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POLITICAL RIGHTS VERSUS ECONOMIC NEEDS?¹

At the southern edge of Bangladesh and of West Bengal in India, bordering on the Bay of Bengal, there is the sundarban - which literally means "beautiful forest". That is the natural habitat of the so-called Royal Bengal Tiger. Rather few of them are left, but they are now protected by a hunting ban. The sundarban is also famous for the honey it produces in large clusters of natural beehives. The people bordering that region, desperately poor as they are, go into the forests to collect the honey, but they also have to escape the tigers. In a good year, only about fifty or so honey gatherers are killed by tigers, but that number can be very much higher when things don't go so well. While the tigers are protected, nothing protects the miserable human beings who try to make a living by working in those woods, which are deep and lovely - and quite perilous.

This is just one illustration of the force of economic needs in many third world countries. It is not hard to feel that this force can outweigh other claims, including those of liberty and of basic political rights. If poverty drives human beings to take such terrible risks - and perhaps to die terrible deaths - for a dollar or two of honey, it might well be odd to concentrate on their liberty and political rights. Habeas corpus might not seem like a communicable concept in that context. Priority must surely be given, so the argument runs, to fulfilling economic needs, even if it involves compromising political liberties. Focusing on political rights is a luxury that a poor country "cannot afford".

These views are presented with much frequency in international discussions: why bother about the finesse of political rights given the overpowering grossness of intense economic needs? That question, and related ones reflecting agnosticism about the urgency of political freedoms, loomed large at the Vienna conference on human rights earlier this year, and delegates from several countries argued against general endorsement of basic political rights across the globe, in particular in the third world. The focus would, rather, have to be; it was argued, on "economic rights" related to important material needs.

Is this a sensible way of approaching the problems of economic needs and political rights - in terms of a basic dichotomy that appears to undermine the relevance of political rights because of the urgency of economic needs? I would argue here that this is altogether the wrong way to see the force of economic needs, or to understand the salience of political rights. The real issues that have to be addressed lie elsewhere, and involve taking note of extensive interconnections between political rights and the understanding and fulfilment of economic needs. The connections, I would argue, are not only instrumental (political rights can have a major role in providing incentives and information in the solution of acute economic needs), but also constitutive. Our conceptualization of economic needs depends crucially on open public debates and discussions, the guaranteeing of which requires insistence on basic political rights.

The place of political rights has been under active debate, in one form or another, in many international platforms, including various organs of the United Nations, even spilling on to the recent meetings of the International Olympic Committee. It has also become a particularly urgent question facing sub-Saharan Africa today, as democracy begins to regain some of the ground it lost fairly comprehensively since the 1960s. There are few

general issues more central to the contemporary world - especially the third world - than this.

Forms of priority

The attack on political rights in favour of economic claims has to be seen as a contrast with the broad current of modern political philosophy which tends to assert, in one form or another, what John Rawls has called "the priority of liberty". That priority takes a particularly sharp form in modern libertarian theory, which in some formulations (for example, in the elegantly uncompromising construction presented in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and the Utopia*, Basic Books, 1974) would put extensive classes of rights - varying from personal liberties to property rights - as having nearly complete political precedence over the pursuit of social goals, including the removal of deprivation and destitution. In less demanding formulations of such a "priority" presented in liberal theories (most notably, in the writings of John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard, 1971, and *Political Liberalism*, Columbia, 1993), the rights that receive precedence are much less extensive, and essentially consist of various personal liberties (including some basic political and civil rights of the person). But the precedence that these - more limited - rights receive is complete, and while these rights are much more confined in coverage than those in libertarian theory, they too cannot be in any way compromised by the force of economic needs.

The case for such a complete priority can indeed be disputed by demonstrating the force of other considerations including that of economic needs. To illustrate in terms of the earlier example, why must the society get all excited about making the desperately poor honey-gatherer in the Sundarban free from interference by his neighbours or by the state, while leaving him economically forced to take the risk of being eaten by a tiger? This issue was, in fact, raised in a general form by Herbert Hart a long time ago (in a famous article in the *University of Chicago Law Review* in 1973), and in his later book (*Political Liberalism*, 1993), John Rawls has acknowledged the force of this argument, and suggested ways of accommodating it.

