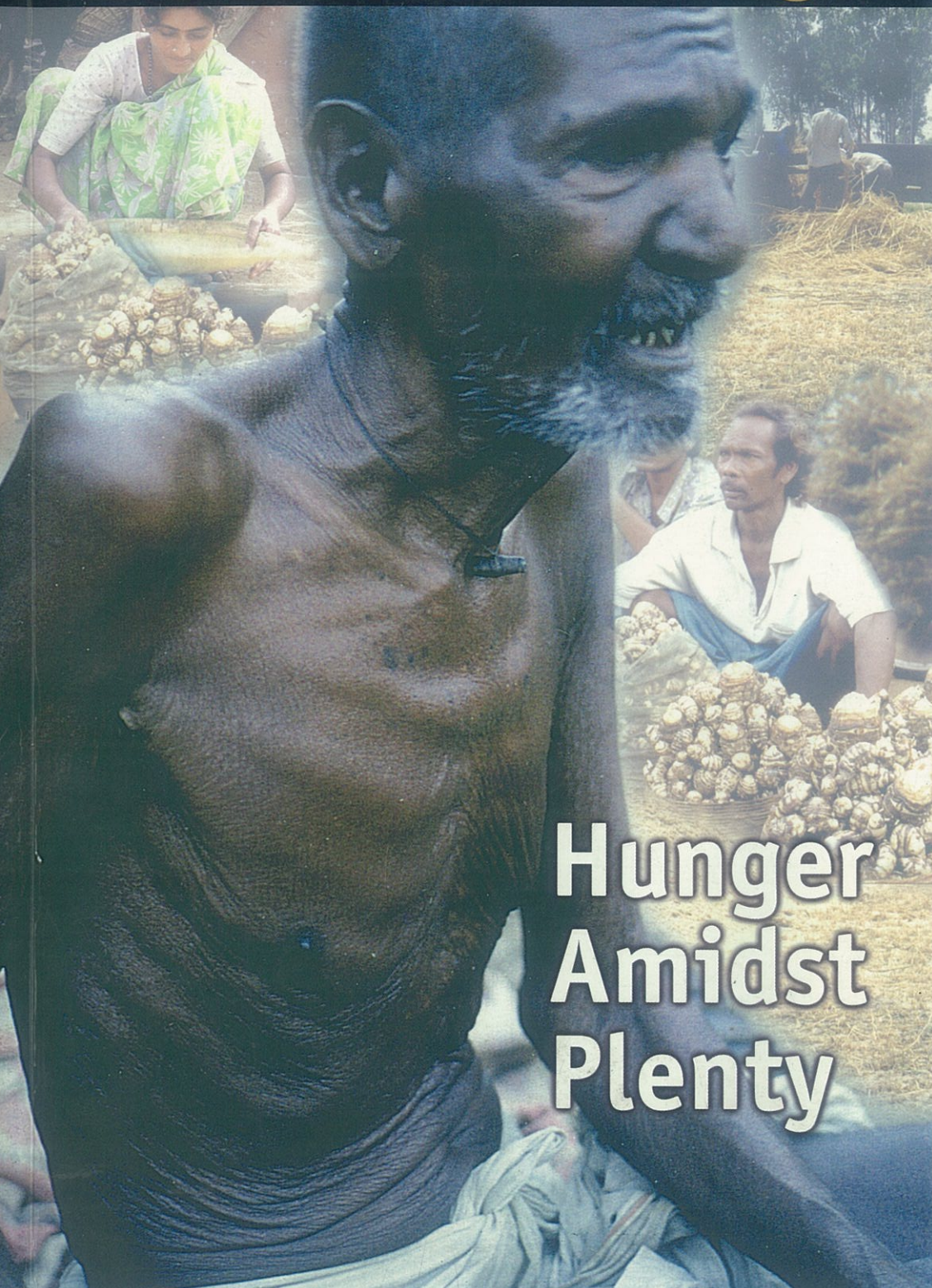




Volume 14, No. 2, 1998

# asian exchange



**Hunger  
Amidst  
Plenty**

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# Hunger Amidst Plenty

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Asian Exchange  
Volume 14, No. 2, 1998



ASIAN REGIONAL EXCHANGE FOR NEW ALTERNATIVES

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# Introduction

ADITI CHOWDHURY

It was some time in the 80s that I first heard of Kalahandi, a remote place in the Indian state of Orissa. Kalahandi made it to the headlines when a mother sold her months-old baby for five rupees (less than US \$ 0.12 at today's exchange rates and around 15 cents at that time) to fend off starvation. News began filtering in of the famine situation in this hinterland, which was witnessing an exodus for want of food. Only those remained who could not travel far — the aged, children and pregnant or nursing women. Over that summer, the death rate rose sharply, and heart failure was the cause of death recorded officially in several cases, when they were recorded at all.

The news sparked fierce debate on the ethics of mothers selling children, no matter what the cause. Initially some of us were stunned: there cannot be starvation in a country whose godowns and warehouses were brimming over with buffer stocks of foodgrain! Famines were a thing of the dark past; we all had learnt that India had long before attained self-sufficiency in food. Of course, we also knew that thousands did not get two square meals a day, but famine was something else. We wanted to assess the truth for ourselves, but were dissuaded from following it up: the terrain was rough, the journey arduous, there were no motorable roads and one would have to walk for miles under the scorching sun .... In the end, we did not go, perhaps, our commitment was not strong enough. The media was flooded with analyses and expert opinions. The root cause of Kalahandi's woes appeared to be a World Bank-funded dam under

construction on the Indravati river that was causing drought in the region.

It was to be several years before the whole truth about Kalahandi was to finally come out: that the region had one of the highest yields of grain and was a major contributor to the buffer stock. However, good harvests did not mean food for the local population; it meant growing coffers for the *mahajans* (merchant-moneylenders) who operated in the area. These mahajans were mostly outsiders who took advantage of the inaccessibility of the region and backwardness of the people to establish their little fiefdoms in collusion with the local administration. The rest, as they say, is history. The local people over time pledged and lost their lands to repay loans; they earned a pittance for tilling the land they once owned as there was no one to help them secure minimum wages. The situation was, perhaps, worse for those who managed to hold on to their land; the *mahajans* fixed the procurement price of their produce which was not even enough to cover costs.

Kalahandi cropped up like a bad conscience in the summers that followed, with the inevitable reports of deaths and the occasional baby sale. But people get used to everything, the most bizarre and horrifying included, and, like the anger and despair over the never-to-be forgotten faces of Ethiopian children and Bangladeshi women had gradually dissipated, so did the images of Kalahandi. And year after year, every new starvation death, each Kalahandi auctioned child, became just another statistic.

And yet, the question of mass hunger, of starvation, never stopped troubling me; why do people have to go hungry when enough food is produced and more? What can be the causes of hunger, especially in the absence of natural calamities, of floods, drought, earthquakes or fire. Is it just poverty, an inefficient distribution system, a systemic problem, or mere lack of foresight? Or are there other deep-rooted causes? For it is apparent that the story of Kalahandi is not unique, nor is it confined to a remote corner of the subcontinent. Similar stories can be found in peasant communities all across Asia, Africa, and Latin America; they are also evident to a lesser degree in the marginalised communities of the developed countries in Europe and in North America.



The rising incidence of mass hunger, deprivation and marginalisation among the peoples of Asia has been one of the abiding and central concerns of ARENA. Through its programmes and projects, ARENA has tried to identify and analyse the causes that impact adversely on food security, and look into possible alternatives to mitigate hunger and starvation. This issue of *Asian Exchange* is another step towards that direction.

*Hunger amidst Plenty* brings together a collection of articles that provide an insight into the root causes of the rapid and continuing addition to the hungry millions in Asia. We see that it is not always the unavailability of food that leads to starvation and hunger; in fact, world production of food is growing faster than the growth of world population. However, what is growing even faster than population and food production is inequitable distribution of wealth, and political and social power within countries as well as among countries. This inequitable distribution of economic and political power is leading to peoples being deprived of their fundamental right to food.

One of the direct causes of growing hunger has been the changes wrought in the system of production of food. In the subsistence economies of Asia, people and communities grew the food that they consumed, selling or exchanging the surplus for their few basic needs. The commercialisation of agriculture changed all that; cropping patterns were altered, with the new crops requiring more and more water, fertiliser, pesticide and seeds. Small farmers who did not have funds to invest in the additional requirements were forced off their lands and had to work as wage labour while large landowners consolidated their holdings.

This process of deprivation and consolidation has been described by Sarojeni Rengam in 'Food Security, Safe Food and Sustainable Agriculture in the Context of Global Trade Negotiations'. In her article Rengam shows how the WTO is facilitating and accelerating the process of marginalisation of farmers with food production today being increasingly geared to the needs of consumers in the rich nations and for the benefit of TNCs; they are not geared any more to satisfy the basic needs of the people who grow the food. The presence of transnational agribusinesses is growing in the third world and it is they who dictate what crops should be grown by farmers in the third world for consumption by the rich. The WTO's



agenda of increasing the volume of global agricultural trade is reinforced by other multilateral institutions such as the WB-IMF through the structural adjustment programmes and through conditionalities imposed on third world loans.

One area where the WB-IMF have been useful to further WTO interests has been on the issue of subsidies. Countries of the third world have been encouraged and pressured to do away with subsidies and other protection measures for farmers even as the US and OECD countries continue to heavily subsidise their own food producers, leading to unfair competition in the global market. In fact, it is no competition at all.

This is what Utsa Patnaik concludes in her case study of India. Taking the reader on a tour of India's experience and experiments in the agricultural sector over five decades, she illustrates how state interventions had helped in improving food production and alleviating or containing poverty and hunger. However, the interventions were not enough to eliminate hunger all together for there were no parallel measures taken to redistribute land, which allowed increasing concentration of wealth. But the modest achievements of the early years of independence are being undone since the country launched itself on the globalisation-liberalisation-privatisation road.

Patnaik's assessment of the situation of farmers in India are mirrored in Sumit Chowdhury's reflective journey through India's once-fertile lands of Punjab, Telengana and Kalahandi in 'On the famine trail'. The Punjab farmer who once produced enough to make India self-sufficient in food is a very unhappy person today; caught in a vicious debt-trap, Telengana's cotton growers are being forced to commit suicide; and Kalahandi's lands lie barren and empty as most of the population has moved away or died of starvation.

Redistribution of land or community ownership alone cannot ensure food security. A paradoxical case is that of North Korea, according to Erich and Marilyn Weingartner in their paper "Yellow winds" of change in North Korea'. Land in North Korea is collectively owned, but cooperative farming has not been able to increase agricultural yields nor produce enough to adequately feed the population. The slow starvation and inadequate nutrition has led to an alarmingly high rate of malnutrition among children, they say in

'DPRK's stunted generation'. Around 16 percent of North Korean children suffer from acute malnutrition, a figure topped by only India and Bangladesh at 18 percent in all of Asia.

The situation of hunger in North Korea is a complex problematic, aggravated by the continued economic and political isolation of the country. Because the survival of North Korea's children is at stake, the authors argue that breaking this isolation, combined with 'creative policy initiatives' towards long-term solutions, is vital.

In this depressing scenario of all-pervasive poverty and growing hunger among farming communities, a ray of hope is offered by Farida Akhter in 'Changing strategies for future action and solidarity'. The farmers of Bangladesh have united to launch the Nayakrishi Andolon or new agricultural movement to counter the combined effects of globalisation and the WTO. Tens of thousands of farming families are part of this revival in the country and are being joined by their counterparts in the subcontinent as well as from other parts of Asia. Central to the essence of the movement is the community protection of biodiversity against monoculture.

It is this small seed of hope that is planted in their annual *pranbaichitra mela* (biodiversity festival) which has the potential of growing into a tree to offer succour to the beleaguered farmers of the world, and perhaps, secure food for everyone.

# Food Security, Safe Food and Sustainable Agriculture in the Context of Global Trade Negotiations

SAROJENI V. RENGAM

Cries of *WTO, Hell NO!, No to the WTO!, Junk WTO* reverberated from the streets of Seattle as 50,000 street protestors marched against the World Trade Organisation's Ministerial Meeting during 30 November-4 December 1999, in Seattle. This backdrop of street protests strengthened the resistance from Southern countries who stood fast against the trade agenda of the economic superpowers. The meeting ended in 'confusion' at the Seattle Conference Centre. Clarification on what happened or did not happen and what documents, formal and informal, have been issued has been eluding everyone since then.

The Seattle Ministerial Meeting was aimed to set the agenda for the renegotiations of a Millennium Round as proposed by the European Union (EU) and the US, which would have further consolidated and expanded trade liberalisation. Despite the collapse of the discussions in Seattle, it is expected that the talks on agriculture and the patenting

of life will be accelerated to prove that WTO is not dead or damaged. There is a great danger that these new agricultural talks will make matters worse for farmers both in the North and South.

### **Increased subsidies, liberalised trade**

The Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) describes, in fact, encourages, a model for agriculture that has basically only one dimension — increase the volume of traded agricultural products — and imperfectly articulated at that. The agreement affects tariff policies — closing a source of government revenue and a possible protection mechanism for local producers, public investment in food reserves — without which, a significant means of stabilising prices is lost, and limits choices for domestic intervention in supply and price management. The loopholes in the AoA — for example, the so-called ‘green box’ measures that describe allowed areas for public expenditure — all serve the interests of countries with large budgets and sophisticated administrations and encourages an agriculture that is highly subsidised.

In fact, in 1998, agricultural support within the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) totalled some US\$362 billion — higher than the US\$326 billion provided when the Uruguay Round began. In 1995, the US and EU spent over US\$15.7 billion subsidising wheat and maize production and this far outstrips financial support available to farmers in Asia. The average subsidy for a US farmer producing wheat is 25 times more than the total average per capita income in the 42 countries classified as low income. In addition, the largest category of agriculture trade is in the cereal markets. It generates US\$20 billion annually. Between the US and Europe, it accounts for half of all exports of wheat and wheat flour and the US alone accounts for three-quarters of all maize exports. Because production in the US and EU dominate world cereal prices, hence those are the prices against which producers in importing countries have to compete.

At the same time, these agreements require countries to liberalise their food systems, notably by reducing restrictions on imports. Allowing cheap food and products — from a highly subsidised and industrially produced system — to flood the market will force third world farmers to invariably lose out in the competition.

## **Linking agriculture to SAPs**

In addition, through SAP (structural adjustment programme) and the recent restructuring exercise of World Bank-IMF for East Asia, our countries have been told not to subsidise our farmers. Over the past couple of decades Southern countries have been encouraged, cajoled, threatened and generally pressured into unilaterally reducing the level of protection offered to their domestic food producers in the face of well-financed foreign competitors.

In the next round of negotiations, there will be pressure from the US and the EU for greater coherence between WTO, WB and IMF and the UN agencies. Such an agreement will further lock WB-IMF conditionalities to trade agreements in WTO and tighten the stranglehold of the US and EU over the economies of the South. In the light of the economic crisis in Asia and the role of IMF in the restructuring exercise, it is clear that our countries will be forced to accept trade liberalisation as a condition for the economic bailout.

Such market-oriented systems of production and distribution do not have a track record of being able to ensure food security nor in tackling the underlying causes of poverty which has made 800 million people go hungry, of which 500 million are in the Asia-Pacific region. FAO analysis shows that, despite record low prices over the last three years, poor developing countries' food bills have increased by an average of 20% as compared to 1994, the year the AoA was signed. At the same time, commodity prices the world over are setting new lows, damaging countries' ability to pay for imports by reducing the value of their foreign exchange.

It is impossible to generalise across all developing countries, of course, and output levels even in specific countries have fluctuated during the implementation period. But many developing countries remain on a trend of growing dependency on food imports. This trend has been intensified by the Asian crisis which has brought home a very stark message: Industrialisation of agriculture and dependence on export-oriented development at the expense of food production and agriculture is fraught with danger. Reliance on imports for food needs means, for many Asian countries, increase in food prices, uncertain food supplies, and price manipulations by monopoly grain corporations.

