

The Rockefeller Foundation, the Population Council, and Indian Population Control

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In the second half of the twentieth century, ‘overpopulation’ became a key area of concern for a number of government and non-government organizations across the globe, and family planning aid was mobilized to meet the challenge of population growth by lowering the birth rate. Whilst concern surrounded population growth across the developing world, India held pride of place within global overpopulation discourse, bestowed by both foreign and Indian observers alike with the dubious honor of being ‘the quintessentially overpopulated country’ or the ‘*locus classicus* of the Malthusian dilemma.’¹ The newly independent Government of India became a pioneer in population control policy, launching the world’s first government-sponsored family planning program in 1952. The Indian family planning program was expanded and intensified throughout the 1960s, and reached an infamous peak during Indira Gandhi’s period of Emergency rule in 1975-77, when mass sterilization camps were teamed with increased incentives for vasectomies and tubectomies, and penalties for those who failed to limit the size of their families.² India was also a key site for international population control intervention, becoming what sociologist and population control critic Donald Warwick described as the ‘darling and the downfall of the donors,’ and the ‘world’s proving ground for birth control.’³

My Ph.D. project investigates the history of population control in postcolonial India, guided by two key research questions: why did population control become such an important

project within the newly independent Indian nation; and why did India occupy such a central position within global ‘overpopulation’ discourse and related population control interventions? I spent two weeks at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in June of 2010, as part of my Ph.D. research, where I found extremely rich materials across three collections: The Rockefeller Foundation records, the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers in the Rockefeller Family Archives and the Population Council records. These records spanned the early 1950s to the late 1970s, and offered a valuable insight into the concerns surrounding Indian population growth, and the transnational interventions intended to curb it. Since I am still in the early stages of my research, and since the materials on this topic held at the RAC are so extensive, this report will attempt to highlight only some of the particularly interesting projects, themes and documents which I came across during my research there, and to suggest some pathways for future research.

India and the Population Council

The Population Council had an interest in India from its very inception. Indeed, India’s exceptional place in overpopulation discourse is borne out particularly clearly in the transcript of discussion at the ‘Conference on Population Problems,’ convened on the initiative of John D. Rockefeller 3rd and held at Colonial Williamsburg in 1952 under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences. Around thirty participants from the social and biological sciences were invited to ‘consider available facts and conflicting views about the effects of population growth on human welfare.’⁴ As historian Matthew Connelly has observed, conference discussion repeatedly returned to the subject of India, as participants ‘projected their prejudices onto the subcontinent as they speculated about its future.’⁵ Indeed, the full record of proceedings held in the John D. Rockefeller 3rd papers reveals that India was consistently referred to throughout the conference as the prime example of an ‘overpopulated’ country, viewed through the prisms of a) Malthusianism and b) demographic

transition theory.⁶ That is to say, delegates were centrally concerned with a) whether or not India could feed its growing population; and b) the relationship between economic development and population growth. Demographer Kingsley Davis attempted to summarize the debate: ‘I think we have stated a belief that there are too many people in India for the technology and resources that India has at its disposal. If there are not too many at present, there are likely to be such increases in this number that it will slow down the process or make it impossible, perhaps to get a higher level of living for India.’⁷ Whilst others argued that the ‘real problem’ lay in extending food supply enough simply ‘to keep the population alive,’ let alone increasing the standard of living.⁸

However, the concerns surrounding food supply or the standard of living were by no means exclusive to India. Delegates raised similar fears over the rest of Asia, North America, South America and Africa. There was even a plea not to ‘forget little Holland,’ Britain or Australia which had recently experienced a lack of surplus food.⁹ Thus the persistent return to India as the focus of discussion is all the more striking. Indeed, the conference participants themselves began to question why this was so. One delegate stated:

“At luncheon today I raised the question as to why it was that almost everybody who spoke this morning talked about India. What is there about India that makes this situation so acute? And I think unconsciously we are scared, and I think we have a right to be. In other words, that is where the ferment is taking place. That is where the pressure is the greatest. And that is where the situation is being taken care of by the Communist propagandists who are filtering into the villages and where promises are being made that there are other ways out of the problem.”¹⁰

In other words, this was Cold War politics. If India’s poverty could not be solved within the country’s current political system, the Indian people would turn to Communism in search of a solution.