If the priority of liberty is to be made plausible even in the context of countries that are intensely poor, the nature of that claim would need, I would argue, considerable modification. It is, in fact, possible to distinguish between (1) Rawls's strict proposal that liberty should receive overwhelming precedence in the case of a conflict, and (2) his general procedure of separating out personal liberty from other types of advantages for a special treatment. The more general second claim can be seen as one of relative weights to be put on liberties compared with individual advantages of other kinds. The critical issue, I would argue, is not complete precedence, but whether a person's liberty should get just the same kind of importance (no more) that other types of personal advantages - incomes, utilities, etc. - have. In particular, the question is whether the significance of liberty for the society is adequately reflected by the weight that the person herself would tend to give to it in judging her over-all advantage. The claim of pre-eminence of liberty and basic political rights (including what are sometimes called "civil rights") disputes that it is adequate to do just that.

In order to prevent a misunderstanding, I should explain that the contrast is not with the value that citizens attach - and have reason to attach - to liberty and rights in their political judgements. Quite the contrary; the safeguarding of liberty has to rest ultimately on the general political acceptance of its importance. The contrast, rather, is with the

extent to which having more liberty or rights, increases an individual's own personal advantage. The claim here is that the political significance of rights can far exceed the extent to which the personal advantage of the holders of these rights is enhanced by having these rights. There is, thus, an asymmetry with other sources of individual advantage, for example incomes, which would be valued largely on the basis of how much they contribute to the respective personal advantages. The safeguarding of liberty and basic political rights would have the procedural priority that follows from this asymmetric prominence.

Victims and violators

The point can be illustrated by considering the violation of basic liberties of some people by organized groups of political or religious extremists. To take another illustration from India, the outrage that was felt across the country at the killing of helpless Muslims by a small but organized group of Hindu extremists in Bombay last December and January did not simply reflect the tragedy of human deaths. While the number of people who perished in Bombay in this way was large (perhaps a thousand), in the scale of deaths, this magnitude is thoroughly outweighed - many times over - by the number of people who die from preventable illnesses every day in that large and needy country. What was outrageous was not simply the unnecessary deaths, but the violation of liberty to live, involving targeted attacks on one specific community in particular.

The people who died from these riots might or might not have themselves had a view as to whether, if they were to die, they would prefer to die of a painful illness, or through an accident, or in the hands of a communal rioter. That is not at all the issue here. The violation of their basic liberty to live, resulting from the homicidal actions of extremists, involves something much more terrible than that. The nature of the outrage across India confirms the fact that this distinction is widely understood and seen to be important. The general issue here is not one of complex deontology which only a person steeped in high Kantianism can be expected to grasp. There are grounds for rejecting a parity view of outcomes: matching death for death, happiness for happiness, fulfilment for fulfilment, irrespective of how all this comes about.

Alleged advantages of the hard state

Those who are sceptical of the relevance of political rights in poor countries would not necessarily deny the basic importance of these rights. Some of them would not even deny my contention that the nastiness of the violation of liberty can go well beyond other forms of disadvantages. Rather, their arguments typically turn on emphasizing the impact of political rights on the fulfilment of economic needs, and this impact they take to be firmly negative and overwhelmingly important. I must, therefore, examine the instrumental connections - positive and negative - between political rights and the satisfaction of economic needs (though I shall have to come back again, after examining the instrumental linkages, to the constitutive importance of political rights).

There is a much-repeated belief that political rights correlate negatively with economic growth. Indeed, something of a "general theory" of this has been articulated by that unlikely theorist, ex-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. The praise of the supposed advantages of "the hard state" in promoting economic development goes back a long time in the development literature, and even the sagacious Gunnar Myrdal's extensive scepticism of what he called "the soft state" (in his *Asian Drama*, Pantheon, 1968) includes an element that fits well into this chorus for political toughness in the cause of good economics.

