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Population Growth in India: Malthus Right or Wrong?

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Population Growth in India: Malthus Right or Wrong?

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www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm ;
www.cairn.info/revue-population-et-avenir.htm

In Malthus's opinion, the growth of populations could become unsustainable. Mortality would then rise dramatically as it would be impossible to meet the food requirements. Has this scenario been realised or disproved in India since the country became independent in 1947?

► A confirmation of Malthus's principle...

Spelling out what he called "fixed laws of our nature", Malthus derived his principle in this way, in 1798: "I say, that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man"¹. As a consequence, the increase of the human species must be kept commensurate to the inevitably limited increase of the means of subsistence.

► ...feared in the case of India...

Let us go back to 1947, the year when India became independent: the country has a population of slightly above 350 million inhabitants in a territory of 3,287,000 km², i.e. six times the surface area of metropolitan France. Forecasters are worried. In view of the high fertility rate, nearly 6 births per woman, and of the scope for reducing mortality, for instance by generalising vaccinations, the population could vastly increase while the production of cereals or the gross domestic product would not follow.

Therefore, without the delivery of gigantic quantities of food products to India, malnutrition and the ensuing mortality might take catastrophic proportions. Did this black scenario actually occur?

► ...but the fear was unfounded

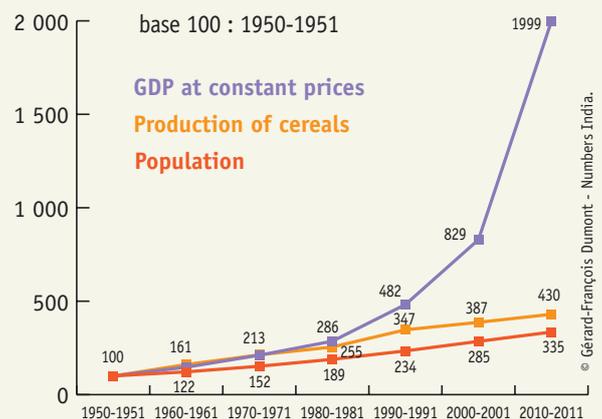
With the progress of medicine and hygiene, though still insufficient, the infant mortality rate decreased by 73% between 1950 and 2014, from 164 to 44 deaths of children under one year old for 1000 births², while the total mortality rate decreased by 74%, from 27 to 7 deaths for 1000 inhabitants. Meanwhile, life expectancy at birth nearly doubled, from 36.2 to 66 years.

By Gérard-François Dumont



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THE GROWTH OF POPULATION, PRODUCTION OF CEREALS AND GDP IN INDIA



While fertility fell from 6 births per woman in 1950 to 2.4 in 2014, the demographic transition³ entailed a large rise in the population, which went up to 10 digits, reaching 1.296 billion in 2014⁴, i.e. was multiplied by 3.6. Such a trend was made possible, in particular, by:

- ◆ a higher output of cereals, which was multiplied by 3.9, and always increasing at a faster rate than the population;
- ◆ the gross domestic product (at constant prices) which was multiplied by 20.

This means, at least for the period between its independence and today, that India has given the lie to Malthus, with the production of cereals and of general wealth growing more quickly than the population, itself benefitting from the improvement of its living conditions. Of course, India still has a long way to go, since the FAO⁵ evaluated the number of under-nourished persons in that country at 190 million in 2012-2014. This is huge, yet the improvement is visible in the proportions, with 15.2% of under-nourished people in 2012-2014 compared with 23.8% fifteen years earlier. So disaster is not inevitable, but a sustainable development will still require intense efforts on the part of India. ☺

(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)

“
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 ”

1. Malthus, Thomas Robert, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, London, 1798, I-17.

2. Sardon, Jean-Paul, « La population des continents et des pays », *Population & Avenir*, n° 720, Nov-Dec 2014, www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm

3. Period when a population evolves from high death and birth rates to low death rates, then low birth rates.

4. Dumont, Gérard-François, « L'Inde, le nouveau milliardaire », *Population & Avenir*, n° 677, March-April 2006. « L'Inde : un marché « milliardaire » fortement croissant, mais pluriel », *Accomex*, n° 99, May-June 2011.

5. FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2014*, p. 42.