

Geo-Economic Aspects Of Population Problem In Nepal

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Introduction

Human resources are highly dynamic and play no less significant role on accelerating the wheel of economic progress and prosperity; for human beings are the only active agents for mobilising passive resources. Human resources, which, thus, prove to be major determinants of economic growth are related to two vital aspects—size of population and skill of people. That the latter aspect is of supreme significance requires no elaboration; while the first aspect of population refers to its positive change and exerts tremendous influence on the tempo of economic growth and development. That is to say, massive size of population which is the outcome of its rapid growth is at once a strong stimulant as well as an impediment to rapid economic progress.¹ On one hand, it promotes in several ways quick economic development, and on the other, it acts as a serious drag on economic progress. It is because man comes to this world not only with a mouth to consume but also with a pair of hands to produce. On the basis of this classical viewpoint, a growing population generates a large labour force needed for exploiting resources and acts at the same time as an extensive potential market for various domestic products. In fact, population growth is not only a blessing, but also a curse for a vast majority of world's countries. That the growth of population is advantageous may be true for some under-populated countries like Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Canada etc. It can be so neither to those countries, with moderate size of population nor to those with already a huge stock of population.

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1. Dutt, Singh and Verma, **Indian Economics**, (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co. (Pvt.) Ltd, 1972), p. 123.

Nature of Population Problem in Nepal

In the context of Nepal, population problem is conceived to be one of serious problems hindering rapid economic growth of the country. Multifarious as the problem is in nature, it has been acting as a slow poison to the socio economic life of the country. Among the diverse facets of population problem in Nepal, the most critical one is the rapidity of population growth.

Table 1
Growth of Population in Nepal

Year	Growth rate	Population	Density Km ²
1911		56,38,749	38.802
1920	0.1 * -	55,73,788	38.36
1930	0.1 * -	55,32,574	31.19 ²
1941	1.2 * †	62,83,649	43.24 ²
1952/54	1.4 †	84,73,478	58.31 ²
1961	1.6 †	94,12,996	64.74
1971	2.16 †	1,15,55,983	79.48
1976 (Estimated)	2.18 †	1,28,57,243	88.43

Source: HMG/NPC Fifth Five Year Plan (Kathmandu, 1975), p. 34,

* Source: HMG of Nepal, Central Bureau of Statistics, The Analysis of the Population Statistics of Nepal, (Nepal: HMG of Nepal, 1977) p. 24.

Table 1 reveals at once all about the growth of population in Nepal during different periods. It ought to be conceived therefrom that during the period of 60 years (1911-71), the total population of the country has jumped up by 105% approximately. Coming to the year 1976, the total population of Nepal has again been estimated to be 12.85 millions and the annual growth rate too is taken to be 2.18%. Still more shocking point is the latest estimation of growth rate at 2.5% which implies an annual addition of 3,21,000 people approximately.³ This obviously reflects that population growth has fairly outstripped foodgrain production of the country; for the annual growth rate of foodgrain production during the last decade from 1967 to 1977 is estimated to be 1.7% which is much lower than the rate of popula-

2. Density per sq. Km. is estimated on the basis of total population and total area.

3. Gorkhapatra, 30 June, 1978.

tion growth during the same period.⁴ If this situation would perpetuate, the balance between population and food supply is apt to be seriously perturbed. In addition to this, the effect of the present GNP of the country which so lowly ranges from 4% to 5% per annum during the present five year plan period may be badly nullified by this alarming rate of population growth.⁵ As such, the present rate of population growth for such a small developing country like Nepal ought to be comprehended as a crucial problem.

The population problem of Nepal is, as it were, not so serious as that in neighbouring countries like India, China, Bangladesh etc. Nevertheless, on the basis of dismal experiences gathered therefrom, it has become highly imperative for Nepal to adopt suitable steps towards sound solution of this national problem. In other words, it has become hightime for the country to observe the antique saying—"Prevention is better than cure, and it is easier to cure a disease on its first onset than when it has grown chronic."

Rapid growth of population in Nepal can originally be attributed to the orthodox practices prevalent in those days of early marriage and polygamy. Even though these practices have now gradually been dying out and are not, therefore, so forceful as in the past, the rate of population growth is still on the increase. The reason for this contradictory situation lies basically in the fact that death rate during recent years has been on the wane as a result of increasing medical facilities and growing health care in the country. The birth rate, on the other hand, has not yet recorded any appreciable decline in spite of family planning measures so vehemently introduced in the country at present. Instead, the problem has further been accentuated by the growth of naturalised citizens specially in the tarai districts of the country. On the whole, the appalling growth of population in Nepal during recent decades is explicitly accountable for the cumulative effects of varied phenomena.

