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THE ROCKEFELLERS, MARGARET
SANGER AND THE EUGENIC DIMENSION
OF BIRTH CONTROL IN COLONIAL INDIA
AND REPUBLICAN CHINA

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The Rockefellers, Margaret Sanger and the Eugenic Dimension of Birth Control in Colonial India and Republican China

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Abstract:

Margaret Sanger's Euro-American eugenic discourse in birth control have exerted a prominent role in propagandizing the issue of birth control in public debates and discussions in India and China. Positioned at the nexus of national and international initiatives, this essay traces the history of Margaret Sanger's birth control movement in Colonial India and Republican China in the 1920s and 1930s. Modeled within the ideological framework of Neo-Malthusianism that located birth control in the concerns of 'overpopulation, disease and poverty,' this essay attempts to examine the introduction of Sanger's eugenic concerns and its influence on both the Indian and Chinese intellectuals of the time and how these ideas came to be seen as a modern, rational, progressive science, whose utopic potentials could save both the countries from its growing population with limited resources. Sanger was also able to garner support for her birth control project from one of the most wealthy and prominent family, the Rockefeller's since the early years of her birth control advocacy. Committed to the idea of birth control and enhanced control over family size and composition, Rockefeller displayed sustained commitments to Sanger's birth control project. Rockefeller involvement in the population project since the birth of the eugenic movement was seen as a powerful and influential factor in the advancement of the population control agenda. Support from powerful philanthropist like the Rockefeller's played a prominent role in furthering Sanger's birth control agenda on a global scale.

Keywords: Birth Control, Eugenics, Neo-Malthusianism, Margaret Sanger, Rockefeller, China, India

Introduction

Being two of the most populous countries in the world, both China and India have a long history of birth control. This history should be viewed within the ideological context in which birth control took an important turn in history in both the countries. The political and social ideologies of the western educated reform minded elites have exerted significant influence on policy decisions in regard to birth control in both China and India. Such ideological positions do not only influence the perceptions of the elites but is also often seen to advance a general political climate which creates a major contextual influence on the policy making process. The Gandhian ideological opposition to artificial methods of contraception in India, and the Marxist view that overpopulation cannot exist in socialist societies, were important factors in the initial stages of decision-making in regard to the adoption of national population programs in the respective countries.¹ The international environment played an equally influential role in furthering the birth control agenda. The amalgamation of influence of the international agenda governed by Neo Malthusian thinking and the interest of the domestic elites framed the population policy in which birth control figured as an important element for national progress.² This science of birth control was revived by the neo-Malthusian movement which was different from conventional Malthusian position on two counts: firstly, it stressed on birth control methods and secondly, it identified the working class with the problem of overpopulation.³

In the locus of this movement were birth control advocates like Margaret Sanger and Philanthropists like the Rockefellers, whose association with each other in regard to advancing birth control over the decades have changed the discourse on population science. Sanger became the leader of this movement and remained a key actor for many decades. World War I gave birth control a boost through massive distribution of contraceptives and condoms to lower the rising incidence of venereal disease among soldiers. The 1920s changed the trajectory of birth control and centred it around the feminist issue. However, with rising conservatism and antifeminism after World War I, the movement

¹ Rushikesh Mukandrai Maru, "*Birth Control in India and the People's Republic of China: A Comparison of Policy Evolution, Methods of Birth Control, and Program Organization, 1949-1974*" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1976), 14

² Maru, "*Birth Control*," 14

³ Shelly Shah, "Neo-Malthusian Theory of Population (Useful Notes)," Sociology Discussion - Discuss Anything About Sociology, May 9, 2015, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.sociologydiscussion.com/population/notes-on-neo-malthusian-theory-of-population/11119>.

shifted from enhancing women's bodily autonomy to producing better babies.⁴ Sanger's rhetoric on birth control viewed, "a eugenically marred view of woman's liberation, which did not mean the freedom for every woman to decide, without coercion, the number of children she desired to have; rather, it meant sexual freedom for the 'fit,' who seemed to be those who made the same reproductive decisions as Sanger."⁵ Rockefeller's association with the eugenic movement goes as far as 1904 when Rockefeller in cooperation with Carnegie opened a eugenics department and laboratory in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Committed to the idea of eugenics and the perception that superior classes of people should be identified and encouraged to reproduce, an idea which was heavily endorsed not only by brightest thinkers but also financed by wealthy capitalists, this and other institutes supported by these mega American philanthropists took a life of its own.⁶ Hence, when Sanger initiated her birth control movement, Rockefeller became an ardent supporter. Backed with such affluence came the means and the connections to make birth control an administrative reality. For birth control advocates like Margaret Sanger who were religiously devoted to place the birth control movement on the map, such alliances were vital.

With 'Social Science' gaining momentum as an accepted discipline, the eugenic movement reached its peak in the 1920s.⁷ In China, the theory of eugenics which figured in the birth control movement became connected to nation building and public health reform.⁸ If eugenics was the goal, birth control was seen as a means to an end.⁹ In the Indian context, "In the discursive targeting of India's poor as well as in a belief that intelligent and scientifically based breeding could build a better future, many Indian birth control advocates enthusiastically embraced the era's global discourse of eugenics, which devoted new attention to motherhood as crucial link in producing healthy nations."¹⁰ After her first visit to the Far East, Sanger had noted: "I did not go to the Far East as a self-appointed prophet to reform the habits of the yellow race. I have not tried to shout the message of Birth Control into

⁴ Adele E. Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and the Problems of Sex* (University of California Press, c1998), <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft8d5nb4tm/>

⁵ Leslie Mary Shapy, "A Close Reading and Concept-Oriented Rhetorical and Literary Analysis of Margaret Sanger's Eugenic-based Discourse" (PhD diss., Iowa State University, 2016), 1

⁶ Shapy, "A Close Reading," 11

⁷ Ibid, 13

⁸ David, "Female Gynecologists and Their Birth Control Clinics," 33 and 284

⁹ Mirela Violeta David, "Free Love, Marriage, and Eugenics: Global and Local Debates on Sex, Birth Control, Venereal Disease and Population in 1920s-1930s China" (PhD diss., New York University, 2014), 169

¹⁰ Sarah Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce, Birth Control in South India, 1920-1940* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 13

unwilling ears. We have advocated this doctrine only to those who have expressed a willingness to - or bear interest in it. We do not believe in imposing upon anyone the principle or the practice of Birth Control.”¹¹

This study attempts to map out transnational networks of birth control activities during the 1920s and 1930s in Colonial India and Republican China by focusing on the role of Margaret Sanger and her efforts to apply global birth control concepts to local realities. Ideas, organization and money each contributed necessary element to the growth of this movement. Ideas and conceptualization of birth control came from Sanger which was then supported and reinforced by funding support from philanthropists like Rockefeller. In trying to study these alliances, the study also explores the underlying association between Sanger and the Rockefeller’s which gave impetus to birth control advocates like Sanger to expand her ideas on a global scale. Although both China and India initiated large scale birth control in the form of Family Planning on a national scale in the 1950s, their association with the movement dates way back into the 1920s which coincided with Sanger’s visit. Framed within the context of the colonial legacy, India’s engagement with the birth control movement in the 1920s was much more active as compared to China where most discussions were centred around ideological debates. Sanger’s birth control advocacy throughout the 1920s and 1930s gave birth to the “Population Control Movement” which picked up pace in the 1950s in both the countries. Colored with a rich history of population control movements, numerous excellent scholars have written extensively on this issue in both the Chinese and Indian context.

