

# **Malthusian Theory of Population**

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Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) enunciated his view about population in his famous book "Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affect the future Improvement of Society", published in 1798. Malthus revolted against the prevailing optimism shared by his father and Godwin that a perfect state could be attained if human restraints could be removed. Malthus' objection was that the pressure of increasing population on the food would destroy perfection and there would be misery in the world.

He was of the view that the food output increases in arithmetic progression, like, 1,2,3,4 and so on.

But the human population increases in geometric progression, like, 1,2,4,8 and so on.

He opined that during the period of 25 years, while population doubles, the food output increases by just 1 basis point.

But, the people objected to his pessimistic views which led him to travel on the continent of Europe to gather data in support of his thesis. He incorporated his researches in the second edition of his Essay published in 1803. His theory of population is based on the following postulates :

1. Food is essential for man's existence.

2. The law of diminishing returns operates in agriculture.

From these postulates, he deduced that "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in earth to produce subsistence (food) for men", and if the increase in population is unchecked by preventive checks, it leads to vice or misery.

The Malthusian theory of population has been widely discussed and criticised during the 19th and early 20th century. Some of the criticisms are as follows:

- (1) Mathematical form of the theory wrong : The mathematical formulation of Malthus' doctrine that food supply increases in arithmetical progression and population increase in geometrical progression in 25 years has not been proved empirically.
- (2) Failed to Foresee the opening up of New Areas : Malthus had a narrow vision and was particularly influenced by local conditions in England. He failed to foresee the opening up of new areas of Australia, the United States and Argentina where extensive farming of virgin lands led to increased production of food.
- (3) Applied a Static Economic Law to a Period of Time : Malthus could not foresee the unprecedented increase in scientific knowledge and agricultural inventions over a period of time which have stayed the law of diminishing returns.
- (4) Neglected the Manpower Aspect in Population : He forgot that an increase in population' means an increase in

manpower which may tend to increase not only agricultural but also industrial production and thus make the country rich by an equitable distribution of wealth and income.

- (5) Population not Related to Food Supply but to Total Wealth : The Malthusian theory rests on a weak relationship between population and food supply.
- (6) Importance given to only Foodgrains for Livelihood. Malthus gave importance to only foodgrains for livelihood. But for livelihood, foodgrains alone are not enough. Fruits, meat, fish, milk, eggs, etc. can also be used as food.
- (7) Increase in Population the Result of declining Death Rate. The Malthusian theory is one sided. It takes the increase in population as the result of a rising birth rate, whereas population has grown considerably the world over due to decline in death rate.
- (8) Empirical Evidence proves this Theory Wrong. Empirically, it has been proved by demographers that population growth is a function of the level of per capita income. When per capita income increases rapidly, it lowers the fertility rate and the rate of population growth declines.
- (9) Preventive Checks do not Pertain to Moral Restraint. Malthus was essentially a religious man who laid emphasis on moral restraint to control population. But he could not visualise that human beings would invent contraceptives and other family planning devices for birth control.

- (10) Positive Checks not due to Over-population. Malthus' pessimism and religious education led him to believe that over-population was a heavy burden on the earth which was automatically lessened by God in the form of misery, wars, famines, floods, diseases, pestilence, etc. But all these are natural calamities which are not peculiar to over-populated countries. They visit even those countries where the population is on the decline or stationary, such as France and Japan.
- (13) Malthus a False Prophet. The Malthusian theory is not applicable to countries for which it was propounded. In the West European countries, the bogey and pessimism of Malthus has been overcome.
- (14) Not Relevant to Modern Population Problems. The Malthusian theory of population is not of much relevance to modern population problems because it does not explain the reasons for declining birth rate in developing countries, the relationship between birth rate and death rate, the effects of migration and urbanisation, etc.

**Its Applicability** : Despite these weaknesses, the Malthusian doctrine contains much truth. The Malthusian doctrine may not be applicable to the Western Europe and England but its principal tools have become the part and parcel of the people of these countries. If these lands do not face the problems of over-population and misery, it is all due to the bogey and pessimism of

Malthusianism. In fact, the people of Europe were made wiser by Malthus who forewarned them of the evils of over-population and they started adopting measures to ward it off. The very fact that people use preventive checks, like late marriage and various contraceptives and birth control measures on an extensive scale, proves the vitality of the Malthusian law.

Even famous economists like Marshall and Pigou and sociologists like Darwin were influenced by this principle when they incorporated it in their theories. And Keynes, initially overawed by the Malthusian fears of over population, later wrote about "Some Economic Consequences of Declining Population." Is it not the fear of Malthusianism that has created the problem of declining population in France? The Malthusian doctrine may not be applicable now to its place of origin, but its influence spreads over two-third of this universe inhabited by under-developed countries. As Mrs. Joan Robinson wrote : "of all economic doctrines, the one most relevant to the under-developed countries is that associated with Malthus." Excluding Japan, the whole of Asia, Africa and South America come under its purview.

In the least developed countries of Africa, population is growing faster than the food supply. There are dearth's by starvation. Positive checks like floods, wars, droughts, earthquakes, epidemics. etc. operate in all the under-developed countries. Malthus wrote : —The poor are themselves the Cause of their poverty." This is very true because it is the poor people who are responsible for the rapid growth of population in these