One of the vital aspects of population growth in Nepal is its regional variation, population growth on the basis of broad topographic

4. *Ibid.*, 6 July, 1978.

5. HIMGN, NPC, *Fifth Five Year Plan*, p. 58.

features is the highest in the tarai region, moderate in the hilly region and the lowest in the mountain region. It has been pointed out that population in the eastern tarai sector alone has increased by 45% during the last decade.⁶ Such a remarkable rise in tarai population cannot be attributed altogether to the natural growth in the population of the region. It is mainly due to the migration of the people from hilly areas to the tarai belt. It is also quite likely that there has been some inflow of people from India.⁷

Besides this regional aspect of population growth, conspicuous change has been recorded even in the population of various urban centres of Nepal. The percentage of urban population of the country as a whole is computed to have gone up from 3.57% in 1961 to 4% in 1971.⁸ The growth of population in some of the leading urban centres of Nepal is as shown in the table presented below :

Table 2
Growth of population in certain urban centres, 1961-71

Urban centres	1961	1971	Growth	P. C.
Pokhara	5,413	20,611	15,198	280.76
Janakpur	8,928	14,294	5,366	60.10
Rajbiraj	5,232	7,832	2,600	49.69
Nepalgunj	15,817	23,523	7,706	48.71
Dharan	13,998	20,503	6,505	41.47
Tansen	5,136	6,434	1,298	25.27
Kathmandu	121,019	150,408	29,289	24.20

Source: Fifth Five Year Plan, p. 39.

6. HMGN, Dept. of information, *Mechi to Mahakali* part I, (Kathmandu: HMG 1974), pp. 23-24.

7. B. P. Sāreṣṭha, *An Introduction to Nepalese Economy*, (Kathmandu: V. S. Shreṣṭha, 1962), p. 21.

8. Fifth Plan, Op. cit., pp. 38-39.

An insight into the table presented above depicts explicitly the variation in the total increase of population in various urban centres during the period 1961-71. In view of the recent expansion of urban fields as well as of the elapse of seven years' period (1971-78), their population at present must have gone up furthermore. This growth of urban population may undoubtedly be more due to the migration of rural people rather than merely due to natural growth. In other words, population growth in most urban areas has taken place partly at the expense of rural population and partly by its natural growth. It should also be noted that among the towns listed in the table, Pokhara has evidently the most surprising growth by 280% during 1961-71. As such, unless certain suitable steps are timely taken up, the tendency on the part of rural people to move out towards urban areas is likely to be further augmented; and consequently, population congestion therein is apt to grow still more serious. Ultimately, rural areas, unless supplemented by natural growth at the present rate, may be doomed to serious depopulation.

Rapid growth of population, though advantageous in some ways, is virtually detrimental to accelerated growth of Nepalese economy. The main evils it has posed so far to the country are as outlined below:

- (1) It has pushed the market rate and reduced thereby the real income of the people even if their cash income has risen up. As such, people with fixed money incomes have been placed at greater difficulties
- (2) It has induced local people to encroach forest areas. The latest report in this connection is that an area of 56,000 hectares of forest land has been deforested in tarai and inner tarai parts.⁹
- (3) It has generated unemployment among educated people, specially in urban areas like Kathmandu valley.
- (4) Several densely peopled areas have now become the areas of food shortage.

9. Gorkhapatra, June 21st, 1978.

- (5) It has caused serious traffic and parking problem in city areas and has necessitated widening of roads and bridges.
- (6) It has necessitated the expansion of social services like health, education, communication, electricity, drinking water etc. Thus, it has compelled the government to incur added expenditure and bear higher responsibilities.
- (7) It has brought about undesirable changes in the existing land use pattern in various parts of the country.

All these problems aroused by the rapid growth of population in Nepal have seriously affected the process of economic development of the country as a whole.

Another problem cropping out from the rapid growth of population in Nepal is the extreme inequality in the regional distribution of population. In reality, the regional distribution of population is, so to say, never balanced in any country of the world. In Nepal, even this uneven distribution of population can be admitted as a problem; because certain areas have now become so crowded and congested that it has given rise to complex problems. Certain areas, on the other hand, are so sparsely settled that they suffer from acute shortage of labour force needed for mobilising local resources. This is how changes in geographic distribution of population create varied problems.