Meanwhile the need for foreign exchange earnings, especially at this time of crisis, is again intensifying the drive into export-oriented agriculture and therefore the increased use of pesticides and fertilisers. The use of pesticides, fertilisers, high-yielding seeds and other inputs are not only increasing in price but are also hazardous to human and environmental well-being. Food safety at this time of crisis takes a back seat to increasing food production and agricultural exports for profit.

Trade liberalisation and the AoA poses an even graver threat to the continued existence of small farms throughout the world. In reality, our small farmers have not been able to compete with highly industrialised, highly subsidised corporate farming. In fact, it is expected that in Mexico three million farmer families will be forced off their lands because of the effects of a trade agreement that was signed between the US, Canada and Mexico called NAFTA. In the Philippines, annually 15,000 farm families in rice cultivation are expected to lose their land. This further concentrates farm land in ever-fewer hands and especially in the hands of large corporations.

### **Feeding the TNCs**

Food production is shifted away from satisfying local and national needs for basic foods, to the demands of transnational agribusiness. In Brazil, local populations go hungry as nearby large-scale farms grow soybeans to feed cattle destined for North American markets. The logic is to increase trade, increase the distance food travels, increase the amount of processing and packaging. Those who benefit are the transnational corporations (TNCs).

Today, a handful of TNCs have significant control of all aspects of the agriculture and food systems. Agribusiness corporations amass billions while farmers and rural labourers are left with next to nothing. For example, Cargill, a US-based company, controls 77 percent of the total cereal trade. About five transnational corporations control between them about 90 percent of the export trade in wheat, corn, coffee, tea, pineapple, cotton, tobacco, jute and forest products. In 1998, Cargill and Monsanto announced a worldwide 50-50 joint venture to create and market new grain processing and animal feed products. This merger of Monsanto and Cargill will give them tremendous control over the global seeds business and in

transportation facilities. In 1999, DuPont acquired Pioneer Hi-Bred International, the largest seed company to the tune of US\$7.7 billion.

A steadily shrinking number of corporate giants are controlling the \$23 billion seeds industry. Takeovers and mergers have escalated. As a result, some analysts predict that through genetic engineering including herbicide tolerance and insect resistance traits, the global crop protection market would expand to a US\$100 billion-a-year industry. The control of both the seeds and agrochemical inputs by a few companies in the North will be devastating to the small farmers in the South.

On the other hand, the industry companies have repackaged their poor image to promote a greener image. However, they have often used misleading data to register their products in the South, misleading advertising that includes safety of their products and outright harassment of critics and legal action against governments who try to ban hazardous pesticides.

### **Killing seeds**

Meanwhile, another devastating technology known as 'Terminator technology' was created to prevent farmers from saving non-hybrid, open pollinated or genetically altered seed sold by seed companies. The technology will create sterile seeds by programming a plant's DNA to kill its own embryo. Open pollinated varieties of crops like wheat and rice are staples for most of the world's population. A seed company wants to ensure profits from its investments, we may say. However, many of their proprietary seeds are no more than genetically modified versions of older, reliable, conventionally bred strains that have been in the public domain for many years.

This technology will ensure that farmers and communities cannot save their seeds for the next season but continue to purchase seeds for every season and thus will be completely dependent on the company for its seeds.

There is another potential risk to the Terminator. Some molecular biologists reviewing the technology are concerned about the possibility of the terminator functions escaping the genome of the crops into which it has not been intentionally incorporated and moving into surrounding open-pollinated crops or wild related plants



in fields nearby. This means that the 'infection' may spread to surrounding food crops or to the natural environment and will cause a catastrophe. The gradual spread of sterility in seeding plants has the potential to eventually wipe out higher life forms, including humans. Massive pressure from public interests groups and the non-acceptance of the technology by key institutions pressured Monsanto — which had acquired 85 percent of the Terminator technology — to withdraw from its commercialisation.

However, Monsanto and other TNCs are now looking at a similar technology called Suicide Seeds whose genetic traits can be turned on and off by an external chemical 'inducer' — mixed with the company's patented agrochemicals. In the not-so-distant future, we may see farmers planting seeds that will develop into productive (but sterile) crops only if sprayed with a carefully prescribed regimen that includes the company's proprietary pesticide, fertiliser or herbicide.

Such developments ensure further intensification of the monopoly and control of a few corporations over our food systems and, in fact, the very essence of our survival. We cannot rely on corporations to meet our food needs. Our daily prayer for a bowl of rice cannot be to Monsanto or Novartis but to the thousands of farmers who are the producers of our food, the experts in sustainable agriculture and who have the knowledge to ensure our food security.

Food security requires a complex view of agriculture, one that incorporates subsistence production or alternative livelihoods for producers, diverse cultures and biological resources, publicly managed food reserves, and a regional perspective on food security needs. These are essential elements in agriculture but often overlooked by governments in their pursuit of so-called comparative advantage in agriculture where only one dimension of the function of agriculture, i.e. production for export, is prioritised and emphasised.

Consequently, sustainability and food security are not a priority. The complex farming systems of small subsistence farmers that allows for production systems which are diverse, adapted to local conditions and sustainably managed — even in harsh environments without the use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and other technologies — have been ignored.

## **Alternative approaches**

In Asia, there is also a growing resistance to a system which only views increased profits, through increased production, as the basis of agricultural development. The alternative view looks at production as only one facet of agricultural development. This alternative paradigm looks at agriculture as a holistic system, where other key concerns need to be considered in making decisions about development. Agriculture after all provides livelihood for millions of farmers, it is the essence of our culture, provides ecological services, and as such the products of farming cannot be treated in the same way as other goods.

New models and approaches are required if we are to enhance food security for the community within a framework which increases every person's status within the family, the community, the village and the country. Women's role, contribution and knowledge — key to food security and sustainable agriculture — have to be recognised and incorporate in any new models or approaches. Land tenure and rights over land are crucial issues for farmers if they are to adopt a broader view and invest in long-term sustainability of farming. Rural credit, infrastructure and services reaching the rural areas are also important. Small-scale projects all over the Southeast Asian region indicate that these are possible given the commitment and funds.

Another initiative, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) has become popular in the US, Europe and Japan and countries in the South such as India, Malaysia, Philippines and Sri Lanka. In this the consumers and local communities support and sustain farmers while farmers respond to the needs of the local communities in providing safe and nutritious food.

Sustainable agriculture systems have tended to learn from, and build upon, traditional alternative farming with the tools and technology that local farmers have utilised. This learning, innovating and building is an integral aspect in creating appropriate and sustainable forms of agriculture. These approaches place food security as its principal concern, within a holistic framework encompassing production, environment, women's participation and democratic functioning.

## **Reclaiming the stolen harvest**

The global challenge of trade liberalisation and the AoA has brought forth global resistance in the form of movements that are saying NO to WTO and its AoA! These movements are calling for respect for each country's and region's sovereignty over food and farming. In 1998 at the Asia-Pacific People's Assembly more than 600 key leaders in people's organisations and public interest groups called for a dismantling of trade agreements that have negative impact on the people's Asia.

La Via Campesina, an international coalition of small and peasant producers from every region of the world, has called for agriculture to be removed from the WTO's purview altogether, on the grounds that international trade concerns should not set domestic agriculture priorities.

Thirty thousand people from around the world marched in Vancouver calling for an end to APEC and 10,000 marched in Geneva to say No to WTO. And as mentioned earlier 50,000 people marched in Seattle. And the resistance is growing.

As Mark Ritchie of the Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy, said in his analysis of Seattle, "Seattle will be remembered for a lot of things including the courage of mostly young people who stood solidly and steadfastly in the face of a furious assault. My hope is that it will be also be remembered as a watershed event — a time and place where 'We the People' confronted dysfunctional and oppressive global institutions with new ideas and new energy."

Vandana Shiva in her analysis said, "... the future of the WTO will be shaped far more by what happened on the streets of Seattle and in the non-government organisational events than by what happened in the Convention Centre. The challenge for the future is to change the global trade rules and national food and agricultural policies so that these practices can be nurtured and spread and ecological agriculture, which protects small farms and peasant livelihoods, and produces safe food, is not marginalised and criminalised. The time has come to reclaim the stolen harvest and celebrate the growing and giving of good food as the highest gift and the most revolutionary act."

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Diverse Women for Diversity list service

# Globalisation, Poverty, and Food Security: Towards the New Millennium

UTSA PATNAIK

The present period is one of retrospection, as we take stock of the achievements and failures of a half-century of developmental efforts in an India independent of colonial rule. In the last decade, under the pressure of international developments and the Bretton Woods institutions' hegemonic neo-liberal vision for indebted countries, there has been a decisive shift in the policies followed in India towards greater opening to global markets and capital flows, and this is having profound effects on our economy and society. As we move inexorably towards the new millennium, the question inevitably arises — when will we succeed in finally doing away with the stigma of being the one country in the world, with the largest numbers of absolutely poor people, the largest number of illiterate people, the largest number of malnourished children, the largest number of maternal deaths in parturition, the largest number of child workers — the list is seemingly endless. All these statistics, a half-century ago, were applicable to China, not to India; but socialist China by 1978 (the end of the Maoist period) or in three decades after its formation had already done immeasurably better than has India by 1998, five

decades after Independence, in the spheres of health, education and poverty reduction. It is necessary to identify the salient failures in our development effort and their cause in order to see the way forward. This is all the more important in an era when fuller participation in the world economy via external trade liberalisation and internal structural adjustment programmes is being put forward as the panacea to all problems — an agenda which sounds hollow even to some of its advocates after Southeast Asia's travails, admittedly, but an agenda that is still being pushed strongly by the Bretton Woods institutions.

This paper will be divided into the following parts. In the first, we will cast a brief look over the main achievements and failures with respect to the reduction of poverty and ensuring food security during the period 1950-90 of 'food first' policies when there were restrictions on trade in agricultural products and a relatively low extent of integration into global markets. In the second part we will look more closely at the specific reasons for some improvement in food security and reduction in poverty in the 80s. In the third, we discuss in what ways in the era of greater integration into world trade and investment flows ('globalisation'), trade liberalisation accompanied by 'structural adjustment' actually raised poverty (and even the all-India crude death rate in one year of maximum adjustment) in the first half of the 90s. In the last part we will indicate the type of dangers which have emerged for small-scale industry and for agriculture from the mindless liberalisation and exposure to the global market, currently under way.

### **Aspects of the *dirigiste* development strategy, 1950-1990**

In the two decades before Independence, colonised Indian society had experienced fast-changing crisis factors: the world agricultural Depression which pauperised peasants through falling terms of trade, the trauma of war, deficit-financed war expenditures and rapid foodgrains price rise, affecting people everywhere in India but especially so in Bengal where expenditures by the colonial government were highest and therefore uncontrolled rice price rise culminated in the great man-made famine of 1943-44 in which at least three million people lost their lives. Since the per capita foodgrains availability had earlier fallen by nearly 40 percent in Bengal between WWI and the end of British rule, compared to

almost 20 percent decline in Punjab (on average in British India it fell by 29 percent), this had already increased the famine-vulnerability of the poor, as had falling farmers' incomes as the global prices for primary products fell. The main reason for the fall in per head food availability was the rapid growth of export crops which grew over ten times faster than did the foodgrains it displaced.

The architects of early planning, like P C Mahalanobis had seen before their own eyes the devastating effects of the uncontrolled market on peoples' livelihoods;<sup>1</sup> therefore in their vision, regulating markets, planning for growth and an emphasis on food self-sufficiency were all essential planks of the *dirigiste* (directed, or guided) strategy which they put in place. For this it was necessary to de-link from the global market which had pauperised Indian peasants; the Mahalanobis model therefore assumed stagnant export earnings which was equivalent to thinking of India as a closed economy which had to pull itself up by its own domestic efforts, not relying on advanced countries to give access to their markets. Since Indian society was not a socialist one with any form of collective property, 'planning' had a very different content and meaning from that say in China: basically India was a free-enterprise economy where the state tried to *guide* the direction of investment into certain sectors it considered important, through licensing, monetary and credit policy and other means; and the state itself directly invested in a range of heavy industry and in infrastructure much as Meiji Japan had done a century earlier.

It is not generally realised that *the state profile in India even at the height of planning was much lower than that it is in any advanced capitalist country today including the USA*. Thus all European states but two, at the central level alone spend 43 to 52 percent of GDP annually and finance this by raising annual taxes of 33 to 42 percent of GDP whereas the Indian state has never raised more than 16 percent of GDP as taxes considering both Centre and states together, and has spent only one-quarter of GDP annually at most, both these ratios falling further in recent years as the state withdraws from productive activity. Many have called India a 'mixed economy' and attached a great deal of importance to the rhetoric of socialism; in our view, India has been a free-enterprise economy with every safeguard for private property, but with a certain degree of state investment and direction, where the latter has been very much



less intensive than that say in Japan or in Korea, and where the state presence in the economy has been only about half the level of most advanced capitalist European countries.<sup>2</sup> The myth of a large state presence and control of the economy in India, is propagated by the industrial countries' global institutions which wish to see weak nation states in the third world at the same time that they strengthen their own state structures and intervention.

There were important positive achievement of the *dirigiste* strategy. It laid the foundation of a diversified range of industry particularly in heavy industry, energy and intermediates, where only a handful of consumer goods industries and a small iron industry had existed in 1950; it built up our own technological capacity and a skilled person-power base; and it raised overall foodgrains production at a faster rate than population was growing, so that by 1990 the per capita availability of foodgrains from domestic sources was about one-sixth higher than in 1950. Distribution is a different matter, which we discuss in more detail in the other sections; but compared to the colonial period when food availability per head was falling and compared to present-day experience in most countries in Africa and in Latin America where food production per head continues to fall as they pursue exports-first policies, the raising of average food availability in India up to 1990 was a most significant fact which should not be under-rated, even as we rightly criticise the highly inegalitarian policies of promoting 'green revolution' through which it was achieved.

Where the Indian strategy of *dirigiste* development signally failed was in its feeble attempts to reduce the concentration of wealth and of incomes. This is the main reason for the continuous pulling away of *de facto* income distribution, from the egalitarian ideal and towards greater and greater concentration over time. It is the reason for the failure to reduce high levels of poverty until the mid-80s; it is also the reason for the insufficient expansion of the domestic market for mass consumption goods which slowed down and undermined planned growth, forcing Indian capitalists to turn to foreign collaboration to produce for the external market.

A most important arena of failure in addressing wealth concentration was and remains that of agrarian reform. Even though *land to the tiller* had been the slogan on the basis of which the

peasantry had been mobilised during the freedom struggle, the Indian capitalists reached a historic compromise with the landed interest, which meant that no serious attempt was made to translate this slogan into reality. The possibilities of a genuine agrarian reform which existed in the 50s under the then undisputed leadership of the Congress both at the Centre and the states, were frittered away and the hopes of the land-poor and landless betrayed. Intermediary tenures were indeed done away with but the ex-intermediaries remained as the most powerful rural class in their new *avatar* of landlords since they could retain large areas claiming it as *khud-kasht* or own-cultivated land. We estimate from NSS data that about 12 percent or one-eighth only of the total cultivated area was redistributed in India up to the 1980s compared to 46 percent or nearly half in China by 1955. Both Japan and Korea also saw a very radical redistribution of land in the social upheavals of the post-War period, and in both countries the mass market was considerably expanded. Further, in China there was land seizure without compensation and there was free distribution to the landless and land-poor;<sup>3</sup> in Japan there was nominal payment to landlords, who could keep only 2.45 acres; by contrast landlords in India were compensated with cash and bonds, the burden of paying this being imposed on Indian tenants. Total compensation was Rs670 crore (Rs6.7 billion, about US\$160 m) of which Rs360 crore (about US\$84 m) had been paid in the first two decades of reform, by 1972. This may not seem much today but the total burden comes to over 7 percent of the entire First Plan outlay and was disbursed to a minuscule segment of the intermediaries.<sup>4</sup>

The failure of India on the land reform front was much more than only of economic significance. It has set back the agenda of social progress by a whole generation, by perpetuating the relations of caste/class based social dominance exercised by the landed elite over the vast mass of poor, illiterate and caste-oppressed people even while some upward mobility took place for the middle castes/classes. The trading and capitalist classes, and the educated professional urban elite have also participated in this continuing social oppression as beneficiaries of the cheap and docile labour-power perforce supplied by the destitute rural migrants mainly from backward and *dalit* castes at the bottom of the village system, who crowd in to urban slums in their search for a livelihood. After half a century of seeing little or no amelioration of their position, these

historically disadvantaged segments of Indian society no longer have any faith in the traditional ruling classes and their own movements have been on the upsurge, although so far it is mainly a caste-consciousness rather than class consciousness which permeates them.