However, India was not only fixed upon as an example of ‘overpopulation,’ but as a particularly promising site of intervention and more importantly, source of leadership. Furthermore, it was a country of which a number of delegates had personal experience.

Whilst Connelly points out that Kingsley Davis was the only delegate at Williamsburg who had actually published research on India. Davis had visited the country for the first time just six months earlier. Frederick Osborn, Warren Weaver, Pascal Whelpton and Marshall Balfour had also visited India within the past six months. These men drew upon their experiences in India and attested to an interest in population control already in existence there, as they identified the country as a possible site for study. For example, Whelpton reported a ‘consensus’ of feeling within India that ‘the per capita production had not increased enough, and that in the future a family-planning program of some type looked as though it were essential for progress in raising the living levels.’¹¹ He also stated that there was already a desire within India to study the ‘social and psychological factors’ influencing fertility behavior, and suggested that at least one study should be started in India with technical advice from the US, ‘which would find out what the people think about these matters.’¹² Whelpton further mentioned that experiments with the safe period were about to be carried out in several Indian villages with government support, and that experiments with one or two other methods of contraception were also likely to be ‘favorably received’ by the state governments.¹³

These observations became increasingly important in light of another fear expressed at Williamsburg: that ‘the “haves” can never extend to the “have-nots” ... without having their motive suspect.’¹⁴ ‘Purely from the point of view of good tactics’, one delegate suggested, ‘it would be well to associate with the men and skills from races and colors that are not here at this table.’¹⁵ Thus, conference participants discussed ways in which they could ‘manipulate the situation’ so that other parts of the world might take the lead. The United States they argued, could come into the picture ‘only through the back door as it were, under pressure from the rest of the world.’¹⁶ In this vein, Karl Compton from M.I.T. suggested that the newly formed Population Council should include ‘representatives from other countries

which are very seriously concerned with this problem,' such as Japan and India whose interest in these issues had already been extensively discussed during the conference.¹⁷ Davis suggested 'a program of training foreign scholars of some ability, and directing their interests in this field,'¹⁸ and University of Michigan psychologist Donald Marquis identified a potential project to do precisely that: a demographic research and training center currently under discussion by the United Nations, for which the impetus came from India as well as the 'Western' nations.¹⁹ This project would eventually produce two Demographic Training and Research Centers in Bombay and Santiago, with the support of the newly formed Population Council.

The concerns expressed at Williamsburg regarding the role that the Population Council should or could take in India were frequently reiterated by its staff. Frederick Osborn stated a 'feeling that the acceptable role for Westerners is to make available to the best technical help when it is asked for, and to make grants for projects developed by local governments or institutions accompanying these grants with qualified personnel. In this way we hope to avoid any feeling that we are interfering in Indian affairs.'²⁰ Population Council projects in India were therefore concentrated on training and research activities, such as support for the United Nations Demographic Training and Research Centre (DTRC) which opened at Chembur, Bombay in 1956, and had been in embryonic form during the Williamsburg conference. The Population Council provided both funds and personnel to the DTRC, which was intended to train students from across the UN's ECAFE (Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East) region in demography.²¹ The Population Council also provided funds to set up a number of population studies departments in already existing institutions, such as the University of Kerala in 1961, and provided fellowships for Indian students to pursue population studies abroad.²² In addition, the Population Council encouraged the development of population expertise through its 'basic book' program, which

provided key population titles to institutional libraries. Recipient institutions consisted not only of universities and colleges, but also NGOs such as the Population Council of India, the Family Planning Association of India and the Christian Medical Association of India. Even government bodies were included, such as the Department of Family Planning at the Ministry of Health, the Director of Census Operations and the State Family Planning Bureaus in Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Patna.²³

The question of whether or not the Population Council should become 'more deeply involved' in India was one which was raised on several occasions.²⁴ In 1957 the Population Council had serious discussions regarding the 'desirability of having more systematic representation in India.'²⁵ However, Population Council action in India was constantly mediated through the Indian government. In 1959 Marshall Balfour wrote that difficulties had been 'building up for some time concerning foreign aid in India.' Balfour claimed that the problem resided with the Minister of Finance, Morarji Desai, who was 'adamant' that all aid to India must receive the prior sanction of the Central Government before any action was to be taken. 'The machinery of government will certainly cause long delays,' cautioned Balfour, 'However, I believe that the Council must make some effort to meet the wishes of Government or there will be trouble.'²⁶