Certainly, some relatively authoritarian states (such as South Korea, Lee's own Singapore, and recently China) have had faster rates of economic growth than some less authoritarian ones (such as India, Costa Rica, or Jamaica). But the overall picture is much more complex than these isolated observations might initially suggest, and systematic statistical studies give little support to the view of a general conflict between political rights and economic performance. Some scholars (such as Partha Dasgupta, A. Pourgerami, and Surjit Bhalla) have, in fact, found a positive impact of political and civil rights on economic progress, while others (such as Sirowy and Inkeles) find divergent patterns, while still others argue, on the basis of the collection of results so far obtained, that "an optimistic interpretation of the overall results would thus be that democracy, which apparently has a value independent of its economic effects, is estimated to be available at little cost in terms of subsequent lower growth" (as John Helliwell has put it). There is not much comfort in all this for the so-called "Lee Kuan Yew hypothesis" of a basic conflict between political rights and economic performance.

The general thesis "in praise of the tough state" suffers not only from casual empiricism based on a few selected examples, but also from being conceptually indiscriminating. Political (including civil) rights are of various types, and authoritarian intrusions can take very many different forms. It would be a mistake, for example, to equate North Korea with South Korea in terms of infringement of political rights, even though both have violated many such rights. The total suppression of opposition parties in the north can hardly be taken to be no more repressive than the roughness with which opposition parties have been frequently treated in the south (like the beating of student opponents in Seoul which we have ourselves seen - on our own television sets - a vision that is not typically offered when the suppression is tougher). Some authoritarian regimes (both of the "left" and of the "right"), such as Zaire or Sudan or Ethiopia or Khmer Rouge's Cambodia, have been enormously more hostile to political rights than many other regimes that are also identified, rightly, as recognizably authoritarian.

Correlation and causation

If broader coverage and greater discrimination are badly needed to modify the common generalizations in favour of the hard state, the necessity to examine the causal basis of these generalizations is also important. The processes that led to the economic success of, say, South Korea are by now reasonably well understood; in this a variety of factors played their part, involving the use of international markets, openness to competition, a high level of literacy, successful land reforms, and the provision of selective incentives to encourage growth and exports. There is nothing to indicate that these social policies were inconsistent with greater democracy and had to be sustained by the elements of authoritarianism actually present in South Korea. The danger of taking post hoc to be propter hoc is as real here as in any empirical reasoning.

This is not to suggest that the opposite must necessarily be true, to wit, that the presence of political rights must make the economic policies more effective and successful. The central argument for political and civil rights does not rest on that supposed connection, but on the basic importance of these rights. What is crucial to note on the instrumental side is that this basic importance is not overwhelmed by some terribly negative effects of political rights on economic performance and on the fulfilment of needs.

Political rights and famine prevention

It is, however, possible to make an even stronger claim than this in favour of political rights in the context of some deprivations of a drastic and elementary kind. Whether and how a government responds to intense needs and sufferings may well depend on how much pressure is put on it, and the exercise of political rights (such as voting, criticizing, protesting, and so on) can make a real difference. I have tried to argue elsewhere (in *Resources, Values and Development*, Harvard University Press, 1984, and with Jean Dreze, in *Hunger and Public Action*, Oxford University Press, 1989) that the avoidance of such economic disasters as famines is made much easier by the existence and use of various liberties and political rights, including the liberty of free expression.

One of the remarkable facts in the terrible history of famines in the world is that no substantial famine has ever occurred in any country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press. They have occurred in ancient kingdoms and contemporary authoritarian societies, in primitive tribal communities and in modern technocratic dictatorships, in colonial economies run by imperialists from the North and in newly independent countries of the South run by despotic national leaders or by intolerant single parties. But they have never materialized in any country that is independent, that goes to elections regularly, that has opposition parties to voice criticisms, and that permits newspapers to report freely and question the wisdom of government policies without extensive censorship.

Is this observed historical association a causal one, or simply an accidental occurrence? The possibility that the connection between democratic political rights and the absence of famines is a "bogus correlation" may seem plausible enough when one considers the fact that the democratic countries are typically also rather rich and thus, perhaps, immune from famines for other reasons. But the absence of famines holds even for those democratic countries that happen to be poor, such as India, Botswana, or Zimbabwe. Also, we have intertemporal evidence when a country undergoes transition to democracy. For example, India continued to have famines right up to the time of independence in 1947; the last famine - one of the largest - was the Bengal famine of 1943, in which it is estimated that between 2 and 3 million died. Since independence and the installation of a multi-party democratic system, there has been no substantial famine, even though severe crop failures and food scarcities have occurred often enough (for example, in 1968, 1973, 1979, 1987).