The remarkably swift rise of the retrogressive political movement of the high-caste elite preaching *Hindutva* in recent years, is the dialectical counterpart of and reaction to the new assertiveness of the *dalits* and the backward castes, and we see today therefore a rapid process of political polarisation of our society. It is fair to say, that it is no longer possible for people in public life to sit on the fence, to preach a third way between oppressor and oppressed, or to hide their true views as they earlier could under umbrella organisations with a vague articulation of progressive sounding ideas which were never seriously put into practice. The touchstone of the democrat today is whether she is prepared to back the movements of the oppressed to the hilt and oppose the movement of the socially backward looking minority, whether for her national pride consists in tackling the problems of poverty and illiteracy and not in wasting public money in an arms race, whether food security for the people is paramount, or an opportunistic theoretical compromise with the trade liberalisation which is seriously undermining that food security while promising profits to a few.

A second major failure of the *dirigiste* strategy, related also to the absence of effective land reforms, was that of generating employment fast enough to provide a reasonable livelihood to the people. The most rapid possible growth of industry cannot solve our problem of employment and surplus labour, as was clear even as early as up to the mid-60s when we saw that a 9 percent annual growth rate of industry generated a mere 3 percent annual growth rate of employment, not enough to absorb the increment to the urban labour force, leave alone shift the occupational distribution of the work force away from agriculture and towards the secondary sector. The proportion of the total population dependent on agriculture and related activities never went below the 66 percent figure in the long three decades from 1950 to 1980. In the decade of the 80s it slowly started shifting down for reasons we will explore in the next section, but again in the 90s there has been a reversal as the cutbacks on state development spending reduced employment sharply.

## **Improved food security and some poverty reduction in the 80s**

We have elsewhere characterised the period 1950-90 as broadly one of 'food first' policies in the sphere of agriculture, which has been jettisoned for an 'exports first' set of policies in the current decade of the 90s as India went in for trade liberalisation and structural adjustment.<sup>5</sup> The main planks of the latter as it affects agriculture and food security, has been the rapid freeing of both exports and imports of agricultural commodities. Trade in agricultural products were brought within the purview of the GATT negotiations for the first time in the prolonged Uruguay Round of negotiations, which via the Dunkel draft brought in provisions for ensuring market access for the North's agricultural products and changes in the patent laws relating to products of plant and animal origin. As a signatory to the GATT 1994, India committed itself to doing away with quantitative restrictions on agricultural trade and to amending its patent laws. We will look at the impact of this liberalisation briefly in the next section, at present noting that these measures are a complete reversal of the earlier emphasis on food security, which may have been flawed with regard to the concept of 'food security' itself, but nevertheless represented some awareness of the dangers of relying excessively on the international market.

What exactly do we understand by 'food security'? A rather *narrow definition* of food security was adopted in the era of 'food first' policies especially from the mid-60s food crisis. It was understood as the ability of the population especially its poorer segments, to access its basic food requirements of staple grains. There were two aspects to this: the sheer physical availability of basic foodgrains which could be ensured at the national level through increasing output, and which had to be brought to shops within a reasonable distance to final consumers; and real purchasing power: the component of this which was stressed was a reasonably low price such that the poor were able to purchase most of what they needed without forgoing too much of other essentials. What a more *comprehensive idea of food security must include*, is measures to shift actively the distribution of incomes towards the poor as average income rises; as we have seen this aspect was a total failure of the *dirigiste* strategy, for inequality worsened.

The achievement of national self-sufficiency in food production is a necessary but not sufficient condition for food security. It is necessary particularly for a vast country like India which, like China, cannot realistically rely on the vagaries of the global market to supply any substantial shortfall which might arise in its food output. The world market in foodgrains is dominated by the OECD countries with North America and Western Europe providing four-fifths of market supplies. Northern countries can produce very little apart from cereals, root crops and dairy products owing to their cold climate, and are heavily dependent on the world market to dispose of a high fraction of their farm output. Their strategy has always been to acquire external markets for their grains and dairy products, by heavy subsidies to their producers and by dumping if necessary, while trying to prise open third world countries' lands with their diverse productive capacity, and initiate an export thrust from them at low prices of the tropical products they are incapable of themselves producing, which are however a vital part of their populations' high living standards via a diversified consumption basket.<sup>6</sup>

Food imports into a third world country whenever it has been substantial and the outcome of domestic output failure has always carried political conditions, either immediate and blatantly visible ones (as when Bangladesh was asked not to trade with Cuba as a condition for receiving US grains during its 1974 crisis) or it has had less visible long-term effects (as the use of rupee counterpart funds in India under the USA's PL 480 programme in the 60s when India was dependent on food aid).

As will be clear from Table 1, from a situation when it was a large foodgrains importer in the 60s, India had attained national self-sufficiency in food production from the second half of the 70s onwards when imports dropped to negligible levels and some periods even saw a small export. Availability refers to the sum of domestic output plus net imports plus change in stocks; while up to the mid-70s rising per head availability could only be ensured by quite large food imports, as the 'green revolution' fructified domestic output proved sufficient. This table also brings out the green revolution's unbalanced emphasis on cereals at the expense of pulses; while annual cereals availability per head rose by 34 kg between the 50s and the 90s, we find that precisely the period of 'green revolution' — namely the two decades beginning in the 60s — saw a sharp drop in

per head pulses availability from 22 kg to 14 kg ; even though efforts have been made to stem the rot and the rate of decline has certainly slowed down, at present every Indian has only half the level of pulses available as in the early 1950s — only 12 kg. compared to 24 kg. then. Pulses have been traditionally the main source of protein for the poor who cannot afford animal protein sources like milk in adequate amounts; the average mass diet has thus worsened considerably in terms of nutritional balance even as its calorific value has risen. The average Indian has still not recovered the consumption level she had at the end of WWI owing to the large food availability decline by nearly 30 percent which had taken place in British India until Independence.

However 'food self-sufficiency' is always defined in terms of satisfaction of internal market demand, not in terms of satisfaction of peoples' basic needs; and this is where the question of purchasing power and access to basic food needs in the sense of ability to purchase, become very important in a poor country. It is quite possible for output per head to rise but if the distribution of the output worsens, we may end up with the same or even higher levels of poverty. This is precisely what happened; despite the steady rise in the per head grain output, the share of the total population which was below the poverty line, did not fall in any trend sense until the 1980s, as Table 11 shows. The distribution of the increased average supplies, was not towards those who were the most poor and deprived but towards the upper groups of consumers, who became better off and ate more grain-intensive animal products even while the poor population remained as numerous — increasing in absolute terms and maintaining the same high share of the population, over two-fifths, during more than 30 years after 1950. Urban poverty is very largely the outcome of the migration of rural destitutes to city slums in search of a livelihood. The ability to reduce hard-core urban poverty which in isolation from other factors could be relatively easy to do, is constantly undermined by the new waves of migration undercutting urban wages and replenishing the pool of unorganised surplus labour for small scale industry and the service sector. The key to reducing urban poverty thus lies in the provision of employment and food security in rural India.

This outcome of increase in concentration of incomes was the logical accompaniment of the strategy of change followed in the

rural areas in particular — which entailed little effective land reform and relied on the well-to-do farmers and the landlords in already irrigated areas to deliver output growth. Between the early 60s and the mid-70s, the real earnings of rural labour fell drastically and the rapid food price inflation of the period also hit hard all net purchasers of foodgrains — the small farmers, urban unorganised labour, petty artisans, small cash crop producers and so on.<sup>7</sup> It was owing to the widespread unrest following food price inflation, and the price-rise resistance movement, that political Emergency was imposed in mid-1975. We may identify this as the beginning of the erosion of the political hegemony of the Congress party, starting in the Southern states.

From this period onwards the state intervention in the foodgrains economy rose considerably, for the inflation-sensitivity of the population, its vocal urban lower income segment in particular had been demonstrated in no uncertain terms. By the mid-80s the FCI and state agencies were procuring at least one-eighth of the gross grain output, in some years up to one-sixth; as a share of total market supplies this was very substantial, ranging from one-third to four-fifths. Table 11 also shows that urban poverty has been consistently below rural poverty, and that even urban poverty had not declined much until the 80s. It was only in the 80s that rural poverty fell to below 40 percent of the population for the first time since Independence and continued to fall until it reached the lowest level estimated so far, 34 percent in 1989-90.

It goes without saying that the poverty measure we are using is itself inadequate because it looks at nutritional deficit alone and does not specify that a minimum amount of clothing, shelter, water and fuel needs must be met. Also, the NSS data on which all poverty measures are based group the consumption expenditure data in such a way as to understate poverty, so actual levels of poverty are likely to be higher. In the absence of any better country-wide statistics however we have no alternative to using the NSS data. As long as we do not take the exact figures as sacred, the estimates can validly tell us about trends of change over time — assuming the degree of underestimation of poverty has itself not changed.

What happened during the 80s, to improve food security somewhat for the poor and initiate a decline in poverty? We will



discuss this question at some length because it will help to explain how and why the new policies of cutting development outlays and cutting social subsidies in the 90s as part of SAP, necessarily results in rise in mass poverty. As a result of a very detailed analysis<sup>8</sup> of the reasons behind the fall in poverty during the 80s and rise in poverty during the early 90s, we find the following main factors at work:

First and most important, the extension of the Public Distribution System of foodgrains and other necessities to the rural areas on quite a significant scale took place from the end-70s onwards. This was linked to the assumption of power in a number of states, of non-Congress popular governments which seemed at least during that period, to be rather more responsive to mass demands. Until the early 80s it was the three Left-dominated states: West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala, along with the sensitive border state Jammu & Kashmir, and the Union Territory of Delhi, where at least a third or more of grain needs per head of population, were being met from the PDS whereas in other states with much higher poverty incidence, such as Bihar and Orissa, a very small fraction of needs were being met by the PDS. (See K N Kabra's evaluation in *The Public Distribution System in India* 1992)

However this picture of good PDS functioning being confined almost entirely to the Left bastions, changed in the course of the 80s: both the NTR government in Andhra Pradesh and the non-Congress Tamilnadu governments placed a high priority on providing additional subsidy out of state funds over and above the Central food subsidy to keep the final price of basic grains affordable for the poor. Andhra Pradesh operated a highly popular Rs2 per kg. rice scheme, Tamilnadu started a scheme of meals for schoolchildren as Kerala had already done much earlier, and registered improvement in school enrolment rates. The Janata government in Karnataka too extended the PDS.

All this would not have worked well in isolation if many of these states had not also tried at the same time to revive democratic decentralisation such as the system of village self-government in a new form through regular elections for village *panchayats*. West Bengal had done this already with some success, because registration of the sharecroppers in 1978 followed by campaigns to restrict rent to legal levels, had laid the basis for a considerable weakening of the hold of the *jotedar* and moneylender on rural society, allowing the

*panchayats* to become more representative than they would have been otherwise. Andhra Pradesh introduced the *mandala* system and Karnataka revived *panchayats* while Kerala which was already far ahead of other states on many social indicators, launched a drive for complete literacy and recently initiated comprehensive 'planning from below'. All measures which increase democratic participation would also raise the effectiveness and reach of a public distribution system.

The common criticism of the PDS regarding its urban bias is thus no longer as valid as it was earlier. Since 1971 the number of fair price shops distributing PDS supplies has more than tripled to 400,000, the bulk of the addition being in rural areas, and domestic food procurement tonnage has more than trebled as well. Although the share of food subsidy in GDP rose little from 0.4 to 0.6 percent, more of the subsidy went to rural areas in recent years.

Our poverty study shows that the most important determinant of decline in poverty everywhere in India from the late 70s to 1987, and the continuing decline in certain states even during 1987 to 1993 when all-India poverty was rising, was the ability of those states to hold down the prices of basic food grains in an extended PDS even when the prices of other goods were rising. It might be asked, how an individual state can influence food price when the Central government fixes the issue price of foodgrains on a uniform basis for all states. This issue price is already the outcome of applying a central food subsidy, which covers the cost of transport, handling and storage. The main procuring areas being in North India these costs would otherwise raise price excessively in the other states. The state-level issue price is usually higher than the central issue price owing to local costs of movement, handling and storage which also have to be covered.

Despite a uniform central issue price however, as Table 6 shows there is a lot of variation among states regarding the price at which grains were actually supplied locally. This difference arose from the fact of an *additional subsidy* being provided out of the state budget by those states which had some sensitivity to popular demands. Owing to the extra subsidy, some states restricted the local issue price to within 10-11 percent higher only than the central price, (Kerala Karnataka and West Bengal) while others gave even larger additional

subsidy and lowered the local issue price to notably below the central price (Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu) or slightly below it (Rajasthan). The maximum decline in the rural poverty percentage during 1977 to 1993, took place precisely in the four South Indian states and in West Bengal, and the most important reason for this was their holding the food price line when it was rising everywhere else in India.

The data on poverty decline are summarised in Table 5 which shows that over the entire 16 year period studied, 1977 to 1993, the rural poverty percentage fell to the maximum extent in the whole of India, in Andhra Pradesh (58 percent) followed closely by Kerala (56 percent) then Tamilnadu, Karnataka and West Bengal, all with over 40 percent decline in the poverty ratio. By contrast the poorest performance in lowering the poverty ratio was registered by Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Assam — viz. the entire Gangetic Plains region of upper India excluding only West Bengal, and extending up to Assam. This region accounts for the bulk of the country's population. While Haryana had low poverty levels to begin with, the situation in the other states is serious because they had initial poverty levels which were quite high. As a result the regional concentration of poverty in India is shifting away from South India and getting concentrated more in Central and Northern India.

Comparing this table with Table 6 showing PDS issue prices by states, we can see that Andhra provided the cheapest foodgrains through its three-tier pricing system — the regular PDS price which was about a quarter higher than the central issue price to cover local costs of handling, a price 35 percent lower than the central issue price to white card holders and a price as much as 51 percent lower to the poor and to educational institutions. The Andhra pricing system of universal access but differential prices, deserves to be closely studied; unfortunately it is already in the process of being dismantled under the pernicious 'state-level structural adjustment programme' sought to be currently implemented there with the advice of economists from the Harvard Development Institute, and if this is done fully, we may expect to see a resurgence of poverty in that state. Tamilnadu has been supplying all categories of ration card holders with rice at a third lower price than the CIP while Delhi and Rajasthan are between 8 and 12 percent lower. Kerala, Karnataka

and West Bengal have limited the rise over the CIP to 10 percent or so, below Rs6 per kg.

The second important factor behind poverty reduction in the 80s was the considerable growth in spending by Central and state governments (though unevenly) on rural development and related areas like power and infrastructure. Some of it was planned but most of it was an upward deviation of the actual spending from budgeted spending, which accelerated with the 1987 drought. As may be seen from Table 7 the actual rural development and related expenditures were 13 percent of the nation's income every year during 1985-90 compared to the planned 7.8 percent only. While Maharashtra had operated an employment guarantee scheme for many years, now other drought prone and backward areas also saw increased spending. Whatever the leakages and the corruption, these schemes did generate non-farm employment and incomes on a big scale which through their multiplier effects influenced the entire rural economy. For the first time there was a definite fall in the share of agricultural work and rise in the share of non-farm work among the rural households (see Table 8) and since the latter was more paying, real wages and earnings of rural labour rose, which helped poverty to fall. Economists were excited about the work-force diversification, seeing it as the beginning of rural India pulling itself out of the morass of low-productivity farm labour. In the 90s however this brief positive spurt was to be completely reversed with SAP.<sup>9</sup>

### **Adverse effects of liberalisation and SAP on food security**

All the positive trends regarding food security and poverty reduction came to an end with the IMF extended financing facility loan of \$4.8 billion in 1991 and the commitment to liberalise and implement SAP. Advised by the Fund-Bank, the minority central government slashed development expenditures to contain the budget deficit and made it more difficult for state governments to borrow. At the all-India level poverty rose sharply by 1992 according to all estimates (to 44 percent in villages, a level not seen for a decade) and *the all-India crude death rate rose in 1992*. Poverty rose firstly, because non-farm jobs were at once badly affected (Table 8), unemployment rose, and earnings fell.