So far as the regional distribution of population in Nepal is concerned, 57% of the total population is confined to hills and mountains, 38% in tarai and 5% in Kathmandu valley. It should also be noted that there are in all 28780 villages in Nepal and 96 % of the total population is confined to them.¹⁰ As regards population density in various regions, it is as indicated under the table given below:

¹⁰ S. H. Shrestha, (*Economic Geography of Nepal*, Kathmandu: Educational Enterprise, (PVT) Ltd., 1976), p. 159.

Table No. 3
Regional Density of Population, 1971
(Density per sq. Km.)

Various Regions	Eastern Sector	Central Sector	Western Sector	Far Western Sector	Regional ¹¹ Average
Tarai	197.33	189.62	149.59	55.99	148.13
Hills	101.57	133.61	93.41	57.83	96.65
Mountains	30.47	61.03	39.40	20.68	37.89
Sectoral Average	109.79	128.09	94.13	44.83	

National average: 79.48

Source:- **Fifth Five Year Plan**, pp. 37-38.

From the analytical study of the above table, it is quite apparent that the population density on the basis of topographic features is the highest in the tarai region and from there it diminishes in general towards the Himalayan region. The only exception to this general tendency is the Far Western Hilly Region where the density is rather higher than that in the corresponding tarai region.

If population is correlated to cultivated land which is the prime source of livelihood for the overwhelming majority of people in Nepal, the general trend of population density is altogether reversed. Though density in hills and mountains in relation to their area is lower than that in the tarai region, the population density per sq. km. of cultivated area in the former is evidently higher by more than three times than that in the latter. In this connection, the table given below may help realise the real situation of the problem:

Table No. 4
Population Density in Cultivated Land, 1971

Himalayan Region	1174 per sq. Km.
Hilly Region	1002 " " "
Tarai Region	336 " " "

Source: Nepal: Fifth plan in Brief, NPC., 1975, p. 37.

11. Calculated personally on the basis of regional and sectoral population.

In an agricultural country like Nepal, population density must be grasped at least in terms of agricultural opportunities available in varied geographic and development regions of the country. Since density in cultivated land in hills is remarkably higher than that in the tarai region, about 16 hilly districts are reported to have been suffering from the problem of food shortage. As a result of this precarious circumstance in hills, local people are greatly inspired to migrate towards tarai areas where the potential means of livelihood are relatively far greater.

The third vital aspect of Nepal's population problem is the internal migration of people from hills to tarai and from rural areas to urban centres. Such migration in the past was limited to east-west hilly areas; for most of the tarai and inner tarai below 1200 metres being covered with dense forest were highly malarial. After malaria was eradicated for the first time in the Chitwan valley by 1956, movement of hilly people towards tarai districts took place persistently in an increasing number.¹² This seems to have been motivated partly by economic difficulties in hilly areas and partly by malaria eradication in the areas noted previously. It has been reported that the hilly areas in the Kosi sector alone had a total decrease of 76,000 people due to migration during 1966-69.¹³ The main problem it created is their haphazard settlement in the tarai region which in turn led to serious depletion of forest resources thereof. The magnitude of migration seems, however, to have varied much from region to region depending on varied phenomena. Among the obvious evidences of population migration, mention may be made of depopulated Himalayan valleys with several deserted houses, ruined market centres, terraced slopes etc.¹⁴ Besides, there is also temporary migration from hills to tarai parts of different development regions. It is alleged that 30% people from Jumla and 25% people from Dailekh move out southward on seasonal basis in

12. V. B. S. Kansakar "History of population Migration in Nepal"

The Himalayan Review, Vol. VI, (1973-74,) pp. 65-67.

13. F. E. Okada, **Preliminary Report on Regional Development Areas**

In Nepal, (Kathmandu: NPC/HMGN, 1970,) p. 20.

14. T. Hagen, **Nepal: The Kingdom in the Himalayas**, (New Delhi: Prentice Half of India, Pvt. Ltd. 1961), p. 63.

search of jobs.¹⁵ Likewise, under the impulse of modern amenities, ceaseless migration of rural inhabitants to urban areas has still been taking place. In the main, Kathmandu valley being the hub of administration, education, health, commerce and culture, there has been persistent migration from surrounding hilly areas to the valley bottom. On the other hand, migration from this valley had become so widespread in the past that all the Newars living now outside the Kathmandu Valley are from the very Kathmandu Valley.