Incentives and Information

Why might we expect a general connection between democracy and the non-occurrence of famines? The answer is not hard to seek. Famines kill millions of people in different countries in the world, but they don't kill the rulers. The kings and the presidents, the bureaucrats and the bosses, the military leaders and the commanders never are famine victims. And if there are no elections, no opposition parties, no scope for uncensored public criticism, then those in authority don't have to suffer the political consequences of their failure to prevent famines. Democracy, on the other hand, would spread the penalty of famines to the ruling groups and political leaders as well. The second issue concerns information. A free press and the practice of democracy contribute greatly to bringing out information that can have an enormous impact on policies for famine prevention (e.g., information about the early effects of droughts and floods and about the nature and impact of unemployment). The most elementary source of basic information about a threatening famine is the news media, especially when there are incentives - provided by a democratic system - for bringing out facts that may be embarrassing to the government

(facts that an authoritarian government would tend to censor out). Indeed, I would argue that a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best “early warning system” a country threatened by famine can have.

The Chinese famines of 1958-61

The connection between political rights and economic needs can be illustrated in the specific context of famine prevention by considering the experience of the massive Chinese famines of 1958-61. Even before the recent economic reforms, China had been, in general, much more successful than India in economic development, in many significant respects. For example, the average life expectancy went up in China much more than in India, and well before the reforms of 1979 had already reached something like the high figure that is quoted now (nearly 70 years at birth). Nevertheless, there has been a major failure in China in its inability to prevent famines. The Chinese famines of 1958-61 killed, it is now estimated, close to 30 million of people – ten times larger than even the gigantic 1943 famine in British India.

The so-called “great leap forward”, initiated in the late 1950s had been a massive failure, but the Chinese government refused to admit that, and continued to pursue dogmatically much the same disastrous policies for three more years. It is hard to imagine that anything like this could have happened in a country that goes to the polls regularly and which has an independent press. During that terrible calamity the government faced no pressure from newspapers, which were controlled, or from opposition parties, which were absent.

The lack of a free system of news distribution also misled the government itself, fed by its own propaganda and by rosy reports of local party officials competing for credit in Beijing. Indeed, there is evidence that just as the famine was moving towards its peak, the Chinese authorities mistakenly believed that they had 100 million more metric tons of grain than they actually did.

Interestingly enough, even Chairman Mao, whose radical hopes and beliefs had much to do with the initiation of, and official persistence with, the “great leap forward”; himself identified the informational role of democracy, once the failure was belatedly acknowledged. In 1962, just after the famine had killed so many millions, Mao made the following observation, to a gathering of 7,000 cadres (quoted in *Mao Tse-tung [Zedong], Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed, Talks and Letters: 1956-71*, ed. Schramm, Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 277-8):

Without democracy, you have no understanding of what is happening down below; the situation will be unclear; you will be unable to collect sufficient opinions from all sides; there can be no communication between top and bottom; top-level organs of leadership will depend on one-sided and incorrect material to decide issues, thus you will find it difficult to avoid being subjectivist; it will be impossible to achieve unity of understanding and unity of action, and impossible to achieve true centralism.

Mao’s defence of democracy here is quite limited. The focus is exclusively on the informational side - ignoring the incentive role of democracy. But nevertheless it is extremely important that Mao himself acknowledged the extent to which disastrous official policies were caused by the lack of the informational links that a more democratic system could have provided in averting disasters of the kind that China experienced.

These issues remain relevant in China today. Since the economic reforms of 1979, official Chinese policies have been based on plentiful admission - and powerful use - of the importance of economic incentives, without making a similar acknowledgement of the role of political incentives. When things go reasonably well, this permissive role of democracy might not be greatly missed, but as and when big policy mistakes are made, that lacuna can be quite disastrous. The significance of the democracy movements in contemporary China has to be judged in this light.

Persistence of famines in sub-Saharan Africa

Another set of examples comes from Sub-Saharan Africa, which has been plagued by persistent famines since the early 1970s. There are many factors underlying the famine proneness of this region, varying from ecological issues of climatic deterioration - making crops more uncertain - to the firmly negative effects of persistent wars and skirmishes. But the typically authoritarian nature of many of the sub-Saharan African polities also has something to do with the frequency of famines.