Some states however defied the advice and minimised the cuts, like Kerala and Tamilnadu while others actually continued to raise expenditures like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. (Table 9 gives the change in state expenditures to GDP ratio under SAP). Poverty continued to decline during the reform period in all the South Indian states, *because they deviated from SAP requirements*. The worst affected by decline in development expenditures under SAP were clearly Bihar, Orissa, Punjab and West Bengal. Poverty rose in all these latter states except in West Bengal; how rural poverty did not rise but indeed continued to fall though more slowly in West Bengal despite drastic squeeze on spending, deserves investigation. Was it perhaps a case of better use of the reduced funds in employment generating projects because the *panchayat* system was strong?

Against this background of falling non-farm jobs (Table 8), the cropping pattern shifts taking place with export liberalisation which we discuss briefly below become all the more worrying as the net impact may be to reduce employment even more by diverting land away from more labour-intensive crops like rice to prawn fisheries or from crops to horticulture. The risk factor for farmers has also increased greatly with the new export orientation, since international prices are notoriously volatile, and with a short-term global price rise, unsustainable expansion of a cash crop output, glut and price crash often takes place, aided and abetted by export agents. Between 1990 and 1995 the area under foodgrains fell by nearly 5 million hectare and that under raw cotton, soyabean and other oilseeds increased in total to almost the same extent.

The fastest growing individual crop was raw cotton which had seen a violent export thrust during 1990 onwards. Thus exports jumped from an average of 35,000t. during the four years before 1990-1 to more than 10 times higher at 374,000t. in that year, and maintained a high average of 200,000t. in the next three years. Owing to the sudden jump in exports there was a domestic raw cotton famine, open market yarn price trebled and tens of thousands of handloom and powerloom weavers were badly hit. The unregulated raw cotton export thrust led to decline of industry as large numbers of powerlooms closed down. Despite this the Commerce Ministry gave the go-ahead to more exports in early 1997, resulting in further rise in raw cotton price and the closure of an even larger number of powerloom enterprises. Higher domestic raw material price reduced

the competitiveness of our textile industry and exports of the raw material, cheap by world standards, pleased India's textile competitors. Not only raw cotton, but wheat and rice too was exported on a large scale by government itself during 1995 and 1996 as stocks piled up in FCI godowns and more people went hungry. The deeds of the colonial exploiting East India Company are sought to be replicated by our own government as it caves in to the neo-imperialist agenda of economic recolonisation of third world countries. Every demand of the Bretton Woods institutions is a demand for economic recolonisation, and every concession is an erosion of sovereignty.

*Suicides by Farmers:* Did the raw cotton export boom benefit farmers growing the crop? The recent spate of suicides by cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and elsewhere provides the answer. The risk of producing a commercial crop is borne entirely by the grower, and the risk is greatly increased when the cash crop is grown on contract for export, according to the seed and fertiliser-pesticide regime prescribed by the purchaser. The majority of cotton farmers are small farmers and most take land partly or wholly on lease. The Indian farmer is highly price-responsive and has been since colonial times. As the world cotton price improved and exports grew, hoping to improve their economic position many thousands of such farmers rapidly expanded the area sown to cotton, taking large cash advances from traders and commission agents and loans from banks to meet the extra seed and input costs, on vast tracts of rain-fed land in Andhra, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Both dealers in uncertified seed and in substandard pesticides have a field day under such boom conditions of rapid area expansion with no state supervision as everything is left to the allegedly 'efficient' market.

The cotton crop is susceptible to a large variety of pests and the unholy trinity of commission agent/moneylender, pesticide dealer and seed-supplier all had a role to play in the debacle, as farmers purchased uncertified seed, spent huge sums of money applying substandard pesticides to their pest-affected crop but could not save an iota of it. Had they grown their old drought and pest resistant local jowar and ragi they would have had something to eat: with reliance on cotton, they neither had anything to eat nor any prospect of clearing the large, unviably debts already incurred. Many were driven to the extreme step of ending their lives, leaving their families to face a harsh neo-liberal world. Of course, suicides have not been confined

to cotton growers but have also occurred among growers of tur dal and chillies in northern Karnataka, producing for the domestic market. The point is that the small and middle farmers are highly vulnerable to risk, which exists for domestically consumed cash crops too, but which are increased greatly for an export crop. The grower can do nothing about the volatile global price of the export crop and neither can the national state. The current plight of rubber growers in Kerala facing crashing world price for rubber is again a case in point.

From the imperialist countries' point of view the beauty of the system is that via the Fund-Bank, the same policies of primary product export thrust can be urged successfully upon dozens of third world countries producing similar tropical to subtropical products, so with about 80 exporting DC's competing with each other to increase supplies the trend in dollar world commodity price cannot be anything but downwards. This is aided by pressure on indebted countries to devalue, not once but again and again, to remain 'competitive' vis a vis each other and this means much cheaper dollar cost of the same volume of imports for advanced countries. Devaluation need not reflect any change in so-called 'fundamentals' but simply be the result of a strategically placed rumour from the Fund that an advice to devalue is imminent. Since 1990 the rupee has been made to depreciate against the hard currencies by 100 percent.

Taking all developing countries the 80s had seen 50 percent fall in unit dollar price of primary products and the fall is continuing in the 90s despite the odd year or two of upsurge in coffee or cotton (usually owing to disease in a large exporter country and supply shortfall). The 1993 World Bank report on commodity prices predicts steadily falling international terms of trade for primary -product exporters well into the next century.

There is every reason to think that India is falling into the 'primary exports trap' as the Sub-Saharan African countries and the Latin American countries have already done. The trap consists in exporting more and more physical volumes of products at falling unit dollar price so that the country has to run harder and harder to stay in the same place with regard to export earnings. Thus during 1985 to 1993 the developing countries export volumes grew at 9 percent annually but their share in world export earnings fell and the



purchasing power of exports growth, almost halved. At the same time in order to export more, scarce land is diverted from foodcrops.

As cashcrops claim more area at the expense of grains, yield has not risen enough to compensate for area decline and the compound growth rate of foodgrains output has dropped to only 1.7 percent, below the population growth rate, during the period 1990-91 to 1995-96 for the first time in three decades (Table 2). The decline of rice, coarse grains and of pulses have been especially sharp. We had warned of this outcome in an article written in end-1992, based on the experience of other third world countries liberalising trade,<sup>10</sup> but it gives us no satisfaction to see that our warning was justified. In 1996-97 there was a large jump in total grain output to 198 million t., but 'step-function' behaviour in agriculture is common, and as we had predicted (in the *Alternative Economic Survey 1996-97*) the output in 1997-98 has fallen below this peak (to 195 mt. owing to continuing fall in coarse grains and pulses).

Making foodgrains at reasonable rates available through a public distribution system does not in itself address the problem of raising the real incomes of those in poverty, particularly those in medium-deep to deep poverty. The complexity of the question may be judged from the fact, for example, that Kalahandi, which has become notorious for starvation deaths among its tribals, has had for the last 30 years, a considerably *higher* level of per head paddy production than not only the Orissa average, but even the all-India average. The tribal population produces more than enough for its food needs; but it cannot keep even its bare subsistence requirements because most producers are part or pure tenants who have to pay exorbitant rent to their landlords and they are in debt to the commission agents and traders (the latter are all Marwaris). Most of their output is taken away via exorbitant rents and interest and moves as commoditised grain across the borders to neighbouring states, leaving no cash in their hands to buy food even if it were available in fair-price shops. We are back again at the basic requirements of reform in land relations, without which the necessary conditions for food security cannot be established for those enmeshed in rent and interest burdens. Even with a rural PDS of adequate reach the inhabitants of an area like Kalahandi might not be able to satisfy their minimum needs through purchase.

The profile of poverty from all-India data for 1987-88 shows that poverty is a phenomenon concentrated among *rural labour, scheduled castes and tribes, and female headed households*. These are not mutually exclusive categories but are overlapping. Thus although 35 percent of all rural households were dependent on labour, they made up 46 percent of all rural poor since three-fifths of the group was in poverty. Scheduled castes and tribes were 29 percent of households and 37 percent of all poor. Nearly half of all rural female-headed households were poor.

Raising real incomes through productive employment becomes important for those for whom farming on their own pieces of land or related activities, do not bring in enough incomes. Here, too, the 80s had marked a break with earlier trends by way of greatly increased state expenditures on rural development activities under various heads, which despite its inadequacy did bring some relief and helped reduce poverty.

The effects on food prices of the new policies under SAP were felt immediately after the minority Congress government assumed power in mid-1991, for it raised the issue price of foodgrains from the fair price shops to consumers, to a greater extent than it raised the procurement price paid to farmers, in order to cut the food subsidy. It kept raising issue prices steeply until 1994, so that wheat and rice price was 85 percent higher compared to 1990. The steep food price rise however boomeranged on the government because, not able to buy from the ration shops, a large segment of consumers were priced out of the mis-named 'fair-price shops' and they moved into poverty; the number of poor people rose by at least 30 million. As may be checked from Table 9, the off-take dropped by 9 million tonnes between 1990 and 1995 and stocks built up even faster because procurement remained good. The cost of holding larger and larger stocks of grain meant that the subsidy was not going to the consumer but mainly to the FCI for stock-holding: from nearly 90 percent the consumer subsidy was down to 60 percent of the total by 1995. This was a case of the greatest bungling ever seen in the history of the PDS, and a direct result of the Fund-Bank pressure to cut subsidies. The storehouses were bursting with grain and at least 30 million more people had been pushed from regular poverty even deeper into nutritional poverty.

Cutting subsidies on food, health and education which benefit the masses is part of the neo-liberal theology, and goes hand in hand with their advocacy of giving more spending money to the already well-to-do by way of lower taxes on them and making the latest consumer durables available to them. Shifting incomes, however unequal they already might be, even more towards the well-to-do is part of the largely successful political strategy of the Bretton Woods institutions for winning the support of local elite in third world countries for 'austerity' measures, viz. policies of reducing state development spending and cutting social expenditures. Their policies may be summed up as austerity for the poor, and more spending money for the well-to-do. The economic rationale is very clear: more incomes in the hands of the top 10 percent or so constituting the elite of the given population means a larger market for the white goods, automobiles, cellular phones, processed foods, etc. which Northern countries would like to sell, whether by exporting them to the third world country or by setting up units within the country for the local market. India on account of the large absolute size of its so-called 'middle class' is an attractive market and moreover most of the Indian elite has an ape-like propensity to imitate, in this case Northern consumption patterns and is thought to be amenable to the strident advertising campaigns which we have seen in recent years.<sup>11</sup> Policies which increase the share of incomes going to the top 10 percent of the population and expand this market are thus pushed under the guise of other arguments derived from 'supply-side economics', (for example because it would allegedly raise the savings rate in the economy).

Mass income growth being reduced however is desirable from the Northern countries' point of view because they would like to see a larger share of India's highly biodiverse land resources being devoted to the non-foodgrain crops they cannot for climatic reasons produce in their own countries at all, or not in sufficient amounts and which they wish to import. If mass rural incomes rose faster, so would India's domestic demand for basic foodgrains. We had earlier estimated that with as egalitarian an income distribution and the same level of per head food consumption as China had in 1985, India would have needed at least 250 million tonne of foodgrains to satisfy internal demand compared to the 150 mt actually produced with which she had become 'self-sufficient'. With higher rural incomes and purchasing

power, more land and resources would automatically be devoted to the foodgrains owing to the market mechanism itself.

But this is not a desirable outcome for the Northern countries' agenda: they pressure for policies to remove all barriers to export and import from third world agriculture, for a complete opening up in the same way that India was a completely open economy in the colonial period. Complete openness means allowing the powerful magnet of international demand with its own particular commodity structure, to restructure the way Indian farmers utilise their land in terms of cropping, to meet the requirements of advanced countries which by now concentrate 83 percent of global purchasing power. This has historically taken place by lowering basic foodgrains absorption of the masses of third world populations. The same mechanism of lowering mass staple grain consumption can be seen today in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and many countries in Latin America, as they follow an exports-first policy. Sub-Saharan Africa has had one of the fastest growth rates of agricultural exports in the last 15 years, and has 'succeeded' thereby in lowering per head food production by over one-sixth. The countries worst affected in SSA are perpetually on the verge of mass famine and episodes of drought means food aid, enmeshing the region even deeper into conditions of greater export thrust and of allowing even freer flow of international capital. Yet the gross facts are ignored by the Northern 'experts' on Africa; the preferred solution of the international aid and health organisations is to control their population growth alone while continuing to exploit the vast natural resources of the region for maintaining high Northern consumption levels. A similar emphasis on population control lies at the heart of the neo-liberal health agenda for countries like India.

We believe that people who analyse the problems of food security and of famine while taking an ambiguous or approving position on economic liberalisation, are intellectually profoundly opportunist; the same goes for all those who are strident on the subject of gender discrimination and women's empowerment, but are remarkably silent on the question of economic liberalisation even as it affects adversely the position of the mass of women as part of the general mass of the people. No matter how transparent the agenda of economic recolonisation that global capital has, there are many who would never explicitly recognise it because they do not wish to be seen to

be critical of neo-imperialism, for they do not wish to forgo the personal benefits accruing to them from their connections with the organisations of international finance capital or the world centres of neo-liberal theory. This may be mediated through sophistry in argument, but the basic self-serving motivations remain clear enough. Democratic movements of women no less than those of other historically disadvantaged social groups have to fight opportunism among their leaders and intellectuals along with the main fight.

Returning to the impact of subsidy cuts and food price rise on poverty, we find that it rose at an all-India level in rural areas, largely as a result of the new economic policies which led to substantial cuts in rural development expenditures, as we show in more detail in the next section, combined with rise in food prices following consumer subsidy cuts. Rural poverty rose particularly sharply in Orissa, Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and even Punjab. This is highlighted in Table 5 by indicating these states with rise in poverty ratios (deterioration in the condition of the mass of the population) in bold type with negative signs; but the most remarkable fact is that poverty actually continued to decline in the South Indian states and in West Bengal even when it was rising everywhere else. The major reason for this was their continuing to hold the basic foodgrains prices down while it was rising everywhere else owing to rise in the Central issue price, by increasing the subsidy provided out of the state budget.

The Bretton Woods institutions have always pressed for targeting the food subsidy in every indebted country implementing structural adjustment programmes under their guidance, on the argument that government's resources were limited and it was necessary to deliver subsidy to those who needed it most, namely the really poor. Many countries have implemented targeting before India started doing so from early in 1997. The experience of most of these countries has been food price rise and a worsening of poverty after the targeted PDS was introduced, compared to the earlier universal access to PDS.

Now, in the abstract, in theory it is difficult to oppose targeting because it sounds reasonable that subsidy should be concentrated on the poor. Why then have the targeted schemes usually misfired? The reason is bad faith: foreign lending institutions arguing for targeting and their domestic adherents are theoretically committed to the free

market, to the idea of no state intervention at all in the food economy, to winding up the existing PDS completely sooner or later. What they therefore want initially, is a *change* in the earlier universal system, because change is the first step, the thin end of the wedge, with which the state's role in the food economy can be levered out completely within a few years. This has happened already in a number of other countries like Sri Lanka and Philippines whose functioning PDS have been destroyed.

To get popular consent to the initial change to targeting, the progressive-sounding argument is put forward that subsidy must be concentrated with the poor. Once the principle of change is accepted however, more things change than only the beneficiary group: the consumer subsidy itself is drastically cut, reducing the entitlement of the poor compared to what it was under the earlier universal system.