Examples include Betsy Hartman’s (1995) *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs, The Global Politics of Population Control*, Mohan Rao’s (2004) *From Population Control to Reproductive Health, Malthusian Arithmetic*, Sanjam Ahluwalia’s (2008) *Reproductive Restraints*, Sarah Hodges (2008) *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce, Birth Control in South India, 1920-1940*, Matthew Connelly’s (2008) *Fatal Misconceptions: The Struggle to control world population*, Tina Johnson Phillips (2011) *Childbirth in Republican China: Delivering Modernity*, Edwin A. Winckler and Susan Greenhalgh (2005) *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*. An attempt for a comparative study between China and India has been done by Rishikesh

¹¹ Kazuhiro Oharazeki, “Document 37: “Document 37: Margaret Sanger, "birth control in China and Japan," TYPED draft of address at Carnegie Hall, New York, N.y., 30 October 1922. Handwritten EMENDATIONS made by sanger. (Margaret SANGER papers, library of Congress MICROFILM, reel 128, frames 491-508.), 19 pp,” Birth Control in China and Japan," 30 October 1922 | Alexander Street Documents, accessed September 10, 2021.

Mukandrai Maaru in his 1976 dissertation, *Birth Control in India and in the People's Republic of China: A comparison of Policy evolution, Methods of Birth Control and Program, 1949-1974*. However, Dr. Maaru focuses mainly on the contrast between Communist China and Post-Independent India. Similar discussions and writings from different perspectives focused on the population policies like the Family Planning program China-India is documented.¹² In addition to that, Barbara N. Ramusack (India) and Mirela David (China) has written separately on Margaret Sanger and birth control in both the countries. Using systematic analysis of secondary literatures and archival research, this essay attempts to consolidate all these writings and draw a contrast between China and India with a specific focus on Sanger's influential role in birth control in the respective countries. By bringing Rockefeller into the picture, this essay proposes to highlight how association between transnational agents and their eugenic dimension sowed the seed of the population issue by initiating discussions on birth control and garnering support from the 'domestic elites'¹³ in China and India.

The Rockefeller's and Birth Control

The RF since its inception has been at the vanguard of the birth control movement through the creation of the 'Bureau of Social Hygiene' (BSH) and involvement in the 'International Planned Parenthood Federation'. From 1911 to 1934, the Bureau of Social Hygiene sought to influence public policy on a number of issues related to sex, crime and delinquency with its goals and projects evolving overtime.¹⁴ The BSH was a creation of Rockefeller Junior with an aim to expand his personal research interests through this separate organization. The Bureau was formally taken over by the RF in 1913 and redesigned to take up research in birth control, maternal health, and sex education. Junior's mother and John D's wife, Cettie has been personally involved with the projects at the Bureau to "promote

¹² Examples include articles by J. Liang and H. Wang (1994), A comparison of efficiency of birth control input between China and India; Haiping Zheng (2010), Family Planning: A comparison of China and India; Kayla W. Siviyy (2016), Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis of Family Planning Policy within India and China; Aprajita Sarkar (2015), A Historical and Anthropological Comparative of the Family Planning Strategies of India and China; Ansley J. Coale (1983), Population Trends in China and India (A Review).

¹³ In the early 1920s and 1930s, numerous debates on birth control in both China and India have been influenced mostly by the intellectual pedigree of the western trained, modern science inclined Chinese and Indians. Liberating women and ensuring better access to reproductive health were not the guiding principles in these early debates in birth control. Most of these early proponents of birth control belonged to the emerging western educated middle class, conversant in western intellectual traditions, employing western ideas selectively to further the agenda of birth control.

¹⁴ "The Rockefeller Foundation," Bureau of Social Hygiene - The Rockefeller Foundation: A Digital History, accessed September 10, 2021. <https://rockfound.rockarch.org/bureau-of-social-hygiene>

instruction in social hygiene for female students around the country.”¹⁵ Rockefeller’s philanthropy in commitment to birth control and population studies which came out vibrantly in the 1920s therefore was not a wholly new direction. The Scripps Institute’s research on population science was supported by the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial Fund since the 1920s.¹⁶ The movement of propagating the knowledge of birth control and contraceptives can be traced back to the early discourse on ‘overpopulation’ which was influenced by the ideological framework of Malthusianism and Eugenics. Thomas Malthus 1789 *Essay on Population* and Francis Galton’s 1883 *Human Faculty* became the guiding framework of the population question. While Malthus argued for checking the growth of population to ensure it did not exceed the levels of subsistence and linked poverty and unemployment as a direct outcome of a lack of exerting practical restraint on the size of the family, Galton coined the term *Eugenics* and defined it as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race: also, with those that develop them to the utmost advantage.” The aim of his science he reiterated, was to “bring as many influences as can be reasonably employed, to cause the useful classes in the community to contribute more than their proportion to the next generation.”¹⁷

Another important event that pushed for the advancement of the birth control movement is the creation of the ‘International Planned Parenthood Federation’ (IPPF), a brainchild of Margaret Sanger and an organization emphatically supported by the Rockefeller’s. The IPPF took its shape in the U.S. and did not take time to slowly spread its activities in many countries. The idea of developing a planned parenthood first began at the birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn in 1916. The creation of the planned parenthood laid the foundation of the birth control movement both in the U.S and worldwide by opening birth control clinics to provide birth control devices to women and to collect statistics about the safety and long-term effectiveness of birth control.¹⁸ Framed within the confines of the neo-Malthusian ideology which stressed on fertility control methods and identified the working class with the problem of overpopulation, birth control formulated rules to regulate reproduction,

¹⁵ Jameson T. Taylor, “Robbing the Cradle: The Rockefellers’ Support of Planned Parenthood,” Catholic Exchange, July 09, 2001, accessed on September 10, 2021, <https://catholicexchange.com/robbing-the-cradle-the-rockefellers-support-of-planned-parenthood>

¹⁶ Frank W. Notestein, “Demography in the United States: A Partial Account of the Development of the Field,” *Population and Development Review*, no. 8 (1982): 654

¹⁷ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on Population* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1914); Francis Galton, *Essay in Eugenics* (London: Eugenics Education Society, 1909)

¹⁸ “The History & Impact of Planned Parenthood,” Planned Parenthood, September 21, 2021, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/who-we-are/our-history>

reform relations between the sexes, reshaped attitudes about the very meaning, purpose, and value of human life. “The neo-Malthusian position found favor with the elite sentiments on the issue of overpopulation. The elite, threatened by the growing numbers of commoners, considered birth control as an important means of checking future conflict over their property.”¹⁹

Margaret Sanger: The Beginning of Reproductive Control

Margaret Sanger was the pioneer of planned parenthood federation. By 1920 Sanger had initiated a birth control movement, led by middle- class women, calling for legal rights in access to contraceptives. Sanger in 1922 noted birth control as a means to attain basic freedom and also a neo-Malthusian enterprise aimed at eliminating poverty and other social evils by reducing family size.²⁰ Growing up in an Irish family of 11 children, her mother’s health took a toll due to many pregnancies and miscarriages when she finally died of Tuberculosis at the age of 50. Her mother’s story along with her experience as a nurse inspired Sanger to initiate the birth control movement at a time when talking about such issues was illegal in the U.S. “In 1923, Sanger opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in Manhattan. That same year, Sanger incorporated the American Birth Control League, an ambitious new organization that examined the global impact of population growth, disarmament, and famine. The two organizations eventually merged in 1942 to become Planned Parenthood® Federation of America, Inc. (PPFA®).”²¹ Sanger and her birth control advocates “saw themselves as twentieth- century secular missionaries bringing the progress and development available only to those who were willing to embrace a scientific mode of living and thinking. International birth control was about spreading the word via spreading the appliance.”²² There cannot be a conversation on birth control without her name being mentioned. Espousing racism and xenophobia, Sanger had reportedly said in one of her famous speeches, “Now we need to advocate birth control to improve the race. I

¹⁹ Shelly Shah, “Neo-Malthusian Theory of Population (Useful Notes),” Sociology Discussion - Discuss Anything About Sociology, May 9, 2015, accessed September 10, 2021,

<https://www.sociologydiscussion.com/population/notes-on-neo-malthusian-theory-of-population/1119>.