Population Council work in India was severely curtailed by the souring of U.S.-Indian relations during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971.²⁷ Gerald Zatuchni complained that 'Beginning in 1971, the GOI embarked on an unstated but clearly obvious effort to rid itself of certain foreign agency technical assistance ... The effort succeeded so well that by early 1973, most non-diplomatic technical assistance had been discontinued altogether or was on a steep downgrade.'²⁸ Demographer Pravin Visaria also observed that U.S. foreign policy with events in the newly formed state of Bangladesh had created 'strong anti-U.S. sentiment.'²⁹ Similarly, Clifford A. Pease noted after a visit to India in 1972, 'there is no question that the

strained relations between the U.S. and India have had a direct effect on population activities in India.³⁰ All United States Agency for International Development (USAID) workers had been asked to leave the country Pease claimed, and all other aid originating from the United States had come to a standstill. These poor relations led Hugo Hoogenboom to state, “given the status of Americans in India and the general Indian attitude toward foreign bilateral assistance, the [Population] Council isn’t going to push itself in India.”³¹

Where Population Council action was sometimes slowed or halted by the government of India, population projects were occasionally appropriated altogether. For example, the DTRC in Bombay was plagued by accusations of preferential treatment of Indian students and of exclusively serving the needs of the government of India, rather than the ECAFE region it was intended to serve. Indeed W. Parker Mauldin of the Population Council raised the question in 1974 of whether the DTRC in Bombay was in fact an ‘international institute of population studies’ at all, or simply and ‘Indian institute of population studies.’ He wrote of his ‘impression that the Indian Government, or at least its representatives who have guided and directed the institute, have not wanted to accept the U.N. even as a junior partner. They have of course, been willing to accept U.N. funds and some assistance, but under terms that have not led to the development of a true international organization.’³² The UN had already presented the Indian government with an ‘ultimatum’ in 1964, in which it asked whether the international aspects of the center could be strengthened, fellows from abroad could be treated better, a greater emphasis could be placed on regional (all-Asia) research and that the Center’s Director could be allowed an opportunity to travel abroad to establish working contacts.³³ The government of India’s role in such a project, and its attitude towards foreign aid, is clearly one important avenue for further research in both the archives of aid agencies and the government of India itself.

Perhaps more remarkably, Population Council activities in India were negotiated not only with the government of India, but with other aid agencies. The Population Council records attest most notably to the increasing importance of the Ford Foundation to Indian family planning from the 1950s through the 1970s. In 1965, Sheldon Segal noted that the Ford Foundation was increasingly becoming identified with the family planning program in India – a ‘visibility’ Segal considered a ‘possible embarrassment’ to both Ford and the government of India.³⁴ By 1970, Population Council action in India was seemingly contingent upon Ford Foundation approval. For example, in September 1970 the Population Council received a request for culdosscopes from the Medical College of Bengal. However, Hugh Hoogenboom felt that the Population Council could not fulfill the request on the basis that the same request had already been refused by the Ford Foundation. Hoogenboom considered this an ‘obstacle’ to the Population Council support due to ‘our understanding with Ford that we would undertake no activities in Ford countries without Ford approval.’³⁵ When and how India became a ‘Ford country’ is certainly a question for further research in both the RAC and the Ford Foundation archives, as is the question of how and why Population Control efforts were divided up between aid agencies.

The Rockefeller Foundation, the Population Council, and the Khanna Study

While the Population Council was beginning its activities, the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) was also becoming involved in Indian population control. My research in the RF records concentrated on a single study entitled the Khanna Study. The RF became involved with this study in October 1953 when it made an initial grant-in-aid of \$10,000 for the study period ending June 30th, 1954.³⁶ The Khanna Study began as a collaborative project between Harvard University, the government of India and the Ludhiana Christian Medical College.³⁷ Being the first birth control program to have a control as well as a test population, the Khanna Study operated on the Malthusian premise that ‘population pressure’ was a ‘social malady’

that could lead to famine, poverty and civil unrest.³⁸ Field work was directed from the market town of Khanna in the Ludhiana district of Punjab, from which the study took its name, and was conducted in seven villages with a total population of eight thousand.³⁹ Through a nine month exploratory study, a yearlong pilot study, a four year 'definitive investigation' from 1956 to 1960 and a follow-up study in 1969, the study staff set out to do the following: 'to study population dynamics and the numerous influences that account for variations in population numbers, and also to measure the results of an instituted program for birth control' through the single method of contraceptive foam tablets.⁴⁰ The study was not successful. In the first year of the definitive study, 'acceptance' of the contraceptive foam tablets was around twenty five per cent, and declined thereafter. Moreover, the field staff gradually realized that those who said that they were in favor of contraception, or even 'accepted' the foam tablets, did not necessarily use them.⁴¹