This is precisely what happened also in India last year, when in the name of better targeting, an absurd principle of calculating new grain requirements for the PDS was introduced, of taking the average of as many as 10 past years of actual off-take of grains from the fair-price shops. A decade ago the population requiring ration grains was smaller by 160 million people. The actual off-take during five years out of the 10, (1991-96) had been reduced as we have seen by excessively raising the grain price and pricing out the poor from the ration shops, to the extent that the all-India crude death rate had actually risen in 1992. The only possible objective of the dishonest principle of taking the past 10 years' abnormally low average off-take was evidently, to reduce the food subsidy further. Under the new scheme the grain allocation in 1997 from the central pool to the PDS of the poorest state in India, viz. Orissa was reduced in the case of rice from over 100,000 tonne to hardly a third of that level, 34,000 t. and in the case of wheat, it was reduced from 50,000 tonne to zero! The state agriculture minister warned of famine and in the light of protests from other affected states as well the principle was to be re-examined.

The noise made about the 'large' food subsidy by the Bretton Woods institutions and the domestic Finance Ministry — which is packed with ex-Fund-Bank employees — is unbelievable. Yet the total central food subsidy for a country and population the size of India, is minute — hardly Rs5,500 crore (US\$1.3 bn) annually or 0.6

percent of the nation's income, which is being transferred to benefit many millions of the very poor. We may compare this to the fact that over 10 times as much, 38 percent of the entire revenue expenditures or over 4 percent of GDP is given as interest every year to people from whom the government has preferred in the past to take money as borrowed funds, rather than as taxes.

In the last 1997 Budget, lower income tax rates in effect gifted away more than twice as much as the food subsidy bill, or an estimated Rs12,000 crore (US\$ 3 bn) to the income-tax payers in the country who number only 12 million, thus on average giving, for no rhyme or reason, an extra Rs10,000 to each member of the top 1.4 percent of the population in a blatantly class-biased measure. It is a myth strenuously propagated by the liberalisers, that tax-payers are heavily taxed in India. On the contrary, there are only eight other countries in the world of 290 nations, which tax less than India does, for India ranks ninth from the bottom in the lowness of its central tax to GDP ratio of only 10 percent.<sup>12</sup> If the present government's suicidal course of belligerent armament — a caricature of the fascist programmes in the 30s in Europe and Japan — is allowed to continue unchecked, the already low funding for the social sectors and for poverty reduction will be further reduced in de facto terms, whatever the paper rhetoric regarding stimulating growth and reducing poverty might be.

### **On subsidies and global competition: Betraying the Indian producer**

The former government's April 97 position paper on subsidies has put a range of vital subsidies on a so-called 'non-merit' list while continuing to parrot the tired *mantra* of the economic liberalisers on subsidies having a 'distorting' effect. As we have seen nothing is said by them on the distorting effects of giving large subsidies via tax-breaks to the already well-to-do. So far we have talked of the *consumer subsidy* on foodgrains alone and how its reduction priced out the poor from ration shops. As important for the food security of the small-scale producers especially in villages, is the liberalisers' animus against all forms of producer subsidies which maintain lower than market prices of inputs like electricity or fertiliser. All the inputs which are vital for maintaining the productive capacity of India's agriculture are targeted by the Fund-Bank and their domestic

intellectual servitors, for the very good reason that the Indian farmer is highly competitive despite a minute level of input subsidies whereas the advanced country producers are uncompetitive despite enormously large subsidies. The main reason for the high degree of competitiveness of the Indian farmer is the low level of real wages of labour.

When globalisation and export orientation is being talked about, any half-way competent analysis must assess the subsidies enjoyed by the Indian farmers' global competitors if it is discussing Indian farm subsidies. Most economists in India appear to be quite unaware of the very high subsidy levels given by the US, every West European country and Japan to their farmers, at the same time that representatives of these countries tell Indians and other third world countries that they must reduce their subsidy level which are 'distorting' the allocation of resources. The fact that an 80 times higher 'distorting' effect is being exercised on this logic, by the 80 times higher subsidy per farmer doled out by their own governments to their own farmers, does not appear to bother them.

While hypocrisy on the part of the advanced countries in their dealings with third world countries is to be expected on the basis of past experience and is part of their strategy of reducing third world competitiveness, the orchestrated hosannas which are being sung by third world economists themselves to the anti-national policies being advocated, need closer investigation. The hosannas are at present muted, but only temporarily, as the disastrous results of free trade and capital inflows in the Southeast Asian countries, in Korea and Indonesia in particular, continue to unfold before our eyes. While back in 1982 when the first IMF loan was negotiated a group of dissenting economists had warned of the danger to economic sovereignty of external indebtedness and had repeatedly warned again in 1991 of the danger of exposing the economy to the vagaries of international finance capital, they were not heeded. Now, the same people who were the instruments of inducting SAP in India and introducing a substantial degree of exposure to the whims of global capital are tacitly forced to admit, given the experience of Southeast Asia, that there has to be a hold on further unthinking measures such as capital account convertibility. But ruinous trade liberalisation continues apace, and the first act of the new government since assuming office (April 1998) has been to announce that several



hundred items of import including agricultural imports are to be placed on OGL.

To subject our farmers especially the poor among them to competition from agricultural imports is absurd given the scale of subsidies that foreign farmers enjoy. The advanced countries organised in the OECD, paid out US\$336 billion of farm subsidies in 1995, (considerably more than India's entire national income), to less than 20 million farmers. The US alone paid US\$75 billion out of its annual budget to its 2.7 million full-time farmers, or an average annual subsidy of \$28,00 per farmer, this subsidy alone being 70 times the income of the average Indian farmer. As we have explained at length elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> without such heavy subsidy the North American and European farmer would be completely out-competed in the global market by the Punjab or Andhra farmer who, thanks to the low wages paid to labour, produces even without subsidy at a much lower cost than does the advanced country farmer. Owing to the heavy state subsidy they enjoy which comes to nearly half (precisely, 47 percent) of the international wheat price per tonne, North American farmers along with the West Europeans who get an even higher 80 percent subsidy per tonne of wheat, are able to dominate the global market in wheat (which is the only thing apart from coarse grains, potatoes and dairy products, that their temperate lands can produce). They wish to reduce the subsidy burden on their own budgets but do not wish to see countries like India and China emerge as global players, hence the unremitting insistence on the cutting of the relatively small subsidies which India has on power and on fertilisers.

The sum of the transfers that only two countries — US and Japan — together paid in 1995-96 to their less than six million farmers, was \$167 billion, (\$92 billion in Japan and \$75 billion in US)<sup>14</sup> and this was much more than the total global FDI flows of \$135 billion to developing countries that year, which according to the liberalisers is supposed to be bringing paradise closer for the over four billion people of these countries. This comparison is given to drive home the truly staggering scale of farm subsidies in the Northern countries and the pittance that global direct foreign investment constitutes; (the entire macro-economic policy of developing countries -starting from high interest rates to real wage cuts and undermining food security — is being subordinated and shaped to the aim of getting

these drops and dribblets of money that advanced countries call 'investment in developing countries').

Unfortunately many persons concerned with the farmers' movement in India hold strong views and write copiously on the question of 'world prices' being the right of the Indian farmer, without knowing anything of the way that world commodity markets function, the level of advanced country subsidies going into determining the world price, and without understanding the real meaning of opening Indian agriculture to free exports. Just as PDS 'targeting' was put forward as a progressive sounding policy measure by the people and institutions whose real objective is to do away with the PDS entirely, similarly the slogan that 'the Indian farmer should get "world prices" for their products', is put forward as a pro-farmer sounding slogan by people and institutions abroad who wish to prise away Indian agriculture from all protection and to economically decimate and pauperise the Indian farmer. Too many ill-informed 'friends' of the Indian farmer have swallowed the bait and are loud in demanding a measure which is profoundly anti-farmer, whether we are talking of the small peasant or the *Kulak* (rich peasant). Neo-imperialism is highly sophisticated, and our intellectuals vis-a-vis the ideologues of neo-liberalism too often behave like innocent tribals, when they are not actively conniving in the neo-imperialist agenda.

In what way is opening to free exports detrimental for the farmer? The moment exports are freed, so are imports: you cannot free one without freeing the other. Liberalising trade in agriculture means doing both. The pressure currently exercised through WTO by the advanced countries to open up to imports both in manufacturing and agriculture, is precisely for the purpose of recolonisation. Advanced countries can then temporarily step up further, the already very high subsidy level on the particular crops they wish to dump on the Indian market and they can do so without violating the GATT agreement or attracting anti-dumping discipline, because they have carefully written in various environmental clauses ('green box' provisions) into the Agreement which allows them to increase many types of cash transfers to their farmers.

Despite actually producing at much lower cost, the Indian farmer will then take a beating not experienced since the Depression of the

1920s when too India was a completely open economy. This scenario is not one we have invented, but one which has been enacted already in countries like the Philippines which have undergone trade liberalisation and SAP for over a decade, whose PDS has been destroyed and which from zero grain imports is now a substantial importer of US grains. The Southeast Asian markets for grain already prised open under the neo-liberal policies however pale into insignificance compared to the size of the potential Indian market as far as advanced countries are concerned. Hence the intense pressure put on India by the US, Australia and other interested countries during the last year to remove all protection to Indian farmers which existed earlier as quantitative restrictions (QR) immediately, their refusal to accept a reasonable time-period for phasing out QR, their refusal to accept the argument that India's balance of payments position is again fragile and it is premature to remove QR.<sup>15</sup> The US and European Union are particularly anxious to get countries like India to lose their food grains self-sufficiency and become importers of grain from them because after the transition to capitalism of the former Soviet Union and the economic collapse in Russia they have lost large grain markets there as well as in Eastern Europe, and they are looking for replacement markets elsewhere, in the developing world. Their TNCs in the food business are also eager to access the urban market for processed products.

Imports from advanced countries, once contracted, will lead to further rise in the domestic price of foodgrains, for the world price is higher than India's domestic price because world wages are much higher, and world prices are higher despite the enormous subsidies which maintain the high living standards of the inefficient farmers abroad. Any rise in domestic foodgrains price will immediately hit the majority of the population which purchases food on the market, and raise poverty.

The success of neo-imperialist pressure through WTO is reflected in the fact that within weeks of assuming office the new government announced an Exim policy which removes protection for hundreds of goods including a very large number of agricultural products ranging from rubber, onions and coconut to shrimps and processed agro-products, which have been put within the category of free imports. This is bound to have an adverse effect on the livelihood of the concerned farmers particularly in states like Kerala which are

already taking a beating from crashing prices of rubber and coconut products.

The correct slogan today should be a two-stage one: no world prices as long as India's wages are one-fiftieth of world wages; and, no world prices as long as subsidies per farmer in advanced countries is fifty times the income per farmer in India. This may be simplified to the slogan — no world prices — for in the foreseeable future there is not the slightest prospect of Indian wages rising to parity with world wages or of any substantial reduction of subsidy in the advanced countries. Along with the opposition to the agenda of neo-imperialism however the positive alternative agenda of the people has to be propagated as forcefully as possible.

## Notes

1. The study of the after-effects of the Bengal famine carried out by the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta, under Mahalanobis's direction still remains our main source of information. See for relevant references A K Sen *Poverty and Famines*; U. Patnaik 'Food Availability and Famine—A Longer View' in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 1991
2. All these figures are from UN publications, for example Human Development Report 1997
3. For a first hand account of land reform in a Chinese village which has become a classic, see West Hinton, *Fanshen* (1967, Random House NY)
4. For a discussion of the contribution of land reform to development please see my paper 'Alternative strategies of agrarian change in relation to resources for development in India and China' in D Nayyar (ed.) *Economics as Ideology and Experience: Essays in honour of Ashok Mitra* (1998, Cass London)
5. Please see my paper 'The political economy of state intervention in the Food Economy' *Economic and Political Weekly* Budget Issue May 17-23, 1997.
6. This argument was further developed along with a critique of Ricardo's comparative advantage theory in my article 'Export oriented agriculture and food security in developing countries and in India' *Economic and Political Weekly* Special Number August 1996.
7. For women rural labourers, real earnings halved between 1963 and 1975 while for men it declined by a third; real indebtedness rose, mostly to moneylenders. See my Introduction in *Chains of Servitude: Bondage*

*and Slavery in India* (eds. Manjari Dingwaney and Utsa Patnaik) 1985 Sangam, Delhi .

8. The statistical analysis is in the revised paper *Poverty in India* by Abhijit Sen and Utsa Patnaik (DSA Working paper, December 1997 CESP, JNU). A draft version dated August 1997 was circulated earlier
9. Sheila Bhalla 'The rise and decline of workforce diversification processes in rural India' DSA Working paper August 1997 CESP, JNU.
10. "The Likely Impact of Economic Liberalisation and Structural Adjustment of Food Security in India" Dec. 1992, ILO and National Commission for Women, partly reproduced in U Patnaik 1996 'Export-oriented agriculture and food security in developing countries and in India' *EPW* Special Number August
11. Not every country's elites are imitative consumers. Japan even though it was not colonised had to sign unequal trade treaties in the 1850s under which she had to remain open to imports from advanced countries and could not raise any tariff above 3 percent. But the Japanese elite adhered to a traditional personal life-style and started using modern consumption goods only when they could produce them independently.
12. The other countries include Burkina Faso, Myanmar, and six oil-exporting countries with large oil revenues who do not need to raise tax resources.
13. See last section of 'The Political Economy of State Intervention in the Food Economy' *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 32 Nos.20 and 21, May 1997 (Budget Issue) where more detailed information on total and per farmer subsidy, and subsidy per tonne of crops, is given.
14. All figures quoted here are taken from the OECD'S annual publication (Paris) *Report on Agricultural Policies, Markets and Trade — Monitoring and Outlook* for the years 1995and 1996. Also see FAO, *Commodity Markets Review 1995-96*.
15. We had argued in the *EPW* Budget issue of May 1997 ('The Political Economy of State Intervention in the Food Economy') that although the advanced countries were pressing India to do so, it was premature to give up the comprehensive protection provided by the Article xviii b of the GATT Agreement which says that developing countries which are vulnerable to balance of payments problems need not remove the quantitative restrictions on imports. While advanced countries argued that India had large reserves and no longer qualified for the cover provided by this clause, the fact that India's export growth slowed drastically in 1996-7 and continued to fall during 1997-8 means that the B.O.P. position showed renewed fragility. As regards 'large' reserves, much of it is hot money and reserves can melt like a block of ice in May on the basis of a single suitably placed rumour of India's 'fundamentals' not being right or a whimsical downgrading of India's credit rating leading to hot money outflow, as the experience of the last year with volatile speculative capital outflows in South East Asia has shown.

**TABLE 1: ANNUAL PER CAPITA OUTPUT, IMPORTS AND AVAILABILITY OF FOOD GRAINS, 1950-51 TO 1995-96**

PERIOD	NET ANNUAL AVAILABILITY			NET CEREALS OUTPUT	CHANGE IN IMPORTS	CHANGE IN STOCKS
	CEREALS	PULSES	TOTAL			
1951-55	129.13	23.59	152.72	122.74	6.06	- 0.33
1956-60	135.93	24.84	160.77	121.48	8.30	- 5.82
1961-65	146.32	22.12	168.44	135.02	10.99	- 0.31
1966-70	140.94	17.78	158.72	129.83	12.45	1.34
1971-75	140.54	15.47	156.01	135.48	6.17	1.11
1976-80	145.79	15.63	161.42	147.13	- 0.77	0.57
1981-85	151.95	14.34	166.29	153.19	2.30	3.54
1986-90	158.16	14.61	172.79	155.95	0.65	- 1.56
1991-95	162.50	13.66	176.16	165.05	- 0.27	2.28
1996-99	160.94	13.06	174.00	163.99	- 2.06	0.99

*Source:* Calculated from Economic Survey, 1996-97, 1999-2000. Read 1951 as 1950-51 and so on, except last row \* which gives the individual year figures.

*Note:* Net output is gross output less 12.5% on account of seed, feed and wastage. Net availability is net output plus net imports minus net increase in government stocks.