The nationalist movements were all firmly anti-colonial, but not always steadfastly pro-democratic, and it is only recently that the assertion of the value of democracy has achieved some political respectability in many of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. And in this political milieu, the cold war in the world did not help at all. The United State and the West were ready to support undemocratic governments if they were sufficiently anti-communist, and the Soviet Union and China would support governments inclined to be on their respective sides no matter how anti-egalitarian they might be in their domestic policies. When opposition parties were banned and newspapers suppressed, there were very few international protests.

One must not deny that there were African governments even in some one-party states that were deeply motivated towards averting disasters and famines. There are examples of this varying from the tiny country of Cape Verde to the politically experimental Tanzania. But quite often the absence of opposition and the suppression of free newspapers gave the respective governments an immunity from criticism and political pressure that translated into thoroughly insensitive and callous policies. Famines were often taken for granted, and it was common to put the blame of the disasters on natural causes and on the perfidy of other countries.

In various ways, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Chad, several of the Sahel countries, and others provide glaring examples of how badly things can go wrong without the discipline of opposition parties and the news media. While the problem of Somalia, right at this moment, takes the form of lack of a political and economic order and of an effective national government, the way towards this crisis was paved by decades of intolerant authoritarianism and the undermining of orderly political processes.

This is not to deny that famines in these countries were often associated with crop failures. When a crop fails, it not only affects the food supply, it also destroys employment and the means of livelihood. But the occurrence of crop failure is not independent of public policy (such as governmental fixing of relative prices, the policy regarding irrigation and agricultural research, and so on). Further, even with crop failures, a famine can be averted by careful redistribution policy (including that of employment creation).

For example, Botswana had a fall in food production of 17 per cent and Zimbabwe one of 38 per cent between 1979-81 and 1983-84, in the same period in which the food production decline amounted to a relatively modest 11 or 12 per cent in Sudan and

Ethiopia. But while Sudan and Ethiopia, with comparatively smaller declines in food output, had major famines, Botswana and Zimbabwe had none, and this was largely due to timely and extensive famine prevention policy by these latter countries. Had the governments in Botswana and Zimbabwe failed to do this, they would have been under severe criticism and pressure from the opposition and would have got plenty of flak from newspapers. The Ethiopian and Sudanese governments did not have to reckon with those prospects.

Reach, limitations and the practice of democracy

In presenting these arguments, there is a danger of over-selling the effectiveness of democracy. Political rights and liberties are permissive advantages, and their effectiveness would depend on how they are exercised. Democracy has been particularly successful in preventing disasters which are easy to understand and where sympathy can take a particularly immediate form. Many other problems are not quite so accessible. For example, India's success in eradicating famines is not matched by that in eliminating non-extreme hunger, or curing persistent illiteracy, or inequalities in gender relations. While the plight of famine victims is easy to politicize, these other deprivations call for deeper analysis and more effective use of communication and political participation - in short a fuller practice of democracy.

A similar remark can be made about various failings in more mature democracies as well. For example, the extraordinary deprivations in health care, education, social environment, of African Americans in the United States make their mortality rates exceptionally high. As I have tried to show elsewhere (in *Scientific American*, May 1993), American blacks have lower survival chances not only compared with US whites, but also with those of citizens of China, Sri Lanka, or the Indian state of Kerala, better provided as they are with these public goods (despite being immensely poorer in terms of income per head). Some American blacks are even more deprived than others; for example the male residents of the Harlem region of the prosperous city of New York not only have lower survival chances than the corresponding groups in Kerala or Sri Lanka or China, but fall behind even Bangladeshi men by their late thirties.

But, again, the remedy of these failures in the practice of democracy turns, to a great extent, on fuller use of political rights, including more public discussion, with more accessible information and more concrete proposals. The difficulties in deciding on effective means of eradication of these hardened deprivations do, of course, remain, and they certainly have become quite perspicuous in the sphere of health care coverage in recent months. But the fact that the lack of medical care for many has become politically so prominent in the United States certainly makes it much more imperative to look seriously for a convincing solution, even though there is clearly a long way to go before an effective remedy is adequately realized. Similar pointers towards hope and scepticism can be made in the poorer countries as well.