The Khanna Study has already attracted the critical attention of scholars, thanks largely to anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani's neo-Marxist critique, *The Myth of Population Control*. Turning the logic of the Khanna Study on its head, Mamdani argued that overpopulation was not the cause of poverty, but the result of poverty. After spending several months interviewing villagers in Manupur, the village in which the 'definitive study' was conducted, Mamdani concluded that there had been a huge gap between the perceptions of the villagers and those of the study staff. He argued that what plagued the study was the basic perception of the problem, shared by the study's directors and its Indian staff alike, of population as a disease to be treated with the techniques of an epidemiologist.⁴² The study staff had failed to understand, Mamdani argued, that the people of Manupur needed large families both for labor and physical security. Rather than posing a Malthusian threat to families on the breadline, children were in fact an economic necessity.

Since its publication in 1972, Mamdani's critique has attracted more attention than the Khanna Study itself. Sociologists Roger Jeffery and Patricia Jeffery attribute the popularity of the book to its length and extensive use of anecdotes, and also suggest that it had 'caught a political tide' by providing 'a credible picture of arrogant Western medical and social scientists being outmaneuvered by diplomatic but rational peasants.' Mamdani's assessment of the 'population problem' as a Western, bourgeois invention which could be resolved by land reforms and social policies rather than by population control, appealed to students and radicalized academics during the anti-Vietnam war era who were attracted to the message that peasants are heroes and that 'development is the best contraceptive'.⁴³ *The Myth of Population Control* also provoked a large amount of criticism for the lack of quantitative evidence and anecdotal method employed by Mamdani, but it has nevertheless helped to sustain a debate on alternative views regarding the causes and solutions to Indian poverty.⁴⁴

The RF records contained proposals, reports, minutes and correspondence which offered a valuable insight into details of the Khanna Study not contained in Mamdani's critique. Since the study was a cooperative effort, it will be necessary to carry out further research in the archives of the other organizations involved, before drawing any major conclusions. Furthermore, there were a number of records at the RAC relating to the study directors and to Ludhiana Christian Medical College which, due to time constraints, I was unable to consult during my visit. However, the records I did consult at the RAC contained some interesting points for further research which are worth noting here.

First and foremost the records revealed a high level of cooperation between the staff at Harvard and the government of India officials. Approval for the project, cooperation and funds from the central Ministry of Health were all sanctioned by Minister of Health Rajkumari Amrit Kaur in April 1953.⁴⁵ Interestingly, Kaur also saw 'no objection' to the main method of contraception under consideration in 1953, which was the 'salt pad' method,

which consisted of a wad of material soaked in a spermicidal salt solution. This is especially pertinent since Kaur is typically characterized by historians as a ‘Gandhian’ who waged ‘a rearguard action against birth control,’ and objected on moral grounds to any contraceptive other than the rhythm method.⁴⁶ Yet, in 1955, when the Khanna Staff were testing a contraceptive foam tablet in Ludhiana, Kaur visited the test villages and was so impressed that she wrote to the study’s directors to tell them she was ‘thrilled at the response from the villagers’ and that ‘such research and experimentation as you are doing is going to be of very great help to us for drawing up an all-India plan.’⁴⁷ Kaur’s approval of multiple forms of contraception is also born out in the Population Council records. Indeed Kaur increasingly welcomed a range of contraceptives for use in India, so long as they satisfied the following four conditions: ‘harmlessness on prolonged use, effectiveness as a contraceptive, acceptability by the people and above all, cheapness.’⁴⁸ Clearly the role of the Ministry of Health and of Kaur herself, in both the Khanna Study and the wider Population Control initiatives, is one important avenue for further research.