**TABLE 2: ANNUAL GROWTH IN FOOD GRAINS PRODUCTION**

<b>YEAR</b> (Compound Growth Rate)	<b>RICE</b>	<b>WHEAT</b>	<b>PULSES</b>	<b>FOOD GRAINS</b>
1967-68 to 1997-98	2.9	4.6	0.9	<b>2.6</b>
1980-81 to 1997-98	3.1	3.2	1.1	<b>2.6</b>
1990-91 to 1997-98	1.6	3.7	0.3	<b>1.7</b>

Note: Growth rates are based on index numbers , base triennium ending 1981-82.

Source: Government of India Economic Survey 1998-99 Table 8.6

**TABLE 3: STATE-WISE ESTIMATES OF RURAL HEADCOUNT POVERTY BY THE EXPERT GROUP METHOD, 1977-78 TO 1993-94**

	<b>1977-78</b>	<b>1983</b>	<b>1986-87</b>	<b>1987-88</b>	<b>1989-90</b>	<b>1990-91</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1993-94</b>
Andhra Pradesh	38.1	26.5	14.6	20.9	19.5	22.1	27.4	16.0
Assam	59.8	42.6	39.7	39.4	35.2	33.7	51.7	45.0
Bihar	63.3	64.4	50.1	52.6	52.4	46.3	61.1	58.0
Gujarat	41.8	29.8	30.3	28.7	14.8	21.6	33.7	22.2
Haryana	27.7	20.6	19.5	16.2	13.3	19.5	17.7	28.7
Karnataka	48.2	36.3	36.6	32.8	45.4	34.9	45.5	28.2
Kerala	59.2	51.5	39.0	33.5	29.1	34.4	30.3	26.0
Madhya Pradesh	62.5	48.9	47.8	41.9	39.5	42.4	47.9	40.8
Maharashtra	64.0	45.2	44.6	40.8	34.8	35.9	53.6	38.6
Orissa	72.4	67.5	55.2	57.6	52.9	36.5	49.0	49.9
Punjab	16.4	13.2	13.0	12.6	3.2	9.3	10.2	12.5
Rajasthan	35.9	33.5	29.2	33.2	26.1	25.9	31.7	27.5
Tamilnadu	57.7	54.0	41.2	45.8	38.4	37.5	44.3	32.6
Uttar Pradesh	47.6	46.5	36.6	41.1	30.5	34.8	47.9	42.6
West Bengal	68.3	63.1	47.3	48.3	37.2	49.5	44.0	40.3
All India	<b>53.1</b>	<b>45.6</b>	<b>38.3</b>	<b>39.1</b>	<b>34.4</b>	<b>35.0</b>	<b>44.0</b>	<b>37.5</b>

Source: Calculated with NSS and CSO data using the method suggested by the Expert Group on Estimation of Proportion and Number of Poor by A Sen 'Economic reforms Employment and Poverty- Trends and Options' *Economic and Political Weekly* Special Number 1996.



**TABLE 4: TOTAL SUBSIDY, CONSUMER SUBSIDY AND CARRYING COST OF STOCKS 1991-2 TO 1994-5**

YEAR	CONSUMER SUBSIDY ON SALES RS. CRORE	AVERAGE BUFFER MT	CARRYING COSTS RS. CRORE	TOTAL SUBSIDY RS. BN	CONSUMER/ TOTAL SUBSIDY, %
1991-92	2890.9	5.58	432.7	3323.7	87.0
1992-93	3223.8	4.35	450.7	3674.5	87.7
1993-94	3175.0	10.63	1245.3	4420.3	71.8
1994-95	2736.0	16.59	1719.0	4455.0	61.4

Source: 12th Report of the (Parliamentary) Standing Committee on Food, Civil Supplies and Public Distribution 1995-96, presented to Lok Sabha on May 9 1995, p.5.

**TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE REDUCTION IN POVERTY RATIO IN STATES  
(GROUPED BY INITIAL POVERTY LEVELS)**

States Grouped by Initial (1977-8) Poverty Levels	Phase 1	Phase II	OVERALL REFORM PERIOD	
	1977-8 to 1987-8 % change	1987-8 to 1993-4 % change	1977-8 to 1993-4 % change	1990 to 1993-4 % change
<b>HIGH POVERTY (OVER 60 PERCENT)</b>				
BIHAR	16.9	<b>-10.2</b>	8.4	<b>-25.3</b>
ORISSA	20.4	13.4	31.1	<b>-36.7</b>
West BENGAL	29.3	16.6	41.0	18.6
MADHYA PRADESH	32.9	2.6	34.7	3.8
MAHARASHTRA	36.3	5.4	39.7	<b>-7.5</b>
<b>MEDIUM HIGH POVERTY (45 TO 60 PERCENT)</b>				
UTTAR PRADESH	13.7	<b>-3.6</b>	10.5	-22.4
ASSAM	34.1	<b>-14.2</b>	24.8	-33.5
TAMILNADU	20.6	28.8	43.5	13.1
KARNATAKA	32.0	14.0	41.5	19.2
KERALA	43.4	22.4	56.1	24.4
<b>MEDIUM LOW POVERTY (30 TO 45 PERCENT)</b>				
ANDHRA PRADESH	45.1	23.4	58.0	27.6
GUJARAT	31.3	22.6	46.9	- 2.8
RAJASTHAN	7.5	17.2	23.4	- 6.2
<b>LOW POVERTY BELOW (30 PERCENT)</b>				
HARYANA	41.5	<b>-77.2</b>	3.6	<b>-47.2</b>
PUNJAB	23.2	0.8	23.8	<b>- 34.4</b>
RURAL INDIA	26.4	4.1	29.4	<b>- 7.1</b>

Source: Rearranged and calculated from Table 3. Note that percentage fall in the poverty ratio (improvement) is shown as a positive number and percentage rise in the poverty ratio (deterioration) has a minus sign. Only major states, defined as those with population above 10 million, are included here.

**TABLE 6: STATE-WISE CONSUMER-END PDS PRICES OF RICE AND WHEAT EFFECTIVE FEB. 1 1994**

Centre/ Union Territory	RICE				WHEAT	
	Common CIP Rs537		Fine CIP Rs617		CIP Rs402	
	Retail PDS price	% rise in PDS over CIP	Retail PDS price	% rise in PDS over CIP	Retail PDS price	% rise in PDS over CIP
<b>EAST</b>						
Bihar	608	13.2	690	11.8	458	13.9
Orissa	622	15.8	709	14.9	455	13.2
West Bengal	590	9.9	680	10.2	455	13.2
Assam	605	12.7	693	12.3	-	-
<b>SOUTH</b>						
Andhra Pradesh						
Regular	675	25.7	-	-	-	-
White card	350	-35.0	-	-	-	-
Hostel etc	265	-51.0	-	-	-	-
Tamilnadu	350	-34.8	475	-23.0	450	11.9
Karnataka	595	10.8	675	9.4	427	6.2
Kerala	575	7.1	656	6.3	438	9.0
<b>WEST</b>						
Gujarat	660	22.9	760	23.2	490	21.9
Maharashtra	660	22.9	750	21.6	500	24.4
Madhya Pradesh	600	11.7	680	10.2	460	14.4
<b>NORTH</b>						
Haryana					422	5.0
Punjab					405	0.7
Delhi	473	-11.9	657	6.5	427	6.2
Rajasthan	490	-8.8	670	8.6	445	10.7
Uttar Pradesh	600	11.7	690	11.8	450	11.9
Himachal Pradesh					432	7.5

Source: Economic Survey 1995-96. Rearranged from Table 4.13. While the central government issues grains to states at a uniform consumer issue price (CIP) given at the top, states sell to consumers at varying prices which are higher or lower than the central CIP as indicated depending on the extent of additional subsidy out of state funds.

**TABLE 7: RURAL DEVELOPMENT EXPENDITURES OUT OF PUBLIC PLAN EXPENDITURES, AS SHARE OF GDP  
(CURRENT PRICES)**

TYPE OF EXPENDITURE	7 <sup>TH</sup> FYP 1985-90 REVISED ESTIMATE	7 <sup>TH</sup> FYP 1985-90 ACTUAL PRICES	91-92 ACTUAL	8 <sup>TH</sup> FYP 1992-97 @ 91-92	92-93 ACTUAL	93-94 ACTUAL
<b>A</b>						
Agriculture, rural devt., s.a.p., irrigation & flood control, village & small industry	41,966	51,349	14,233	102,501	16,291	19,182
<b>B</b>						
Energy & Transport	77,774	91,357	29,047	171,487	30,953	38,886
<b>C</b>						
<b>Sub-total</b>	119,740	142,706	43,280	273,988	47,244	58,068
A as % of GDP	2.7	3.3	2.6	-	2.6	2.6
C as % of GDP	7.8	13.2	7.8	-	7.5	8.0
All Exp. as % of GDP	11.6	14.5	11.7	-	11.6	12.2

*Note:* The expenditures specifically affecting rural areas in whole or in part have been added to give the sub-total. s.a.p. is 'special areas programmes'. Employment generating programmes are included in agriculture and rural development.

*Source:* Reserve Bank of India *Report on Currency and Finance 1995-96* Statement 8 and Statement 146.

**TABLE 8: SHARES OF THE WORKFORCE IN AGRICULTURE AND NON-AGRICULTURE 1989-90 AND 1992**

	RURAL		URBAN		TOTAL	
	1989	1992	1989	1992	1989	1992
Agriculture	75.1	79.4	13.0	13.2	62.1	65.5
Non-agric of which	24.9	20.7	87.0	86.8	37.9	34.5
Secondary	12.2	9.5	31.5	33.7	16.2	14.6
Tertiary	12.7	11.1	55.4	53.1	21.7	19.9

Source: S. Bhalla 1997 "The rise and decline of workforce diversification processes in India" DSA Working paper Aug 1997 CESP, JNU. Data on NSS Principal and Subsidiary status data.

**TABLE 9: STATE-WISE CHANGE IN THE RATIO OF PUBLIC EXPENDITURES TO DOMESTIC PRODUCT  
COMPARING 7<sup>TH</sup> PLAN (1985- 89 ) WITH REFORM YEARS 1991-2 AND 1992-93**

STATE	STATE OUTLAY AS PERCENT OF STATE DOMESTIC PRODUCT				PERCENT CHANGE	
	7 <sup>TH</sup> PLAN (1985-89)	1990-1	1991-2	1992-3	1991-2/ 7 <sup>TH</sup> PLAN	1992-3/ 1990-1
Andhra Pradesh	6.53	4.77	4.48	6.04	- 31.39	<b>26.62</b>
Assam	8.06	6.70	6.66	5.74	- 17.37	- 14.33
Bihar	7.57	5.54	4.10	4.16	- 45.84	- 24.91
Gujarat	6.82	6.45	7.66	5.67	<b>12.32</b>	- 12.09
Haryana	6.78	5.03	4.66	4.85	- 31.27	- 3.58
Karnataka	5.65	5.70	5.98	6.75	<b>5.84</b>	<b>18.42</b>
Kerala	5.48	4.90	4.45	4.80	- 18.80	- 2.04
Madhya Pradesh	8.19	6.42	6.52	6.39	- 20.39	- 0.46
Orissa	8.73	11.24	8.24	7.86	- 5.61	- 30.07
Maharashtra	6.13	4.39	4.58	4.23	- 25.28	- 3.64
Punjab	6.34	5.90	5.26	3.77	- 17.00	- 36.10
Rajasthan	5.95	5.32	5.89	6.07	- 1.00	<b>14.10</b>
Tamilnadu	6.81	5.31	5.00	5.00	- 26.58	- 5.84
Uttar Pradesh	7.06	6.11	6.15	5.56	- 12.89	- 9.00
West Bengal	4.27	3.62	2.49	2.24	- 41.69	- 38.12

Source: Calculated from Reserve Bank of India, *Report on Currency and Finance 1995-96* Statement 178 on plan outlay of state governments, and *Economic Survey 1995-96* on state domestic product. **Bold** type denotes period/states where expenditure ratio rose during reform period.

**TABLE 10: SALES OF WHEAT AND RICE THROUGH PDS RELATIVE TO  
PROCUREMENT DURING REFORM PERIOD**

YEAR	PROCUREMENT IN M.T. (AVERAGE)			SALES M.T.	STOCKS HELD M.T.
	WHEAT	RICE	TOTAL		
1991-92	7.75	9.24	16.99	19.70	19.80
1992-93	6.38	11.79	18.17	17.20	13.86
1993-94	12.84	13.65	26.49	17.70	24.16
1994-95	11.87	18.88	30.75	14.30	30.75
1995-96	12.33	9.95	22.28	14.75	28.80
1996-97	8.18	8.06	16.24	19.66	20.80
1997-98	9.30	12.22	21.52	16.98	18.50
1998-99	12.65	11.79	24.44	18.69	24.70

Source: As Table 4, p.10 except last four years for which data in Economic Survey 1999-2000 pp.78-82. @ Provisional, April- December \*Stocks held in 1995-96 is average of position in July '95, Oct.'95, Jan.'96, and April'96.

**TABLE 11: POVERTY ESTIMATES, 1951-1994 (%AGE OF POOR IN TOTAL POPULATION, HEADCOUNT)**

<b>NSS ROUND</b>	<b>PERIOD</b>	<b>RURAL HEADCOUNT POVERTY</b>	<b>URBAN HEADCOUNT POVERTY</b>
3-5	Aug 51-Mar 53	46.48	37.44
5-6	May 53-Mar 55	59.89	46.29
9-11	May 55-Feb 57	53.01	46.17
12-14	Mar 57-Jun 59	56.14	47.13
15-17	Jul 59-Jan. 64	48.01	45.55
19- 21	Jul 64-Jun 67	58.52	51.31
22- 24	Jul 67-Jun 70	60.09	49.79
25-28	Jul 70-Jun 74	55.31	44.20
32	Jul 77-Jun 78	50.60	40.50
38	Jan 83-Dec 83	45.31	35.65
42	Jul 86-Jun 87	38.81	34.29
43	Jul 87-Jun 88	39.60	35.65
44	Jul 88-Jun 89	39.06	36.60
45	Jul 89-Jun 90	34.30	33.40
46	Jul 90-Jun 91	36.43	32.76
47	Jul 91-Dec 91	37.42	33.23
48	Jan 92-Dec 92	43.47	33.73
50*	Jul 93-Jun 94	38.74	30.03
43**	Jul 87-Jun 88	39.23	36.20
50**	Jul 93-Jun 94	36.66	30.51

Source: Sen 1996 quoting B Ozler G Datt and M Ravallion 'A Database on Poverty and Growth in India' the World Bank Jan. 1996 for all estimates up to the 48th Round. We have given the average of 3-4 rounds as indicated up to 1974 and individual rounds after that. \*For the 1993-94 estimate, exactly the same method as rest of series applied to the 50th Round NSS data by Sen 1996. \*\* In the May 1997 World Bank document, this same series is reproduced with one change for the 1987-88 Round, and an estimate for 1993-94.



# ‘Yellow Winds’ of Change in North Korea

ERICH & MARILYN WEINGARTNER

“The imperialists, while resorting to blatant acts of armed aggression against other countries, are trying to promote the spread of their ideology and culture by using the cloak of ‘global integration’ and ‘creation of global culture.’ If it is not checked, a nation will go to ruin, socialism will lose its light and, further, humankind will face destruction. This is the lesson taught by the 20<sup>th</sup> century.... The imperialists’ ideological and cultural poisoning is a means of aggression and intervention shrouded in the cloak of ‘cooperation’ and ‘interchange’.”

We are reading from what humanitarian workers in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea have nicknamed the “*Yellow Wind Document*.” This is an editorial, which appeared last June in the newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* and the journal *Kulloja*, organs of the Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of Korea. Subsequently, a translated version appeared in *The Pyongyang Times*, a weekly English-language newspaper. Editorials such as these provide the content of major, countrywide educational campaigns.