Political incentives and minorities

There is, however, a particularly difficult problem in making democracy take adequate notice of the needs of minorities. One factor of some importance is the extent to which a minority group can build on sympathy rather than alienation. When a minority forms a very distinct group with which the majority of the population has difficulty sympathizing, the protective role of democracy can be particularly constrained. Examples of this phenomenon include the ineffectiveness of electoral politics in ensuring sensitivity to the rights and welfare of separatist groups, particularly those groups that are tainted with some use of terrorist methods, and with receiving some assistance from beyond the

border. Illustrations are not hard to find in India itself, particularly in the case of Kashmir, with increasing evidence of violation of basic civil rights and personal liberty by the Indian police and the military. The frustration of the Kashmiris does not seem to influence the political behaviour of the majority of Indians, and even India's large Muslim population (numbering well over 100 million) do not appear to have much interest in working for the rights of the relatively small population of Kashmir, including Kashmiri Muslims (less than one-twentieth in proportion to Muslims in the rest of India). There is also a basic tension between the separatism of Kashmiri Muslim activists and the integrationist beliefs of the immensely larger Muslim population in the rest of the country.

Even in such cases, more guarantee for civil rights of separatists - as part of the general priority of political rights will, it can be argued, help to reduce the alienation on both sides, by making political discussions more informed and the political process more responsive. But it must be accepted that there is a real difficulty in using the standard means of democracy to ensure political pressure in favour of minority rights, and that certainly is one of the challenges of democratic politics.

In the rather strait jacketed models of so-called "rational choice theory" (now increasingly popular among political model builders), which tends to characterize human beings as narrowly self-interested, it is hard to incorporate the satisfaction of minority needs through majority votes. To some extent such scepticism is justified. Indeed, even the plight of the African Americans has something to do with the fact that blacks constitute a relatively small minority of the American population.

On the other hand, politics does not always operate in that way. Much depends on what issues are politicized and brought into focus, and made into a "concern" of those who are not directly involved. For example, potential famine victims form a small minority in any country (a famine rarely affects more than 5 or at most 10 per cent of the population), and the effectiveness of democracy in famine prevention has tended to depend on the politicization of the plight of famine victims, through the process of public discussion, generating political solidarity. Outrage at famine deaths move vast numbers of people who are in no way themselves threatened by starvation. In the United States the terrible plight of the medically uninsured - a deprived minority - seems to have become, at last, more politicized than it had been before (though the underlying economic need had existed for a great many decades), and there is some real hope that the political process will lead to some remedial arrangements - much overdue as it is. The reach of political rights is deeply influenced by the way they are, in fact, used.

Foundations and concepts of needs

I move now from these instrumental linkages back to the constitutive importance of liberty and political rights. I have already argued that the importance of such rights goes beyond the personal advantages that the holders of these rights get from them, and in this sense there is an asymmetry with other types of advantages, including economic ones. I would now like to add that the comprehension and conceptualization of economic needs may themselves require the exercise of political and civil rights. A proper understanding of what economic needs are - their content and their force - requires, it can be claimed, discussion and exchange.

Human lives suffer from miseries and deprivations of various kinds some more amenable to alleviation than others. The totality of the human predicament would be an indiscriminating basis for the social analysis of needs. For example, there are many things that we might have good reason to value if they were feasible perhaps even

immortality! But we don't see them as needs. Our conception of needs relates to our analysis of the nature of deprivations, and also to our understanding of what can be done about them. Political rights, including freedom of expression and discussion, are not only pivotal in inducing political response to economic needs, they are also central to the conceptualization of economic needs themselves.

Birth control and population policy

Sometimes it is hard to determine what is or is not an economic need. Take the controversial subject of population policy. Much depends on how we count the pressure on the world's resources, on which scientific opinion varies. No less importantly, the conceptualization of the problem would also depend on what view we take on the willingness of people to reduce the birth rate on a voluntary basis, as the opportunity of family planning is extended and the reduction in death rate makes it less important to have many children to ensure some survivors when the parents are old.