Subsequently I learned that the Population Council was also heavily involved in activities at Khanna. The Council granted funds to Harvard in 1961 in support of the analysis and writing of the Khanna Study.⁴⁹ Moreover, the Khanna Study’s successes and failures had a marked influence on other Population Council projects. As early as 1954 Marshall Balfour of the RF sent Population Council staff a draft proposal for another rural field study, which he felt was important to pursue at least in part because he could ‘see several pitfalls ahead for the Ludhiana project.’⁵⁰ The Population Council sanctioned Rs.2,25,000 towards this study which was carried out in Singur, West Bengal, for three years starting in November of 1955. The government of India approved the grant, and also gave Rs.7,500 to the study.⁵¹ The Singur Study was different from the Khanna Study in that it tested several contraceptive methods, and also aimed to test whether community birth rates could be reduced by

‘educational measures.’ Furthermore, the study was to be ‘managed entirely by Indians at a moderate cost’, unlike the Harvard administered and increasingly costly Khanna Study.⁵² Echoing the concerns expressed at the Williamsburg conference in 1952, this was deemed especially important since, as Dudley Kirk stressed, ‘an important part of this project is to develop Indian leadership and responsibility in making such inquiries.’⁵³

In addition, the Population Council’s contribution also involved an intellectual exchange between Khanna Study staff and the Population Council staff. For example, I found a good deal of crossover between staff and activities at the UN Demographic Research and Training Center in Bombay and the Khanna Study. A number of staff from the DTRC – most notably its first Director, K.C.K.E. Raja – also sat on the Khanna Study’s advisory committee.⁵⁴ Others visited the Khanna Study site in Ludhiana to learn from the study staff. Demographer Donald Bogue, who worked at the DTRC, spent a week in Ludhiana in February of 1960 ‘to learn everything’ that Field Director John Wyon had concluded.⁵⁵ What Bogue learned during this trip, and how such intellectual exchanges influenced both the Khanna Study and other Population Council projects is another question for further research. Moreover, alongside Kaur and Bogue, the Khanna Study also attracted a good number of other high-level visitors, from the U.S. ambassador to India, Chester Bowles, to Dr. Yoshio Koya, President of the Family Planning Federation of Japan.⁵⁶ The question of what Khanna contributed to other population control efforts, and vice-versa, can therefore be posed on a much larger scale.

Conclusions

As I have suggested in this report, my research at the RAC raised more questions than it answered. The records held at the RAC, particularly the Population Council records, are incredibly rich and extensive, and my two weeks of research there merely scratched the surface of the abundance of materials available. These records did however, help me to

identify many of the key projects and personalities central to Indian population control in the postcolonial period. Furthermore, my visit to the RAC has convinced me that focusing on a single collaborative project, such as the Khanna Study, may facilitate a particularly fruitful discussion of the complex issues surrounding Indian population control as they were construed by the multiple organizations involved.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

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- ⁴⁰ Wyon and Gordon, *The Khanna Study*, p. 277.
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- ⁵¹ "Review of the Rural Field Study of Population Control at Singur, up to September 1957," RAC, PC, RG IV3B4.2, Grant File Series, Box 10, Folder 125.
- ⁵² Letter from Marshall Balfour to Dudley Kirk, September 17, 1955, RAC, PC, RG IV3B4.2, Series 2, Box 10, Folder 125.
- ⁵³ Memo from Dudley Kirk to W. Parker Mauldin, April 17, 1957, p. 1, RAC, PC, RG IV3B4.2, Series 2, Box 10, Folder 125.
- ⁵⁴ Minutes of the 4th meeting of the Advisory Committee of the India-Harvard-Ludhiana Population Study in Khanna at 9-30 a.m. on April 4, 1956, p. 1, RAC, PC, RG IV3B4.2, Box 17, Folder 285.
- ⁵⁵ Memo from Don Bogue to Frank Notestein, Parker Mauldin and Dudley Kirk, January 26, 1960, RAC, PC, RG IV3B4.5, Organizational File Series, Box 111, Folder 2062.
- ⁵⁶ Leland DeVinney Diary Excerpt, "Trip through the Punjab with DR, MCB, Mr. and Mrs. Chester Bowles, Harris Woffard and Bill Stern," January 17, 1957, RAC, RF, RG 1.2, Series 200, Box 45, Folder 371; Letter from Marshall C. Balfour to Dudley Kirk, November 13, 1957, RAC, PC, RG IV3B4.2, General File Series, Box 40, Folder 577.