²⁰ Dennis Hodgson and Susan Cotts Watkins, “Feminists and Neo-Malthusians: Past and Present Alliances,” *Population and Development Review* 23, no. 3 (1997): 476, Population Council

²¹ “The History & Impact of Planned Parenthood,” Planned Parenthood, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/who-we-are/our-history>

²² Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce*, 57

dare say mankind's increase is sufficient."²³ The term "*Birth Control*" was in fact coined by Sanger.²⁴ Sanger believed that contraception was a pre-requisite for women's freedom. "A free race cannot be born of slave mothers . . .," Margaret Sanger argued. "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body."²⁵ However at the same time she called for removing the sexual component from birth control by highlighting it as a medical issue by giving the power of distribution of contraceptives in the hands of the physicians rather than women's hands.²⁶ Hence, the eugenic frame combined with the biomedical approach dominated the birth control movement. "Additionally, Sanger noted, birth control as the foundation for all eugenic programs. She exclaimed, "Eugenics without Birth Control seems to us a house built upon the sands."²⁷

The Rockefeller Foundation (RF) support to Margaret Sanger's Birth Control Movement

Margaret Sanger has been at the centre of the birth control movement worldwide. The Rockefeller supported BSH and the IPPF has both offered hearty support to Sanger's cause throughout her birth control advocacy. By the 1920s, the birth control and eugenics movements in the United States had come together commencing the birth control/eugenics era in the field of population science. At this same juncture, Sanger made a strategic decision to move the birth control movement's frame to become more politically and socially charged.²⁸ With Sanger's influence, the movement changed from a radical socialist cause to a liberal issue contending over legal rights designed within the eugenic framework which called for reduction of birth in the undesired population in the greater interest of the society.²⁹ As early as 1924, BSH had began funding Margaret Sanger's proposal for birth control

²³ Matthew Archbold, "Margaret Sanger's Low Road to China," NCR, January 6, 2017, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/margaret-sangers-low-road-to-china>

²⁴ Matthew James Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 50-51

²⁵ Connelly, *Fatal Misconceptions*, 50-51

²⁶ Perrin Liana Elkind, "How Foundations' Field-Building Helped the Reproductive Health Movement Change the International Population and Development Paradigm" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015), 48 cited in Hodgson & Watkins, *Feminists and Neo-Malthusians*, 475

²⁷ Hodgson & Watkins, *Feminists and Neo-Malthusians*, 476 cited in Margaret Sanger, "Birth Control and Racial Betterment," *Birth Control Review* 3, no. 2 (1919), 12

²⁸ Elkind, "How Foundations," 48

²⁹ Ibid, 48; Donald T. Critchlow, "Birth Control, Population Control, and Family Planning: An Overview," *Journal of Policy History* 7, no. 1 (1995), 2

clinical studies by the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau.³⁰ Voicing support for Sanger's funding request to the BSH, Raymond B. Fosdick, president of the RF had written to J.D. Rockefeller Jr.:

Personally, I believe that the problem of population constitutes one of the great perils of the future and if something is not done along the lines that these people are suggesting, we shall hand down to our children a world in which scramble for food and the means of subsistence will be far more bitter than anything we know at the present. Scientists are pointing hopefully to such methods as Mrs. Sanger and her associates are advocating, and these two organizations are doing their best to disseminate knowledge of contraceptive practices, as far as the present somewhat archaic law allows them to.³¹

An internal memorandum circulating in the RF in the early 1930s describes in depth the interest of the foundation in the population question. The memorandum declared: "Birth control has the support of many of the best and most intelligent people in the world and it also has the support of some persons whose mental balance is not the best. In between these two classes, we find the people who hold debatable opinions, the most capable group being the eugenicists."³² The eugenic philosophy was a key concept that remained central to the birth control movement throughout the decades. On celebrating her birth control propaganda, Sanger commented on its "eugenic and civilizational value" and the ways in which it impacts the "quality of the generations of the future."³³ The eugenic philosophy in the early 20th century which coincides with Sanger's birth control agenda was ideologically powerful and widespread. Represented as a cutting-edge science that traveled beyond national and racial boundaries, the philosophy of eugenics attracted the era's most brilliant and progressive intellectuals.³⁴ "This transnational circulation of knowledge about race betterment, in turn, affected domestic politics, economics, laws, scientific research, and social norms about procreation and the future of the nation."³⁵

³⁰ Jameson T. Taylor, "Robbing the Cradle: The Rockefellers' Support of Planned Parenthood," Catholic Exchange, July 09, 2001, accessed on September 10, 2021, <https://catholicexchange.com/robbing-the-cradle-the-rockefellers-support-of-planned-parenthood>

³¹ Raymond B. Fosdick, "Letter from Raymond B. Fosdick to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1924 June 13", *100 Years: The Rockefeller Foundation*, accessed September 10, 2021, https://rockfound.rockarch.org/digital-library-listing/-/asset_publisher/yYxpQfeI4W8N/content/letter-from-raymond-b-fosdick-to-john-d-rockefeller-jr-1924-june-13

³² Critchlow, "Birth Control", 6

³³ Jesi Taylor Cruz, "Reproductive Justice & Racist Foundations of the Birth Control Movement," Blood & Milk, July 30, 2020, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.bloodandmilk.com/a-tough-pill-to-swallow-the-racist-foundations-of-the-birth-control-movement/>

³⁴ Aiko Takeuchi Demirci, *Contraceptive Diplomacy: Reproductive Politics and Imperial Ambitions in the United States and Japan* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 4

³⁵ Demirci, *Contraceptive Diplomacy*, 4

Sanger and the Rockefellers

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was an early advocate of Margaret Sanger's pioneering work in birth control as a means of improving maternal and public health. When Sanger's Birth Control Federation of America joined the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the Rockefeller Brother's Fund (RBF) began its own support for the organization.³⁶ A sum of \$150,000 was appropriated by the RBF to Sanger's planned parenthood federation for support of overseas family planning programs.³⁷ JDR III known for his interest in the population control movement took special interest in Sanger's cause. Funding support from the RBF helped Planned Parenthood launch programs in child spacing, prenatal medical care, public education, and special projects in African American communities.³⁸ Such financial commitment from philanthropists were significant for reproductive scientists to also support their basic research. "Some sponsors attempted to recruit reproductive scientists for research on specific contraceptive projects, while other sponsors provided liaisons between birth control advocates and reproductive scientists."³⁹ Rockefeller's support towards the population cause was not absent of concern since birth control was an extremely controversial field and one that was surcharged with theological politics. However, while the RF and family remained cautious of Sanger's public efforts, they actively and sometimes privately supported her Clinical Research Department for biological purposes.⁴⁰

The Rockefeller family had been personally involved with Sanger's work and took deep interest in supporting it. "The following excerpt from a September 1930 letter to Abby Rockefeller, Jr.'s wife, reveals: "I wish you could come down and visit us some morning or afternoon in the near future. I know how you may hesitate to do this thinking of publicity, etc., but I wish to assure you that nothing of the kind would happen... The object of this letter, however, was not to tell you my woes, but to thank you for your help and your fine interest, and to tell you how much I appreciate it at this particular