The international politics of population policy is full of pressure groups on different sides, varying from general hostility to birth control (and more specifically to abortion) to advocacy of forceful control irrespective of what the people themselves would voluntarily do. These issues are bound to receive considerable attention and scrutiny in the coming decade. Among the developing countries themselves, China has distinguished itself in going for compulsion in cutting down the growth rate of population, through such measures as "one child policy" in some regions and through making social security and economic rights (such as housing) conditional on following the government's rules about the number of births. There are many admirers of such a policy. The birth rate in China has certainly come down, and the last systematic estimate put it around 21 per thousand considerably lower than India's 30 per thousand and the average figure of 38 per thousand of poor countries other than India and China.

On the other hand, within India, there are wide variations in birth rate, and these variations relate both to mortality rates and to education, especially female education. Take the state of Kerala. While I should not treat it as a country (since it is only a state within a country), nevertheless with its 29 million population, Kerala is rather larger than Canada, and need not be dismissed as too small to be worth studying. Kerala has the highest life expectancy in India (more than 70 years - a little higher than China's) and the highest rate of literacy in general and female literacy in particular (higher than that in China as a whole and also higher than every province in China). The birth rate of Kerala has fallen sharply over the last few decades, from 44 per thousand in the 1950s to 20 per thousand in the late 1980s.

That Keralan figure of 20 per thousand is no higher than the Chinese birth rate of 21 per thousand in the corresponding period, and this has been achieved not by compulsory birth control or the violation of any individual liberty to decide on these matters, but by the voluntary exercise of the family's right to family planning. Later - still provisional - statistics suggest that China's further fall in birth rate in very recent years (now to 19 per thousand) has continued to be matched by Kerala's declining birth rate (estimated to be 18 per thousand in 1991).

Underlying the change in Kerala is the operation of economic and social incentives towards smaller families as the death rate has fallen and family planning opportunities have been combined with health care, and the desire of Keralan women to be less shackled by continuous child rearing. But what has also played a part is a general perception that the lowering of the birth rate is a real need of a modern family - a

conceptualization in which public education and enlightened discussion have been deeply influential.

The temptation to have compulsory birth control arises when the government's perception of needs differs from that of the families themselves. That hiatus can lead to deeply disturbing results. While China has ended up with a similar birth rate as Kerala, one result of the compulsion has been a much higher level of mortality rate of female children. The traditional "son preference" seems often to have led to extreme responses to compulsory birth control measures, including an increase in female infanticide and of differential neglect of female children.

The issue of gender bias is, of course, a very general problem that applies to India as well as China. The Chinese authorities have tried hard to change this, but the compulsory birth control policy has had the effect of heightening that tension (reflected in the increase in the relative mortality rates of female infants and children vis-à-vis male ones). The contrast with Kerala is very sharp in this field. The general difference in relative survival chances of women is also reflected ultimately in the broader statistics of the so-called "sex ratio" of the respective populations, even though these figures have to be interpreted taking into account the long-term influences that operate on them. The ratio of females to males in the population is substantially higher than unity in Europe or North America, around 1.05 (even though that number is somewhat inflated by the lasting effects of greater male deaths in past wars). The female-male ratio, in contrast, is still as low as 0.94 in China (rather like India's average 0.93), whereas the ratio in Kerala is 1.04 (much like in Europe).

There is a real difference made by enlightened and educated discussion on matters of vital economic needs. The spread of birth control through consent rather than compulsion depends on that. In contrast, brutal problems can be created when compulsion based on the government's conception of needs runs counter to the general understanding that prevails in the community.

A concluding remark

The incentive and informational functions of political rights in promoting the fulfilment of perceived needs, thus, merge with their role in giving form to our understanding of the nature of needs, including economic needs. The interdependences, while instrumentally important, go well beyond them. It is not just that political rights can help the fulfilment of exogenously identified needs; they also have an important role in the conceptualization of needs themselves. The importance of participation as a part of a just social system goes much beyond providing fine means for given ends. Political rights are central to such participation.

At some basic level this issue relates even to the respect that we owe each other as fellow human beings. In *Taking Leave*, Cosset had noted that "we now frequently hear the working classes called 'the population', just as we call animals upon a farm 'the stock'." The importance of political rights in conceptualizing and understanding economic needs turns ultimately on seeing human beings as people with rights to exercise and not as parts of a "stock" or of a "population" that exists and that has to be looked after. It is ultimately a question of how we see each other.

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