The gist of this editorial – some seven thousand words in length – is that the greatest danger facing North Korea is not a war of aggression in which millions of lives may be sacrificed, but the subtle

influence of the "yellow winds" of capitalist ideology and culture. Great leader Kim Jong Il explains it this way:

"Through their ideological and cultural infiltration into other countries, the imperialists are working ceaselessly to infect people with ideological diseases, disintegrate those countries from within and then put them under their domination and control."

The article, as you might guess, has a different take on a lot of recent world history. It explains the demise of the Soviet Empire as follows:

"The former Soviet Union and other socialist countries in Eastern Europe collapsed, not because of their weak military and economic power or their low cultural standards but entirely because they opened doors to the inroads of imperialist ideology and culture. For the socialist-oriented nations, the 'yellow' wind from the imperialists is more fatal than an atomic bomb."

Even China – North Korea's last significant ally – does not escape criticism. As is well known, the DPRK has been encouraged to institute Chinese-style economic reforms. Without mentioning China by name, the inference is inescapable. The editorial calls on the people to combat every hint of capitalist "yellow winds", in all fields of society:

"In the economic sphere, even the slightest illusions are taboo on the capitalist method of industrial management that directs the people by means of money and on the 'reform' and 'door-opening' that encourage the inflow of imperialism."

No one escapes the broad brush wielded by the editorialist. A number of humanitarian aid workers in Pyongyang were quite incensed. They had come to the DPRK motivated by a desire to save people from starvation. This document implies that humanitarians are simply the tools of the enemy bent on the people's destruction.

The editorial calls for a "mosquito net" to be pitched over all fields of social life in order to prevent the influx of the "capitalist ideological virus." In fact, this expresses in words what humanitarian workers have experienced since the start of relief operations in 1995. Direct contact with Korean people takes place only under very

circumscribed parameters. Even inviting local staff to your home for dinner presents a problem.

On our part, we did not see this editorial as insulting to the humanitarian community. On the contrary! The writing of this editorial came just when the humanitarian aid agencies were beginning to achieve results, despite the obstacles placed in their way. We believe that the editorial became necessary precisely because of the increased visibility of foreign aid workers throughout the country.

Let us name a few examples:

When we first arrived in the DPRK in the Spring of 1997, the World Food Programme had five expatriates working in the Pyongyang Office. In two years this number rose to 42, with four more expected in the near future.

Until the summer of 1997, non-governmental organizations were not allowed residence permits. There are currently a dozen resident NGOs working in the DPRK. The total number of non-Koreans working in humanitarian agencies now stands at about one hundred.

The WFP had three vehicles for travel to barely 50 accessible counties when we first arrived. Now there are some 40 vehicles in the WFP alone, with easily another 30 used by other agencies. The number of accessible counties has risen to 162, in all provinces of the country.

When we first began, there were restrictions about what can be printed on sacks and packaging of humanitarian commodities. Korean lettering was forbidden, as were pictures of the flags of donor countries. Today, packaging identifies the donor in the Korean language, and the American flag, along with the giant letters "U, S," and "A" are visible on sacks throughout the country. What is more, the sacks themselves are re-used repeatedly, which means that the population of American flags continues to expand in North Korea as long as the USA continues to pour aid into the country.

Of course, this is going to unsettle the North Korean hard-liners, who are perfectly aware that the influx of humanitarian aid is not value-free. Aside from the problem of economic dependency on food aid, the presence of inquisitive foreigners deep in the heartland of self-reliant socialism must be disconcerting. The Government is no

longer in a position to hide from its people the fact that the DPRK's worst enemies are feeding the nation's children.

Seen in this light, the editorial takes on a note of desperation. Consider this quote:

"The introduction of a heterogeneous way of life will shake socialist society to its very foundations. The realm of day-to-day life is the most vulnerable to imperialist ideology and culture. The crafty imperialists lay great emphasis, much more than their active anti-socialist propaganda, on having free access to day-to-day life so as to permeate it little by little with the bourgeois way of life."

Humanitarian agencies do, in fact, constitute a threat to the status quo. The editorial would lead one to believe that the emergency in the DPRK has changed from an economic to an ideological one. The latter may well be more frightening to the regime. The editorial is not speaking of a theoretical danger. Many of the changes it warns against are already happening.

It warns that

"a trickle of reactionary 'yellow' publications constantly passes through many hands before turning over into massive circulation."

This is a statement of fact, as we ourselves have observed it. One of the most popular publications circulating among the local Korean staff at the WFP offices in Pyongyang was our subscription of Maclean's Magazine. The Manchester Guardian Weekly was an eagerly awaited paper which disappeared as soon as it was left on the coffee table in the hall.

Or take this sentence:

"A seemingly trifling degree of such non-socialist, capitalist practices as smuggling, black-market dealings, profit-making trading, prostitution and gambling will gradually grow to make the capitalist way sweep the whole of society."

We found sporadic evidence of all these "vices" during our two years in North Korea.

What is more, the Government has been forced to relent on some forms of private profit making, because the public distribution system can no longer supply the people year-round. During our two years of residency, farmers' markets and street vendors multiplied, increasing in size and frequency. The revised Constitution of 1998 expands the definition of private property. It accords larger plots for private planting, the so-called "kitchen gardens," which produce much of what is bought and sold at farmers' markets. Foreign aid workers are denied access to these markets, probably because of ideological embarrassment.

To maintain the status quo under these circumstances requires greater control mechanisms. The changes implemented under the revised Constitution last year seem to strengthen the military vis-à-vis the Korean Workers Party. (This may have something to do with the paranoid tone of the editorial.) The highest post in the land is, of course, the presidency. Contrary to all expectations, this post was awarded for eternity to the deceased great leader Kim Il Sung. His son, Kim Jong Il, appropriated the highest post remaining for a living leader, which under the constitutional changes is Chairman of the National Defense Committee, a committee in which the military has the most prominent profile.

How does one maintain military control when economic control has been lost? Until the DPRK recovers economically, humanitarian aid is indispensable. However, donors and agencies require minimum standards of accountability, which means access to and contact with beneficiaries - leaving the country vulnerable to the "yellow winds" which the editorial deplors.

The DPRK finds itself in a "Catch 22" situation: Either tighten control, increase belligerence, and lose the aid; OR: accept the aid, make friends, and lose control? One can well imagine the intense internal debates between military hard-liners and civilian technocrats. It is within tensions like these that creative solutions are sometimes forged and disaster is averted - OR all creativity is stifled and disaster becomes inevitable.

For the time being, the massive amount of aid flowing into the country from international agencies provides a unique opportunity for what we might call "peace-making by example." Given the fact

that assistance from the largest donors is often politically motivated, there is a challenge for aid agencies to show that the humanitarian impulse is *relief to those most in need*, regardless of the political environment. NGOs, like for example the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, may have a special role in this regard, although the concept of anything "non-governmental" is unfamiliar to the people of DPRK.

There has been a mutual learning process during our two years in the DPRK. The relationship with Government counterparts has improved remarkably. There is a greater willingness to understand this as a "complex" emergency, requiring long-term solutions. The Government has risked self-exposure through the UNDP round-table process for Agricultural Rehabilitation and Environmental Protection (AREP). There is a demonstrated willingness to experiment with agricultural innovations, double-cropping, small animal husbandry, alternative power generation, etc. Medical, agricultural, economic and technical professionals have shown an eagerness to learn through exchange visits to a variety of countries including Canada.

Despite the editorial's dire warnings of ideological penetration, the various fora of negotiation have lately reaped some modest results, for example the recent agreements reached between the DPRK and the USA. However, these results are precarious and in need of careful nurturing. Maintaining the momentum of these processes is of greatest importance.

The problem is that the chief external players, the Republic of Korea and the USA, will not likely be in a position to pursue creative policy initiatives in the near future. The USA is heading into an election year, and the power of President Kim Dae Jung of South Korea may decline even further after the coming year's National Assembly elections.

It is our hope that other countries may help to maintain the requisite momentum by becoming more actively involved with the DPRK. They could initiate multiple-level approaches, building on non-governmental, academic and business relationships which already exist between some countries and the DPRK. They could encourage mutual exchange visits, among cultural, medical, technological and agricultural experts. They might involve academics, athletes, artists, students, diplomats, parliamentarians, or businessmen. Hopefully,

they would also involve direct Government contacts and conversations.

The aim of these contacts should be a reduction of tensions on the Korean peninsula, a show of non-belligerent mutual respect, in order to demonstrate to the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that there are acceptable alternatives to isolation. After half a century of confrontation, it is high time we expend our energies building the psychological basis for peace.

*Presented at the Seventh Annual CANCAPS Conference Sunday, December 5, 1999, Dalhousie University, Halifax Third Plenary Session: Security Challenges in Northeast Asia.*

*Erich and Marilyn Weingartner lived and worked in Pyongyang, DPR Korea, from May 1997 to July 1999.*

*Erich was founding Head of the Food Aid Liaison Unit (FALU) of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). He was the first NGO representative (and first Canadian) to achieve resident status in the DPRK. He built up a program of non-governmental humanitarian assistance, which in the two years of his tenure topped 100,000 metric tons of food, agricultural and medical inputs, at a value exceeding US\$30 million.*

*Marilyn, a health care professional, worked first as a consultant at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), then at WFP as Health and Hospital Unit Medical Assistant. She guided a program of upgrading pharmaceutical production facilities, supplying medical raw materials for the Pyongyang Pharmaceutical Factory, and imported medicines for hospitals, clinics and children's institutions throughout the DPRK. She led one of the teams participating in the WFP/UNICEF/EU nutritional survey of 1998 and initiated an educational program to highlight the nutritional requirements of pregnant women and nursing mothers.*

*Both Erich and Marilyn traveled in all provinces of the DPRK, visiting ports, rail yards, warehouses, nurseries, kindergartens, boarding schools, orphanages, hospitals, factories, farms and many family homes, both in rural and urban settings.*

# DPRK's Stunted Generation on the Slow Road of Hunger

ERICH AND MARILYN WEINGARTNER

*The following is a shortened version of the Dorothy and David Lam Lecture given by Erich and Marilyn Weingartner on Friday, 15 October 1999 at the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives, University of Victoria, British Columbia.*

## **Witnessed realities**

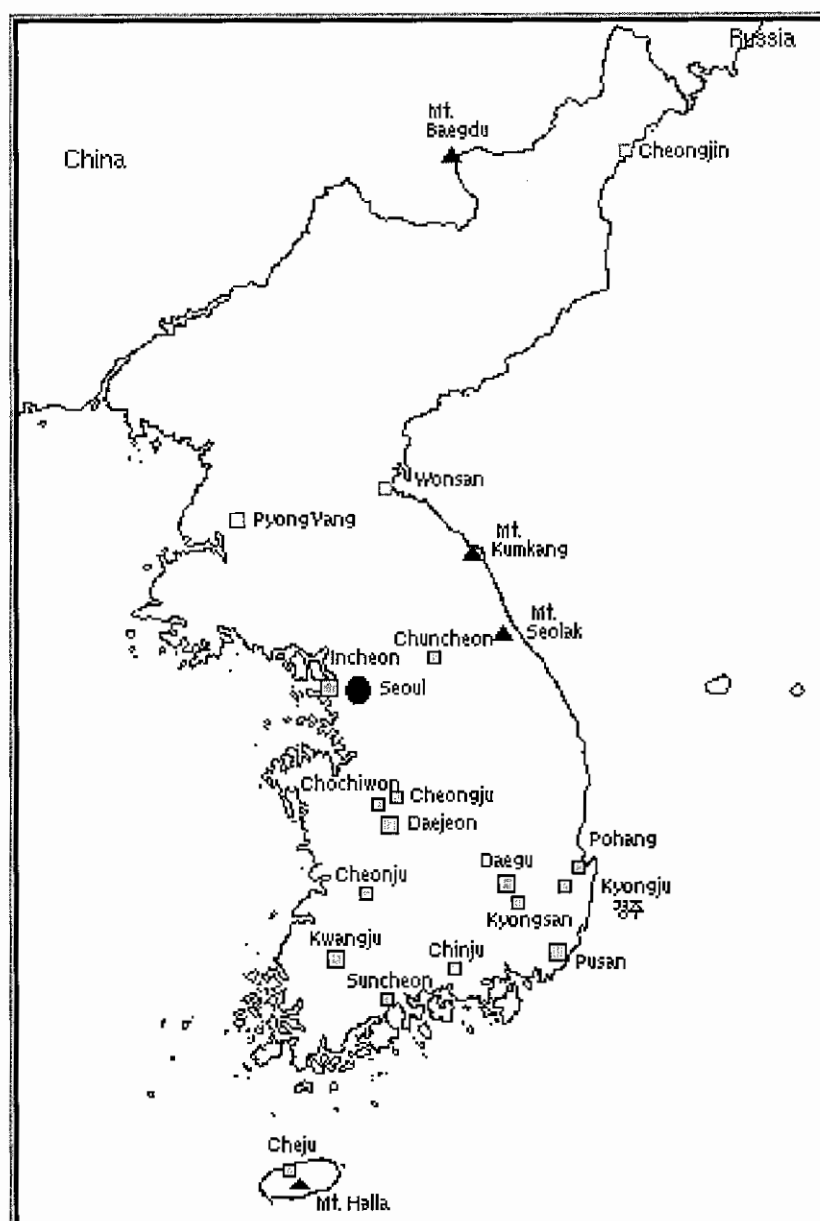
### **1. ROADS**

The roads themselves are an important source of information. A major part of our two years in North Korea was spent traveling around the country.

There are two main highways:

- a modern north-south superhighway - the so-called "Reunification Highway" - on the western side, running from Kaesong to Hyangsan, and
- a concrete-covered east-west highway from the port of Nampo via Pyongyang to the port of Wonsan





In the remainder of country, road conditions are very poor. The main south-north highway on the East Coast is in such poor condition that a trip by Land Cruiser from Pyongyang to Chongjin (on the north-east coast) - a distance of just under 800 km - takes a minimum of three days hard driving.

What can one see on the roads?

- Vehicles are in disrepair - many of them stopped on the side of the road. Most of the vehicles one sees are very old trucks kept running with homemade spare parts. Other trucks have been altered to run on methane gas produced by burning cornhusks or any other combustible material. Rusting and decaying buses and trains can be seen with windows either missing or patched up with plastic and tape, or pieces of glass held together by nuts and bolts.

- People on the move - on foot, carrying heavy loads or pushing two-wheeled carts. Every functioning vehicle is loaded to the brim with people of all ages, often on top of a full load of cargo of every description from logs to lentils.

- Bicycles have increased explosively - with a corresponding number of road accidents involving bicycles. This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Kim Il Sung had banned bicycles during his lifetime, since he did not wish Korean roads to become as cluttered as those in China.

- There are an increasing number of farmer's markets and street vendors in evidence. Of course, foreigners are not allowed to visit them, buy from them or take pictures of them. We used to see them off the beaten path, under bridges or behind walls. Increasingly they are visible out in the open, especially after the revision of the Constitution in September 1998. One can often see small stalls along the highway or on the main roads of cities, selling everything from fruit in season, to home-baked goods, to hand-made household supplies and even furniture.

- Workers are abundant in fields and on road repair. Military, industrial and office workers are mobilized for rice transplanting in the spring and harvesting in the fall. Since most roads are made of dirt and gravel, repair crews are a constant presence, especially during the rainy season and in the winter snows. All roadwork is

done by hand. On high mountain roads, workers camp overnight because there is not enough fuel to bring them home each night.

- Women are a major labour force in all areas of work - agriculture, road repair, construction, guard duty and law enforcement, carrying and pushing heavy loads. Since water supply has suffered from energy shortages, one can see women washing the laundry in whatever water source is available: rivers, lakes, streams, ponds and even ditches.

The roads also reveal the depressed nature of industrial areas, the abandoned and partly dismantled factories, and other signs of reduced industrial activity. Industrial towns and neighbourhoods are depressingly drab. Worker's homes in self-constructed apartment buildings are in a state of disrepair, with inadequate sanitary facilities.

There is a lack of power generation, not to speak of the antiquated and deteriorating electrical circuits and inefficient wiring. The UNDP estimates that of the coal-generated thermal as well as hydroelectric power generated by the DPRK, a full 30 percent is lost to the grid! To increase the production of energy for small communities, the Government has instituted a program to build small-scale power generators that can be seen on rivers and streams throughout the country.