³⁶ "Planned Parenthood," Rockefeller Brothers Fund, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.rbf.org/about/our-history/timeline/planned-parenthood>

³⁷ "Rockefeller Foundation", Minutes of the Rockefeller Foundation regarding Planned Parenthood Federation of America, *100 Years: The Rockefeller Foundation*, accessed September 10, 2021, https://rockfound.rockarch.org/digital-library-listing/-/asset_publisher/yYxpQfeI4W8N/content/minutes-of-the-rockefeller-foundation-regarding-planned-parenthood-federation-of-america

³⁸ "Planned Parenthood," Rockefeller Brothers Fund, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.rbf.org/about/our-history/timeline/planned-parenthood>

³⁹ Clarke, *Disciplining Reproduction*, 182

⁴⁰ Critchlow, "Birth Control," 6

time.”⁴¹ Friendship between Sanger and Rockefeller only grew stronger throughout the years. As Abby Rockefeller’s biographer notes, “Margaret Sanger was one of the last of her friends in Arizona to see her before Abby’s death.”⁴² The Rockefellers since the initiation of Sanger’s planned parenthood through the 1960s was one of the strongest supporters of Sanger’s birth control project.

A Brief History of Birth Control in China and India

In the early part of Sanger’s birth control advocacy in both China and India, issues related to women’s reproduction was perceived mostly as a task of the modernizing male intellectuals. Hence, most of the feminist voices in regard to birth control activism in the 1920s and 1930s in both Republican China and Colonial India came from reform minded intellectual men.⁴³ These voices came from writers like Hu Shi and Zhang Xichen, the editor of *The Ladies’ Journal* in China and Marathi Hindu Social reformers like R.D. Karve and N.S. Phadke in colonial India.⁴⁴ The overwhelming majority of writings in both the countries on the issue of birth control and contraception came from these men. Espoused by Neo Malthusian rhetoric and Eugenic theories, these male vanguards acted as propagandists establishing the necessity for and morality of reproductive control. However, in relation to public policy and planning, the Chinese experience before 1949 was largely limited to ideological and academic discussions on the population problem, whereas India due to its colonial legacy had a much more institutionalized and extensive birth control movement dating back to the 1930s.⁴⁵

Discussions and debates on the need for a birth control in colonial India started as early as the late 19th century, ironically when there was limited or no data to establish the fact of population growth.⁴⁶ In her brief essay, Edith Martyn, a British Suffragist and a member of the British Malthusian league

⁴¹ Jameson T. Taylor, “Robbing the Cradle: The Rockefellers’ Support of Planned Parenthood,” Catholic Exchange, July 09, 2001, accessed on September 10, 2021, <https://catholicexchange.com/robbing-the-cradle-the-rockefellers-support-of-planned-parenthood>

⁴² Taylor, “Robbing the Cradle.”

⁴³ Mirela David, “The Task Is Hers”: Going Global, Margaret Sanger’s Visit to China in 1922,” *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (2016): 33; Barbara N. Ramusack, “Embattled Advocate: The Debate Over Birth Control in India,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1, no. 2 (1989), 34; Sanjam Ahluwalia, “Controlling Births, Policing Sexualities: A History of Birth Control in Colonial India, 1877-1946” (PhD diss., University of Delhi, 2000), 30

⁴⁴ David, “The Task is Hers,” 33; Ramusack, “Embattled Advocates,” 36

⁴⁵ Maru, “Birth Control in India and the People’s Republic of China,” 10

⁴⁶ Mohan Rao, “From Population Control to Reproductive Health: Malthusian Arithmetic” (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 19

on the *“History of the Birth Control Movement in India”* mentioned the presence of correspondents from the Neo- Malthusian League of Britain in India.⁴⁷ The 1981 census data on population in colonial India had, for instance, invoked Thomas Malthus to contend that ‘overpopulation’ was the main cause of poverty in India.⁴⁸ Influenced highly by the Malthusian movement, A Hindu Malthusian League was simultaneously formed in Madras as early as 1882 by a section of Madras elites which was later revived in the 1930s and renamed as the Madras Neo-Malthusian League.⁴⁹ “The fact that ideas of birth control were accepted with such ease, testifies to the great influence, indeed the popularity of eugenic ideas among Indian elites. But the fact that in India, unlike in England, there were no legal prohibitions on birth control helped matters considerably.”⁵⁰ Information on fertility patterns in the Chinese mainland prior to the family planning campaign initiated in the 1950s is considered to be very limited. Malthus in the Chinese case had asserted that virtually “no preventive check to population growth existed in China.”⁵¹ In spite of the lack of data on population, three interrelated beliefs about fertility patterns in the historical Chinese are widely held: first, “the birthrate was abnormally high”, the second belief stated that “Chinese people did not control their fertility” and thirdly, “uncontrolled high fertility was inevitable.”⁵² Social Darwinism became a driving force for the introduction of eugenics in China in the early part of the 20th century. With the domination of the western imperialists represented through a number of unequal treaties acts right from the 1890s, the Chinese revolutionaries called for preservation of the ‘Chinese race’ for national survival.⁵³ Tina Johnson in *Childbirth in Republican China: Delivering Modernity* further elucidates, “Encouraged by the promise of modernity, and equally discouraged by writers like Herbert Spencer who alluded that inferior “races” would eventually die out, reformers advocated all manner of major changes in daily Chinese life,

⁴⁷ Maru, “*Birth Control in India and the People’s Republic of China*,” 28

⁴⁸ Debabar Banerji, *Family Planning Services in India: An Epidemiological, Socio-Cultural and Political Analysis and a Perspective* (New Delhi: Disha Banerji, on behalf of Lok Paksh, 1985), 174

⁴⁹ Maru, “*Birth Control in India and the People’s Republic of China*,” 30

⁵⁰ Rao, *From Population Control to Reproductive Health*, 20-21

⁵¹ Thomas Malthus, “*An essay on the principle of population: or, A view of its past and present effects on human happiness: with an inquiry into our prospects respecting the future removal or mitigation of the evils which it occasions- 6th ed*” (London: J. Murray, 1826), 206-230

⁵² Zhongwei Zhao, “Deliberate Birth Control Under a High-Fertility Regime: Reproductive Behavior in China Before 1970,” *Population and Development Review* 23, no. 4 (1997): 730

⁵³ Yuehtsen Juliette Chung, “Better Science and Better Race? Social Darwinism and Chinese Eugenics,” *The University of Chicago Press* 105, no. 4 (2014): 796-797; Frank Dikötter’s (1992) *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* also goes deep into this. In his chapter ‘Race as Nation’ he exclaims the changing emphasis of Darwinian ideas towards nationalism as the key to national survival. Stimulated both by the ideas of the west and increasing Japanese aggression, racial thinking in China made a rapid transition from 1915 to 1949

culminating in the New Culture Movement (roughly 1915 to 1923) that targeted youth as the agents of change.”⁵⁴

