is the ultimate aim of the world’s business. Hence, it is ourselves as consumers who stand in central relation to all the economics of the world, like a king

in his kingdom. As producers, we go each unto a particular factory, farm or mine, but as consumers we are set by nature then to give leadership, aim and purpose to the whole economic world. That we are not kings but serfs in the mass is due to our failure to think and act together as consumers and realize our true position and power.”

The work of these activists and their latter-day followers, coping with the aid of TV, has led to a fresh wave of consumer-protection legislation in Britain. This followed the formation of the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection in 1962, which led in 1963 to the formation of the Consumer Council. The legislation that followed intensified consumer protection in the market place: the Trades Description Act (1968), the Fair Trading Act (1973), the Restrictive Trades Practices Act (1977) and the Consumer Safety Act (1978). Similar activities and legislation has figured in France and Germany around groups that came together around the Council of Consumer Groups (Germany) and the National Consumption Institute (France).

32.6 SUMMARY

As Elizabeth Cohen has pointed out, the moves to strengthen the consumer’s status, however far it has developed, still remains, though, a matter of shopping and controls on it in Modern Europe and the United States. The grand vision that inspired Redfern – that the consumer should be given a dignity in social awareness is in all likelihood still an ideal that few are concerned with. Given the differing approaches to consumption over time, and changes in the way the production system operates, it is probably also uncertain that anything can be done for the consumer on these lines. Contributing to this is the lack of self-awareness among consumers as consumers primarily.

As the spread of industrial capitalism in the world indicates, moreover, patterns of consumption vary widely from society to society. Before the onset of industrial capitalism, consumption in India and China, for instance, had followed specific patterns associated with gift and exchange unlike the patterns followed in Europe. Even if modern times create a uniform pattern of consumption at certain level the world over, the specific pattern is often moulded by the existing paths that have been followed. Habits of emulation and imitation also vary.

In the circumstances, the fears that were often expressed of the consequences of consumerism may be valid at some levels, but they are far from applicable as a rule. Not only in Modern Europe, but also in the Modern World, the story of consumption has been too different to justify a single perspective.

32.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What are the ways in which the term consumerism is understood?
- 2) Rise of industrial capitalism led to the coming of modernization of ‘Consumerism’. Discuss briefly.
- 3) Critiques of consumerism have also led to consumer rights movement. What are its different aspects?

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