Population migration of this type is not a unique feature of Nepal alone. Such phenomena are said to have occurred in several countries of the world. Economic history stated that even in the U. S. A., internal migration termed as Westward Movement had taken place during the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁶ But it was the movement from densely peopled areas in the east to sparsely peopled areas in the west. Whereas in the case of Nepal, migration has taken place from sparsely populated areas in the north to densely populated areas in the south. This then clearly reveals that internal migration in Nepal has further aggravated the present problem of uneven distribution of population in the country.

The last aspect of population problem in Nepal is that emerging from the age structure of population. Here, the proportion of children under 14 years is very high, while that of old people above 60 years is very low. In this connexion, the estimated age structure of population in Nepal is as shown below:

Table No. 5
Age structure of Population, 1971

<u>Age groups</u>	<u>1971</u>
Persons Below 14 years	40.9%
Persons from 15 to 59 years	53.7%
Persons Above 60 years	5.4%

Source: Fifth Five Year plan, p. 36.

In developed countries of the west, the proportion of children is much lower than that of adults and seniles; while in Nepal it is just the

15. Okada, Op. cit, p. 79.

16. S. H. Shrestha, **Economic Development of U. K. and U. S. A.**, (Kathmandu: Nepal Book Sellers, 1961), pp. 7-8.

reverse. It ought to be admitted that high proportion of children is the clear indicator of high birth rate: while the low proportion of seniles is that of low longevity of life. Even though adults constitute a big bulk of population in Nepal, it is relatively lower than that in developed countries. It connotes also high death rate of children in the country. If high death rate in the country demands added medical facilities, high birth rate on the other hand needs rigorous growth control.¹⁷ At the same time, high proportion of children denotes not only high birth rate, but also low proportion of economically active man power so indispensable for accelerated growth of Nepalese economy. It is obviously because children under 14 years prove to be more as consumers rather than producers. Thus, the peculiarity noted in the age structure of population in Nepal ought to be considered as a national problem in disguise.

Some Suggestions

- (1) It is, perhaps, needless to mention that the sharpest weapon for retarding the rate of population growth in Nepal is to launch the so-called family planning measures as effectively and rigorously as possible. Besides extending its publicity and propanganda, strenuous steps ought to be adopted for popularising family planning devices among larger masses of adult women. A recent report on this aspect is such that so far just a negligible 3% of adult women have responded to family planning practices.¹⁸ In view of this situation, people must be encouraged to render late marriage, generally after 25 years of age. And along this, legal restriction should, on one side, be imposed on family size, and legal recognition may, on the other side, be conferred on abortion.
- (2) Foreigners should not be allowed to stay longer in Nepal so that they may not have the opportunity to claim naturalised citizenship of the country. Along with this, the maximum period they can stay here must be well defined. Eventually, the liberal attitude on the part of Nepal government towards immigration should also be geared accordingly. In addition to this, citizenship certificates ought

17. Mechi to Mahakali (Part I), op. cit., p. 24.

18. Gorkhapatra, 30th June, 1978.

- to be issued only after strict scrutiny and under authentic evidences.
- (3) Inter-regional migration from densely populated areas to sparsely populated areas may be encouraged through suitable devices. On the other hand, migration in its reverse direction should be discouraged in order to curb recent tendencies towards extreme concentration of population in certain limited areas only. As such, even the recent rehabilitation programmes must be implemented more rationally and reasonably in pursuit of this objective.
 - (4) Intensive development projects have to be executed in various hilly areas so that the attitude on the part of local inhabitants to migrate to tarai and urban areas may be mitigated. At the same time, this may also help reduce disparity in the regional development of Nepal.
 - (5) The pace of economic development has also to be expedited by mobilising the varied natural resources existing in diverse sectors of Nepal, if by doing so, speedy development is made of national economy, the living standard of the people could be uplifted appreciably. Since economic standard of the people and population growth in the country are intimately correlated in reverse direction, the rapidity of population growth would, I think, come down automatically to a substantial degree.

Conclusion

That the changes in size and geographic distribution of population in Nepal are raising serious problems have now become quite evident. To the geographers as well as economists concerned with balanced economic development, it appears that population and resources must be considered simultaneously. A sound economic goal would be a population balanced at a level which could be adequately supported on the basis of resources available locally. Since the attainment of a satisfactory balance between the two has now become a new challenge to the best talents of the country at present, population problem in Nepal must be viewed in terms of total change and broader perspective. Moreover, as population problem in Nepal has been posed by several phenomena, it has, for best results, to be attacked from all fronts. It is precisely against this background that the present population policy of HMG/Nepal should be formulated.¹⁹

19. HMG/N, NPC, *Fifth Plan in Brief*, (Kathmandu: HMG, 1975), p. 38.