Eugenic Dimension, Margaret Sanger and Birth Control in Republican China

Eugenic concerns have been an issue of worry for the Chinese intellectuals since the dawn of the reformist movements of the 1920s. These concerns were further intensified with Margaret Sanger’s dual visit to China in 1922 and 1936.⁵⁵ Sanger first arrived in the Chinese shore in April 1922 and spent three weeks while en route by steamer from Japan to England. Three weeks of halt in China was long enough for the firebrand American birth control pioneer to meet Chinese intellectuals and give public lectures in big politically charged Chinese cities like Beijing and Shanghai.⁵⁶ Sanger’s visit to China was proposed by Jiang Menglin and Chen Da, two prominent Chinese intellectuals who had studied in U.S. in the 1920s. Chen Da, an alumni of Columbia University in fact went on to become a famous population scientist.⁵⁷ Access to contraception and safe abortion was considered as important factor to national health by some influential modern medical personnel in the 1920s China which was spurred in part by Sanger’s dual visits. Along with this concern, ideas about eugenics and population control were further cemented to prevent China’s further decline.⁵⁸ The 1920s was time when the Chinese intellectuals were just beginning to theorize the use of birth control and how it could protect China from the problem of a growing population with limited resources. These thoughts were a departure from traditional Confusion ideology but some eugenically minded intellectuals were willing to seek out ideas from the West. And nowhere in the West was the idea of eugenics gaining a stronger foothold at that time than in the United States of America.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Tina Phillips Johnson, *“Childbirth in Republican China: Delivering Modernity,”* (Maryland, U.K.: Lexington Books, 2011): xxii cited in Vera Schwarcz, *“The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919”* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986)

⁵⁵ Matthew Archbold, “Margaret Sanger’s Low Road to China,” NCR, January 6, 2017, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/margaret-sangers-low-road-to-china>

⁵⁶ Michelle T. King, “Margaret Sanger in Translation: Gender, Class, and Birth Control in 1920s China,” *Journal of Women’s History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 61

⁵⁷ Mirela Violeta David, *“Free Love, Marriage, and Eugenics: Global and Local Debates on Sex, Birth Control, Venereal Disease and Population in 1920s-1930s China”* (PhD diss., New York University, 2014), 173

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Childbirth in Republican China*, 148

⁵⁹Matthew Archbold, “Margaret Sanger’s Low Road to China,” NCR, January 6, 2017, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/margaret-sangers-low-road-to-china>

Even though her visit to China was brief, Sanger's trip spurred coverage about the birth control issue in Chinese newspapers and periodicals, familiarizing the urban Chinese populace to the eugenic neo-Malthusian theories on the importance of reducing fertility.⁶⁰ Her numerous lectures in both Beijing and Shanghai on "The Ins and Outs of Birth Control: Past, Present and Future?" sparked a great debate on the issue of birth control and challenged the traditional free birth ethic.⁶¹ Sanger and the Chinese intellectuals approached the question of reproduction as social, national, and racial reproduction. Holding letters of introduction from Chinese intellectuals in the U.S., Sanger arrived in China in 1922 to meet journalists and intellectuals who gathered to hear her lectures on her favorite subjects: birth control, overpopulation, and eugenics.⁶² The 1920s Republican era deemed as China's 'age of openness' signaled 'Chinese Modernity' as a break from traditional social, political, and economic structures, and establishing a Western-style government which called for reforms in the educational system, marriage and gender customs.⁶³ This was an age where proliferation of ideas regarding nation, science, modernity, and economics, in conjunction with publications and dissemination of popular journals and newspapers was initiated in a large number.⁶⁴ The political and social conditions was thus ripe for educated Chinese audiences to learn about Sanger's birth control. The following excerpt from one of her speeches on the growing explosion of China's population highlights her Malthusian perception in detail:

All available ground is taken up to produce their food supply; even the roads are turned into gardens, and while China might well go on for thousands of years more, if undisturbed by Christianity and the humanitarian methods of the western nations, she cannot go on undisturbed by our interference. We cannot go into China with our sympathies and our moral codes saving the babies from infanticide, without increasing her problems. We find that after we have gone and rescued infants from the river one year, only to find an increase of "sing song" girls eking out their existence in prostitution the following year.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ King, "Margaret Sanger in Translation," 61

⁶¹ David, "*Free Love, Marriage, and Eugenics*," 172

⁶² Matthew Archbold, "Margaret Sanger's Low Road to China," NCR, January 6, 2017, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/margaret-sangers-low-road-to-china>

⁶³ Johnson, *Childbirth in Republican China*, xxii

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Kazuhiro Oharazeki, "Document 37: Margaret Sanger, "Birth Control in China and Japan," Typed draft of address at Carnegie Hall, New York, N.Y., 30 October 1922. Handwritten emendations made by Sanger. (Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress Microfilm, reel 128, frames 491-508.), 19 pp., Document 37: "Birth Control in China and Japan," 30 October 1922 | Alexander Street Documents, accessed September 10, 2021

Hence, Chinese intellectuals who were consumed by Malthusian fear were ready for what Sanger had to offer. Her 1922 visit to China influenced the birth control movement in China in two aspects: Firstly, it reinforced the Malthusian images of China as a global example for the necessity of birth control relating growing overpopulation with insufficient resources and secondly, it inspired an intriguing debate around the eugenic quality of birth control in the Chinese media.⁶⁶ In her 1922 visit, the *China Times* had devoted a whole section to the birth control subject in its April 30th Sunday issue and had simultaneously kept a steady flow of recurring writings on the same subject throughout her stay.⁶⁷ It is also important to understand the initiation of Sanger's birth control in China within the context of the 'May 4th Movement' (1915 - 1921). Known as an epochal event in modern Chinese history, this movement represented the anti-imperialist and anti-warlord reaction of the Chinese people to the turbulent new forces unleashed by the First World War. This event was pushed by the changing expectations of a new generation of reform minded young Chinese.⁶⁸ Before Chiang Kai-Shek consolidated the young Chinese Republic, the political situation in China was rife with warlordism and factionalism. The nationalists of the young Republic were dedicated to position the establishment of a national health care system that prioritized women's health and promoted general hygiene.⁶⁹ Hence, "Although the political situation was damaging to China's international image, the absence of a strong central government gave way to the influx of radical ideas and thinkers from the West, including the birth control agenda Sanger espoused."⁷⁰

In China, Sanger's focus on birth control of the poor clashed with Marxist sympathies of the lower classes and nationalist pro-natalist approaches to population which was the wartime ideology that governed most of Chinese patriotic sentiments. In contention with Sanger's eugenic line of thought for birth control, many of the left aligning Chinese intellectuals did not accept her arguments. Their grasps of economic realities in China were "economic inequality and imperialist oppression" as in contrast to Sanger's understanding of "overpopulation and birth control". But given the prominence

⁶⁶ Mirela David, "The Task Is Hers": Going Global, Margaret Sanger's Visit to China in 1922," *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (2016): 75-76; Mirela David, "Female Gynecologists and Their Birth Control Clinics: Eugenics in Practice in 1920s-1930s China," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 35, no. 1 (2018): 40; Mirela David, "Eugenic Dimensions of the Population Problem and Policy in 1920s-40s China," January 6, 2017 at American Historical Association at Colorado Convention Centre

⁶⁷ Chung, Yuehtsen Juliette, "*Struggle for National Survival: Eugenics in Sino-Japanese Contexts, 1896-1945*" (New York: Routledge, 2002), 109

⁶⁸ Joseph T. Chen, "The May Fourth Movement Redefined," *Modern Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1970): 63

⁶⁹ David, "Female Gynecologists and Their Birth Control Clinics," 33-34

⁷⁰ King, "Margaret Sanger in Translation," 65

of Malthusian theories of overpopulation in China, Sanger's birth control enjoyed a substantial coverage both in the Chinese media and the group of eugenic minded Chinese intellectuals.⁷¹ Sanger's eugenic consideration of birth control for people afflicted with hereditary diseases and the feeble minded was well received by the Chinese elites and nationalists who were looking for economic development. Advances in public health and gynecology and concern around maternal and infant health became a priority in the 1930s. But this advance was derailed by warlordism, Japanese aggression and civil war, a comprehensive population policy was finally passed by the nationalist government on May 5, 1945.⁷²

Sanger's first visit in Peking attracted an audience of 2500 students held at the Government University of Peking. Her speech at the Peking National University on April 19th was interpreted by philosopher Hu Shi (1891-1962) who was an advocate of vernacular literary reform, and one of China's most famous public intellectuals. Her next speech on April 20th at the Peking Union Medical College of the Rockefeller Foundation was attended by a large group of nurses which was followed by a gathering of bankers, who gave a luncheon in her honor. Sanger was very much impressed with the Chinese in their grasp of the subject, and in their method of quick action once they had a subject in hand. Later, she was invited for dinner by the chancellor of the university where she received an audience of Chinese intellectuals. The dinner meeting according to Sanger, came out with some excellent suggestions for carrying on the work of birth control, and the formation of a league. However, understanding the immediate need was for practical methods, they took Sanger's pamphlet on *Family Limitation* and translated it into Chinese which was printed on the press the next day and distributed throughout the city. In the days that followed, she also had luncheon with Chinese graduates from Harvard, Yale, and Cornell University in an old Manchu restaurant known as a favorite meeting place for Chinese intellectuals. Sanger was very elated with the meeting at Peking and confidently noted, "If anyone wishes to refute the Malthusian theory, it is worthwhile before wasting his time, to take a trip to China, for there the population question with all the horrors that Malthus depicted, is vindicated."⁷³

⁷¹ David, "Free Love, Marriage, and Eugenics," 171-172

⁷² David, "Eugenic Dimensions of the Population Problem and Policy in 1920s-40s China"

⁷³ Kazuhiro Oharazeki, "Document 37: Margaret Sanger, "Birth Control in China and Japan," Typed draft of address at Carnegie Hall, New York, N.Y., 30 October 1922. Handwritten emendations made by Sanger. (Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress Microfilm, reel 128, frames 491-508.), 19 pp., Document 37: "Birth Control in China and Japan," 30 October 1922 | Alexander Street Documents, accessed September 10, 2021

As word of her trip began to spread, Sanger was invited to speak in Beijing and Shanghai. Sanger's speech on birth control in both Beijing and Shanghai was the first debate on the issue published in print media in Republican China.⁷⁴ Her Shanghai speech was translated by Yu Qingtang (1897–1949), who had just returned from her doctoral studies in the United States.⁷⁵

“Later, in London at the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference, Sanger reported that professors at the National University had formed a birth control league, translated her pamphlet, *Family Limitation*, and were looking for physicians willing to open a birth control clinic in Beijing. She continued to correspond with activists in China, mostly in Beijing and Shanghai, and ensured that reports on efforts in China were presented at international conferences, and as articles in the *Birth Control Review*.”⁷⁶ The most striking feature of Sanger's 1922 visit to China was that most of her audience was predominantly Chinese men which differed from her visits to other Asian countries like Japan and India where she was able to garner strong support and meet elite women who were equally invested in her project.⁷⁷ However, Sanger's visit coincided with the revolution of the May 4rd Movement led by reform minded Chinese men and Women. Hence, even though most of the writings during this period came from reform minded intellectual men like Hu Shi and Zhang Xichen, editors of *The Ladies Journal* and *Women's Review*, Chinese women were not entirely absent from the scenario. Sanger's visit therefore happened at an opportune time when the social context of women activism in Chinese society was slowly changing.⁷⁸

While comparing the population of China with Japan, Sanger noted that whereas the population of Japan is still expanding and overflowing, China's population in contrast has reached a catastrophic stage and can be deemed as a national tragedy. She further stated, “Here is a great Empire prostrate in the dust. China, the mysterious fountainhead of art, philosophy, and the deepest wisdom of the world, has been brought down by the breeding & multiplication of the worst elements of the yellow race. It is difficult for anyone who has not visited China to realize the situation. Here are masses of humans who live below the level of animals.....Such are the results of obeying the age-old

⁷⁴ David, “Female Gynecologists and Their Birth Control Clinics,” 34

⁷⁵ King, “Margaret Sanger in Translation,” 63

⁷⁶ Cathy Moran Hajo, “What Happened Next? A look at Birth Control Organizing in China following Margaret Sanger's 1922 Visit,” January 9, 2014 accessed on September 10, 2021, <https://sangerpapers.wordpress.com/tag/china/>

⁷⁷ King, “Margaret Sanger in Translation,” 65

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 66-67

injunction to increase and multiply, carried to a literal conclusion. Such is the punishment of a herdlike obedience to blind instinct, of non-interference with the course of Nature.”⁷⁹ In expounding this tragic cause in China, Sanger threatened that overpopulation is flickering this ancient Asiatic spirit and threatening it with extinction. This disaster if not controlled at the right time will cause a “rising tide of famine, of wretchedness and the epidemic of transmissible diseases, a flood which, because of the incessant fertility of those millions, spreads like a human plague.”⁸⁰

In the years after Sanger’s visit, Chinese female physicians participated actively in matters regarding women’s reproduction and translated her works for the Chinese population. These female physicians with specialized knowledge were committed to spreading contraceptive information through their medical praxis.⁸¹ Sanger acted as an influential figure in advancing the birth control movement in China through the efforts of Chinese women clinicians like Yang Chow Buwei who happened to be the first female physician to give out contraceptive information through her birth control clinic in 1925 in Beijing. “Sanger’s 1922 China tour had a considerable impact on Yang Chao, who proceeded to translate Sanger’s pamphlet *What Every Girl Should Know* into Chinese by using an English–Chinese dictionary.”⁸² The onset of the 1930s marked a shift of birth control from being purely educational and informative into the public health realms. Linda Gordon in *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* explains the influential role played by Sanger in transitioning the birth control movement from birth control to a medical issue.⁸³ Agnes Smedley, a political and social radical who had briefly worked in the birth control movement in New York and Sanger’s longtime confidant with whom she connected through the sex reform movement in Germany, was financially assisted by her to open contraceptive clinics in China on behalf of her. Although by the 1930s, Sanger had moved away from her leftist alignment which she had shared with Smedley, they were nonetheless successful

⁷⁹ Kazuhiro Oharazeki, “Document 37: Margaret Sanger, “Birth Control in China and Japan,” Typed draft of address at Carnegie Hall, New York, N.Y., 30 October 1922. Handwritten emendations made by Sanger. (Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress Microfilm, reel 128, frames 491-508.), 19 pp., Document 37: “Birth Control in China and Japan,” 30 October 1922 | Alexander Street Documents, accessed September 10, 2021

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ David, “Female Gynecologists and Their Birth Control Clinics,” 33

⁸² Ibid, 37

⁸³ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America. [3rd ed.]* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 178

in opening a birth control clinic in Peking. Inaugurated on 23rd November 1929, the Peking clinic used Sanger's methods as models.⁸⁴

Margaret Sanger, Indian Nationalists and the Birth Control Movement in Colonial India

Sanger arrived in India in the winter of 1935 to advance the project of birth control in the Indian population. She was initially introduced to the reproductive control movement in India through reformed Indian leaders like R.D. Karve, A.P. Pillay and N.S. Phadke. The first family-planning clinic in colonial India was opened in 1925 by Karve who later went on to assist in the formulation of the official policy on family planning as a member of the National Sub-Committee on Population.⁸⁵ A.P. Pillay was the honorary director of the Sholapur Eugenic Society which was established in 1929 and functioned till 1934. Pillay constantly kept in touch with London office and in many instances was assisted by them. Narayan Sitaram Phadke, an upper-caste Brahman from Maharashtra, was a professor of philosophy, is known for his writings in the *Birth Control Review*, 1924 and *Sex Problem in India* published in 1927. Sanger was impressed with Phadke's eugenic arguments and wrote a forward piece for his influential book where she highlighted his efforts as inspired by a patriotic desire for his country to progress on sound biological principles.⁸⁶

Before her 1935 visit, she had temporarily opened a channel to India in the mid 1920s through Agnes Smedley.⁸⁷ Even before Sanger's visit, colonial India had an already established culture of debate often promoting the eugenic idealogues to meet national goals. The development of such a thriving discourse on the eugenic issue in colonial India can be traced back as early as the 1910's in conjunction with the growth of the British eugenic society since 1907.⁸⁸ Hence, most Indian efforts to promote birth control coincided with the growth of their counterparts in the west. The group of Indian intellectuals engaged in this discourse were mostly from the group of reformed elites with backgrounds in academia, statistics, feminism, and medicine.⁸⁹ Sanger's efforts in colonial India were supported by

⁸⁴ David, "Free Love, Marriage, and Eugenics," 239

⁸⁵ Rao, *From Population Control to Reproductive Health*, 108

⁸⁶ Sanjam Ahluwalia, "Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India," (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 29

⁸⁷ Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates," 37

⁸⁸ Savina Jewel Balasubramanian, "Communicating Contraception: Social Science and the Politics of Population Control in Cold War India," (PhD diss., Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 2018), 68

⁸⁹ Balasubramanian, "Communicating Contraception," 69

British birth control pioneers like Marie stopes (1880– 1958) and an extensive network of Indian birth control advocates. In the same year that Sanger visited India, several initiatives towards the birth control movement had already been started. The National Planning Commission of the Indian National Congress, headed by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted a resolution supporting the idea of a state sponsored birth control programs.⁹⁰ Following that was the formation of the Family Hygiene Society in Bombay in 1935.⁹¹

A year before Sanger's voyage to India, Edith How-Martyn, a British proponent of Neo Malthus joined the Neo Malthusian League in Britain and started propagandizing about birth control in India.⁹² "In 1880, Murugesu Mudaliar from Madras became the vice president of the London Neo-Malthusian League and published a journal, *The Philosophic Inquirer*, in Madras. There were other Indians among the early vice presidents of the league, such as Dr. V.V. Naidu, Dr. Muthiah Naidu, and Dr. K. Banerjee."⁹³ Few years before Martyn started its activities, the Madras Neo-Malthusian League was established in 1928 by a group of Madras's most prominent urban, Brahmin men. The members of the league instead of forming birth control as a common issue with the nationalists, shared common cause with the birth control advocates across the world. The members of the league not only saw themselves as a part of the international movement, the internationally-recognized birth control advocates on the other side of the globe were also equally interested in creating links with the Madras based organization. The league became so famed even before it was officially established that it found its way onto the international circuit of birth control propaganda and was extravagantly praised in journals like Marie Stopes' *Birth Control News*.⁹⁴ While Sanger in America and Stopes in Britain in the initial years of their birth control advocacy was mostly focused on educating their population with birth control consciousness, the Madras based Neo Malthusian League, since its inception, was more concentrated on attracting an international audience for their message of race betterment through intelligent breeding.⁹⁵ Margaret Sanger, therefore, when she started her birth control advocacy in India, had a ready and receptive audience.

⁹⁰ John Sharpless, "World Population Growth, Family Planning, and American Foreign Policy," *Journal of Policy History* 7, no.1 (1995): 75-76

⁹¹ Rao, *From Population Control to Reproductive Health*, 108

⁹² Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates," 48

⁹³ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India*, 27

⁹⁴ Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce*, 47

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 55

The Indian cohort of eugenics equally looked for support from western birth control advocates like Sanger to legitimize public discussions on the topic and obtain financial assistance for the controversial subject. The western enthusiasts worked relentlessly in furthering the need of birth control in public policy debates and discussions within India. Western advocates like Sanger also found India to be an interesting location for advancing their agenda and at the same time a given opportunity to experiment their ideas which was not available to them within their own national boundaries.⁹⁶ Sanger hence exchanged correspondence with Indian supporters to undertake propaganda work, build global alliances, introduce contraceptives, and render financial support to the Indian birth control.⁹⁷ However, despite mutual agreements on the era's hegemonic discourses of eugenics, many Indian intellectuals who were advocating for birth control did not necessarily discuss overpopulation as the root cause of India's poverty which was in total contrast to what their colleagues seated in New York and London believed in. The divided opinion between mainstream birth control advocates who were more leaning towards Malthusian arguments and those whose ideas were streaming from the Nationalist struggles that blamed the colonial government for India's growing poverty was apparent since the 1920s.⁹⁸

Attracted by Indian nationalist struggle, Smedley urged Sanger in 1924 to employ Indian physicians to promote birth control for the dual purpose of "child and racial betterment." Sanger was open to these suggestions because she had already experienced building alliance with the medical profession both in the U.S. and Japan to further the birth control agenda. "Smedley further cautioned Sanger that in India "it is better not to stress the women freedom until you have a foothold."⁹⁹ It was better to use the Japanese example as her birth control propaganda rather than the west, she further advised. India was at the heat of the nationalist struggle where the movement had achieved greater heights with Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement in 1920-22.¹⁰⁰

Sanger, however, experienced opposition from Gandhi. Gandhi opposed Sanger from the morality point of view where he believed that sexual union was meant only for procreation and not for pleasure. In defiance to Sanger's views, he further stated, "it is still worse for a person to indulge his animal

⁹⁶ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India*, 4

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 11

⁹⁸ Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce*, 14

⁹⁹ Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates," 37

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 38

passions and escape the consequences of his acts” using artificial means of contraception and that women would reject artificial methods as inconsistent with their dignity.¹⁰¹ He dismissed Sanger’s arguments for contraception on the grounds that it furthers the act of self-indulgence and pushes people away from *Brahmacharya*¹⁰². Sanger was dejected with Gandhi’s views and stated, “He never accepts sex as anything good, clean and wholesome.” At the same time, Gandhi’s opposition was disastrous not only for international public relations but also because this would create obstacle for their birth control agenda in India.¹⁰³ “Unhappy, but undefeated, she carried on with her travels, journeying to 18 cities, delivering 64 addresses, and meeting everyone from Rabindranath Tagore to Jawaharlal Nehru.”¹⁰⁴ In her speeches across India, “Sanger locates morality in the body of each citizen as she alludes to the outside force of birth control that will aid in the development of a moral character and a moral nation. She also associated contraceptive behaviors with India’s destiny, prosperity, and spiritual legacy.”¹⁰⁵ The rhetoric of the message delivered constructs the idea of contraception not as a question of morality but an approach which accommodates Gandhi’s message of spirituality and peace through Indian citizens.¹⁰⁶

Sanger’s first stop was Bombay where she experienced a wide range of audiences. She addressed a group of medical professionals by giving specialized lectures on contraception accompanied by demonstration films. She was equally influential in attracting the Indian press like the *Bombay Chronicle* who covered her activities, thus popularizing the birth control issue amongst the Indian masses.¹⁰⁷ After taking a triumphant tour of three weeks across India, Sanger arrived in Thiruvananthapuram in late December 1935 on the invitation of Maharani of Travancore Sethu Parvathi Bai. The maharani had invited Sanger to her son’s capital to deliver a lecture, a talk which had turned out to be sensational in the orthodox Brahmin kingdom. Thiruvananthapuram was one of south India’s great seats of orthodoxy, both in principality and practice, a temple town, and the royal family lived a cloistered life of Brahminical ritual and piety, and here was the ruler’s mother inviting a white woman and organizing

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 38

¹⁰² Stage of Male Hindu life when one is to study the ancient Vedas and is to practice continence.

¹⁰³ Hodges, *Contraception, Colonialism and Commerce*, 58

¹⁰⁴Manu S. Pillai, “Opinion: An unapologetic woman of power,” mint, November 30, 2018, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/tO3ofYBeCNrpRGnPKoVBoJ/Opinion--An-unapologetic-woman-of-power.html>

¹⁰⁵ A. Elizabeth Stearns, Susan F. Sharp and Ann M. Beutel, “Women as Political Bodies in the International Speeches of Margaret Sanger,” 27, no. 2 (2015): 135

¹⁰⁶ Stearns et. al, “Women as Political Bodies”, 136

¹⁰⁷ Ramusack, “Embattled Advocates,” 49

a discussion on such scandalous themes as intercourse.¹⁰⁸ Sanger was scheduled to participate in the debate at the All-India Women's Conference presided over by the Maharani. However, after facing backlashes from the Catholic nuns who were a major element in Travancore educational system and vehemently against the birth control agenda, the Maharani decided to skip the meeting. Sanger's participation in the debate however was highly appreciated by many reform minded Indian women who were present at the meeting.¹⁰⁹

Sanger worked closely with early British Malthusian enthusiasts like Edith How Martyn to promote the birth control cause in India. Martyn's brief essay on the "*History of Birth Control Movement in India*" discusses the participation of Indian members of the Britain's Neo Malthusian league with much of their organizational activity in Southern India, Calcutta, Ahmednagar, Lahore, Delhi, Lucknow, and Patna.¹¹⁰ These contacts with early advocates of birth control led Sanger to address a meeting at the All India Women's Conference in 1935 following which she delivered a number of speeches across the country.¹¹¹ In a 1935 radio address to the people of India, Sanger stressed the importance of limiting family size, especially for those individuals who lacked the financial means to support the family, a statement which is totally ignorant of the fact that "children were economic asset for the poor and not a burden." In her speech she stated:

Every father enjoys having children if he can support them. But he has a right to the knowledge that will permit him to have only the number he can support. A father who can adequately provide for three children, keep them well clothed and well fed, becomes torn with worry and heart break when four, then five, then six or seven children come into the home, and he cannot give each the necessities of life.¹¹²

Very limited efforts were made to involve the Indian women in the organizational structure of the birth control movement in the 1920s. A majority of the cohort deciding the Indian birth control frame were British educated elite men. As late as 1929, there was no organization of Indian women discussing the problems of birth control. Sanger did make an effort to involve the Indian women into international discourse but she was advised against doing it by Indian men who suggested that only

¹⁰⁸ Manu S. Pillai, "Opinion: An unapologetic woman of power," *mint*, November 30, 2018, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/tO3ofYBeCNrpRGnPKoVBoJ/Opinion--An-unapologetic-woman-of-power.html>

¹⁰⁹ Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates," 49

¹¹⁰ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India*, 26-27

¹¹¹ Stearns et. al, "Women as Political Bodies", 126

¹¹² *Ibid*, 131

they were qualified to take up the birth control issue. Controlled by patriarchal principles, the few Indian women who were engaged in dialogue with foreign women did not make a public appearance and kept the discussions of birth control behind the curtains.¹¹³ By the 1930s, the Sanger's birth control movement had changed its discourse from limiting itself to litigation and legislative reforms to advocating for inclusion of contraceptive education in New Deal maternal and child health programs.¹¹⁴ What distinguished Sanger's efforts from those of the feminists and socialists was the professionalization of birth control.¹¹⁵ One of her most close Indian associates who fully supported Sanger's approach was Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, the pioneer of the Family Planning Association of India. Rama Rau's support helped found the international organisation that champions this cause.¹¹⁶ Following their meeting after the 1935 All India Women's Conference, Lady Rama Rau and Margaret Sanger organized the First Family Hygiene Conference in Bombay in 1938.¹¹⁷ Sanger's association followed by frequent visitations continued with the Indian birth control movement till the 1950s and 1960s. By then, India had become the centre of the population control movement with the creation of the Indian Family Planning Program, a national program and first of its kind in the world.

Conclusion

Sanger's birth control movement in both China and India happened at the height of the women's eugenic movement in the 1920s America where "Intersection of science, politics, and social policy" took place and the movement formulated its own scientific ethos. Influenced highly by Charles

¹¹³ Ramusack, "Embattled Advocates," 39

¹¹⁴ Sharpless, "World Population Growth, Family Planning and American Foreign Policy," 75 cited in James Reed, *The Birth Control Movement and American Society: From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, (Princeton, 1984), 263-69; David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger*, (New Haven, 1970), 259—67

¹¹⁵ Rao, *From Population Control to Reproductive Health*, 102 cited in Susan Gordon, *Women's Bodies, Women's Rights*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1976)

¹¹⁶ Divya Sethu, "When Gandhi Opposed Birth Control, This Woman Designed Our Family Planning Policy," May 18, 2021 accessed on September 15, 2021, <https://www.thebetterindia.com/255242/dhanvathi-rama-rau-birth-control-activist-mahatma-gandhi-family-planning-association-of-india-international-planned-parenthood-federation-unsung-women-independence-inspiring-history-div200/>

¹¹⁷ Rao, *From Population Control to Reproductive Health*, 109

Darwin 1859 *On the Origins of Species* and Herbert Spencer's notion of the "survival of the fittest", the eugenic dimension became an important element of Sanger's birth control. Sanger's notion of birth control was especially attractive to the elites who often perceived their wealth as a sign of their innate genetic superiority. Although Sanger's visit to both the countries were met with oppositions from nationalist leaders like Gandhi in India and socialist-aligned intellectuals in China, she was able to garner heartfelt support from most of the domestic elites. With the consolidation of the Republican government in China and the nationalist struggles picking up pace in colonial India, both the countries were highly receptive to the notions of birth control which was framed within the biomedical model of modern medicine. Sanger's birth control neo-Malthusian viewpoint that indicated 'unchecked population growth would lead to poverty' gained widespread acceptance in the elite circles in both China and India. She further combined the neo-Malthusian frame with eugenics, arguing that "more birth control would lead to less poverty and fewer defective offspring." Owing to the need to develop a strong nation, this issue which was already a matter of concern in both the countries was accepted and discussed widely. On the wider debate on women's health, Sanger was also able to influence reform minded women like Lady Rama Rau in India and Dr. Yang Chongrui in China who in the later years would become birth control pioneers in both the countries. The gender, class and caste dimensions are equally important when trying to locate Sanger's advocacy in both the countries. Although Sanger was able to attract a wider women audience in India as compared to China, it was usually the high caste western educated Indian women who figured in the hem of her feminist discourse. However, in spite of her desire to promote a eugenic message of birth control to manage the reproduction of destitute and diseased Chinese and Indian women, it was educated, middle-class Chinese and Indian men who were in the best position to hear and act upon her message regarding birth control and contraceptive use. In conclusion, it is safe to concur that Sanger's advocacy of birth control in both Republican China and Colonial India in the later decades played an eminent role in the professionalization and medicalization of the birth control movement where eugenic ideology was clearly expressed at an institutional level.