Roads also reveal the ecological consequences of deforestation. Cold climate and low energy resources means people resort to cutting down forests for heating and cooking fuel. In the border provinces with China, lumber has been a lucrative commodity for barter trade, often wood for food. Denuded hillsides increase soil erosion, change weather patterns, and enhance the negative effects of both drought and flooding.

## 2. AGRICULTURE

It is not a secret that the DPRK has had chronically low yields in its agriculture, and can no longer meet the food needs of its population. There is a considerable debate among experts as to whether the DPRK was ever really food self-sufficient and if so, whether it can be so again. The problems are numerous:

- It is a mountainous country, with only 20 percent arable land.

- State policy has promoted unsustainable monoculture, with a concentration on rice production.

- An over-reliance on chemical fertilizers in the past has exhausted the soil. Lack of raw materials has brought fertilizer factories almost to a standstill. Farmers now rely on composting - including human waste - and on fertilizer supplied by humanitarian agencies. These inputs bring the total supply to only a third of what is needed.

- There is insufficient fungicide and pesticide to combat plant disease and infestation.

- Farm machinery, which was available in former years, stands idle for lack of gasoline and spare parts. On one farm, we were told that out of 15 tractors only five were operational. Farming has again become highly labour-intensive, with draft animals used for ploughing and transport.

- To compensate for low agricultural and industrial production, the Government has permitted farming on steep hillsides, an unsustainable practice that creates further environmental problems. These lands are often made available to industrial workers as a means of survival.

All farming in the DPRK is collective (Koreans prefer the word "cooperative"). As in other societies that instituted collective farming methods, individual motivation is often a problem. The Government seems to have recognized this. In addition to traditional motivational campaigns, the Government has recently increased the allotment of privately cultivated land, so-called "kitchen gardens." These have proved to be a lifesaver for those who have access to such land. Experience has shown that these small-scale gardens - 60 square metres on average - usually out-produce yields generated by collective lands. They constitute the major part of food available in farmer's markets.

Most nurseries, kindergartens and orphanages now grow their own food, and aid agencies (mostly NGOs) have helped them to extend the growing season by building greenhouses.

Other ways in which food production has been enhanced:

- Rehabilitation of farm lands, reservoirs, embankments - sometimes with the help of food-for-work schemes supplied by agencies like the WFP;
- A programme of double cropping promoted by the UNDP - primarily winter wheat, spring barley, and - most recently - potatoes;
- Crop rotation and import of hybrid seeds;
- Small animal husbandry - goats, rabbits, chickens, dogs, pigs;
- The digging of ponds for aquaculture.

Despite these measures, it is clear that the DPRK has no food reserves and continues its precarious dependence on the weather and foreign aid. This is underlined by the results of twice-yearly crop assessments carried out by the FAO and WFP since 1995.

The 1999 crop assessment figures are as follows:

Total utilization: 4,765,000 mt

Total availability: 3,472,000 mt

Import requirement: 1,293,000 mt

Expected food aid: 370,000 mt

Commercial import (est.): 300,000 mt

Uncovered deficit: 623,000 mt

It should be noted that except for localized weather damage, this year, as also last year, was as "normal" a crop year as one can expect on the Korean peninsula. These figures can therefore be taken as an indication that agricultural recovery will be an extended project. It is an indication that we are facing a long-term, chronic humanitarian crisis in North Korea.

Who are the people most at risk? In the order of urgency, they are children, the elderly, pregnant and nursing women, people in large families, and industrial workers.

### 3. NURSERIES AND KINDERGARTENS

The DPRK has a system of day care that any nation could be proud of. All children have access to these institutions, and most attend them -

provided there is food available. Before WFP targeted nurseries and kindergartens in 1997, attendance rates were around 30 percent. This climbed to almost full attendance as soon as food started to arrive.

Children's institutions have dedicated and caring staff. We heard stories of nurses taking orphaned infants into their homes at night, despite food shortages in their own families. Staff is often absent working in fields or gathering wild foods in forests for the children in their care.

Water and sanitation is a problem everywhere. Children's institutions complain about a lack of soap and access to clean water, contributing to recurring diarrhea. Skin rashes, symptom of vitamin deficiencies, are a common sight. In crowded, under-heated conditions, respiratory infections spread quickly among children of all ages.

Children seen by us were generally thin, with a low level of energy and activity. Caregivers explain that children used to be much livelier "before the floods." Children seemed healthier this year than the two previous years, but appearances can be deceptive in the absence of a nutritional survey.

#### 4. NUTRITIONAL SURVEY

Marilyn took part in such a survey in September-October 1998. It was the first nation-wide survey of its kind, conducted with scientific rigour. Participating in the data collection were UNICEF, WFP, and the European Commission. On the Korean side, the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC) had oversight and the Korean Institute of Child Nutrition took the measurements.

The survey covered children from 6 months to 7 years of age in eight provinces and three municipalities. In all, 1800 households were visited, chosen to be statistically representative of 70 percent of Korean families.

The main task was to measure the height and weight of the children. However, UNICEF conducted a concurrent Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), which also collected data on iron deficiency anemia, the diet of children, childbirth and breastfeeding

practices, immunization histories, water and sanitation services and access to education.

The findings surprised even the Government, which took 6 months to come to its own revised conclusions. Acute malnutrition was found to be at 16 percent, chronic malnutrition as high as 62 percent. Although the latter statistic figured prominently in the media, the more significant statistic is actually the 16 percent acute malnutrition. This is the highest rate in East Asia, surpassed in all of Asia only by India and Bangladesh, at 18 percent.

What is the difference in the two measurements?

Chronic malnutrition - also known as "stunting" - is measured by comparing the height with the age of the child. Stunting is the result of long-term under- or malnourishment. 62 percent of Korean children were found shorter than expected for their age. Obviously, this measurement can vary for reasons other than nutrition. Nevertheless, the number does indicate that malnutrition has afflicted North Korean children for longer than the four years since the floods.

Acute malnutrition - also known as "wasting" - is measured by comparing weight with height. Whether stunted or not, a child with a certain height is expected to weigh enough to sustain the normal functioning of its body. If the weight is too low, it means the child is not currently getting enough to eat.

Although 16 percent global malnutrition is grave enough, the breakdown of this figure is even more revealing. Between the ages of 12 and 24 months, a full 30 percent - that is, one out of three children - were malnourished. This is the age when crucial brain functions and motor skills develop and the immune system matures. Although otherwise healthy adults can survive short-term food shortages undamaged, malnutrition at this age can lead to permanent disabilities.

Furthermore, 18 percent of children less than 12 months were malnourished. This indicates nutritional problems during pregnancy and breastfeeding. The mothers of these children most likely suffered low weight gain during pregnancy and delivered low birth weight babies. Such children are unlikely to "catch up" to their peers' development.

The drama of this survey becomes clear if one considers the burden placed upon North Korean society if a significant percentage of the next generation fails to develop their physical and mental potential.

## 5. CAUSES OF MALNUTRITION

Considering the significant amounts of food aid which has gone into the DPRK over the past 4 years, most of it targeted to the children covered by this survey, why does malnutrition continue at these levels? This question haunts humanitarian workers because of suspicions surrounding the diversion of aid. It also embarrasses the Government, making them nervous enough to postpone this year's survey indefinitely.

To be fair, there are plenty of reasons other than the diversion of food aid to explain these findings. As UNICEF continues to insist, lack of food is not the only cause of malnutrition.

To begin with, as the Canadian food guide illustrates admirably, the body needs different kinds of food in appropriate quantities. The WFP food basket stipulates that at least three types of food must be supplied: cereals, pulses (beans) and oil. Most food deliveries to the DPRK have consisted of cereals like corn and wheat. Oil and pulses are more expensive, and therefore less popular with donors, who like to maximize the tonnage of their shipments.

Add to this the substandard water quality available to most children in the DPRK, leading to recurrent diarrhea. Diarrhea is also caused by the consumption of so-called "alternative food" such as grasses, leaves, acorns, tree bark and the like. Children with diarrhea cannot absorb the nutrients in food quickly enough before it leaves the body.

North Korea has cold winters like Canada, and - thanks to the fuel shortage - a lot less heat. Under-heated institutions and homes mean that children use the energy in food to keep their bodies warm, rather than to build up their tissue. Weakened bodies fall victim to recurrent infections - respiratory ailments in winter, diarrhea in summer. Again, the body uses food to fight infection, thus prolonging malnutrition.



Since most families as such have not benefited from international food aid, the needs of pregnant and breastfeeding mothers have not been taken care of. The Nutritional Survey has focused attention to this target group, but donations have not kept pace with the needs. Even when these women do receive food, they have a tendency to share it with the rest of the family, thus diluting the effect.

Finally, it should be recognized that North Korean health care providers were unprepared for dealing with malnutrition. After the Korean War, malnutrition was eliminated in the DPRK. Few believed that such knowledge would again become necessary. Medical schools did not keep up with research into the treatment of malnutrition until it was too late. There is an urgent need to upgrade training and increase numbers of competent caregivers.

## 6. HOSPITALS

The DPRK has built a great number of hospitals in all parts of the country at city, county, district and ri levels. Unfortunately, many buildings are old and cold. The lack of heating keeps patients away in the winter; food shortages keep patients away any time of the year. When food is available, occupancy rates soar. It should be noted that mothers usually stay in hospital with their sick children. They too must be fed by the hospital.

There is a shortage of medical supplies, which has forced hospitals into increased reliance on traditional "Koryo" medicine. Hospitals usually have a Koryo-medicine-making unit with qualified pharmacists who grow their own herbs in hospital gardens. They report that some 70 percent of medicines currently used are homemade herbal remedies.

Hospital staff (doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists) are well-trained and dedicated, but facilities such as operating rooms, delivery rooms, instruments and laboratory equipment are in a sorry state of affairs. Outdated technology used is some 15 to 30 years behind the times. The absence of anesthetics and antibiotics makes every operation a painful, life-threatening event. Still, health care workers do what they can with preventive medicine, using teaching aids drawn by hand on hospital walls.

Because of lack of supplies, immunization programmes - which used to be some of the best in the world - have been neglected in

recent years. WHO has warned of re-emerging diseases like tuberculosis, measles and even cholera. The DPRK is unprepared for the extent of the looming crisis. To remedy this situation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has launched disaster preparedness programmes. UNICEF and WHO are involved in countrywide immunization of children.

### **Has anything changed?**

We are frequently asked the question whether anything has changed during the two years we worked in the DPRK. Is there any hope of a turn-around? It is a difficult question, because changes in the DPRK are usually invisible to foreign eyes. Small changes may harbour great significance. On sunny days when the air is clear, we may detect numerous positive signs:

- There has been some agricultural recovery; some innovations and adjustments in agricultural policy; the success of double-cropping; an increase in small animal husbandry and greenhouses. There are more markets, more bicycles, more vehicles;
- There has been some reforestation; some energy improvement. This spring there was a cosmetic clean-up and beautification campaign;
- Children on the whole seem somewhat better, at least compared to the ones we saw when we started in 1997;
- Government normalization has provided some stability; the working environment for humanitarian agencies has improved; there is better monitoring access, increased direct access to line ministries and research institutes. Government seems to have come to recognize the importance of NGO contributions (although the concept of NGO is still a mystery to them);
- There has been mutual learning between government counterparts and humanitarian agencies; there is formal recognition by Government that this is a complex emergency requiring long-term solutions; Government has followed up the nutrition survey by emphasizing rehabilitation, prevention and skills upgrading;
- Relations have also been strengthened at Provincial and County levels; numerous workshops and round tables have been conducted

by international agencies at provincial and local levels, attended by local officials and experts;

- The international community has been allowed to create and rehabilitate production facilities - e.g. food production facilities like noodle and CSB factories, and pharmaceutical production from donated raw materials.

Despite these positive signs, the outlook is generally gloomy. Although humanitarian aid is urgently needed, most of the agencies operating in the DPRK now agree that it is not the solution. Food shortages are expected to continue despite massive input by the WFP and other agencies. Agricultural uncertainty will continue even if the UNDP succeeds in funding the roundtable process for Agricultural Rehabilitation and Environmental Protection. Medical crises will not only continue but increase despite the efforts of WHO, IFRC and UNICEF.

Economic recovery is vital, but industry is not recovering quickly enough. Apart from some South Korean industries, few foreign companies seek investment opportunities, despite the creation of special economic zones like the Rajin Sonbong area, and a multi-national Tumen River Development Project that promises to provide appropriate communication infrastructure in the nearby border region.

The DPRK has developed an unhealthy dependence on international aid at a point in time when donor fatigue has set in. It is increasingly difficult to raise the requisite funds to sustain the current level of aid.

Humanitarian aid cannot, finally, solve the intractable political problems in the region, which lie at the root of the difficulties. Unless there is real movement in the 4-power process, the north-south talks, and other fora of negotiation involving North Korea, humanitarian aid will continue to be held captive to political exigencies.

## **What needs to happen?**

Humanitarian aid needs to be accompanied by greater effort at seeking solutions to underlying problems. In addition to humanitarian assistance, the DPRK needs massive economic assistance in order to

recover from its current crisis. This presupposes an end to isolation and a building of confidence between the DPRK and potential trading partners. The recent partial lifting of US sanctions is commendable in this respect.

There is an urgent need to end military confrontation on the Korean peninsula and hasten reconciliation between North and South Korea. This, more than anything else, would open the gates to real assistance and recovery. This presupposes positive results in the ongoing peace process.

We must remember, however, that Korea is only one element in the geopolitical scenario affecting peace and justice in all of northeast Asia. The interests of the USA, China, Japan and Russia all have a direct impact on what happens on the Korean peninsula. Koreans have been a pawn of regional powers throughout history, and harbour deep suspicions of non-Korean motivations - even those of humanitarian agencies.

The North Korean authorities see the South Korean "sunshine policy" and USA's "constructive engagement" strategy as a more gentle, but therefore even more dangerous, intrusion intended to undermine the North Korean people's resolve. They warn of "yellow winds", which blow through their defenses and infect those who are not vigilant.

Here is a quote by Kim Il Sung's son, Kim Jong Il:

"Through their ideological and cultural infiltration into other countries, the imperialists are working ceaselessly to infect people with ideological diseases, disintegrate those countries from within and then put them under their domination and control."

Considering what we said at the beginning of this lecture - that the current crisis threatens to undermine the ideological foundations of the system - this perception is understandable. The USA is by far the largest donor of humanitarian aid and the ROK is by far the largest trading partner of the DPRK. If North Korean citizens continue to eat from bags of maize, wheat and corn-soya blend imprinted with the American flag, can they help but wonder why their government is trusting its worst enemy to feed them?

To conclude,

Aid is not the answer to North Korea's problems. However, aid provides a window of opportunity. Aid gives us the access, which allows us to understand better, to identify the real issues.

Aid helps to open doors, to build relationships and thereby to build mutual confidence. We might call it "peace-building by example."

Aid provides a breathing space, a time frame within which longer-range solutions can be devised and tested.

Aid prepares the runway for a "soft landing."

# Changing Strategies for Future Action and Solidarity

FARIDA AKHTER

## The Seattle Scenario

Hardly anyone in Bangladesh was surprised at the collapse of Seattle. Our history shows that all those who become too giant and want to control too much by twisting others must face a disastrous fall. For the common people the surprising part was to know that the people in US were also demonstrating, having processions and police beating them up, which they watched in the BBC television. It was very inspiring to see this. It gave us hopes. This was the common reaction among the younger generation. That means, the street demonstrations are worthwhile!!

From UBINIG, Farhad Mazhar was present in Seattle as an NGO representative working on trade, development, environment and food security issues. On his return he wrote in a national weekly newspaper *Holiday*. He wrote:

Seattle was spectacular. It's a bizarre experience: military and the police in the downtown Seattle beating and throwing tear gas against demonstrators and dispersing them in strategic street junctions. The blinking lights of holiday season damped

by fog and rain in cold December evenings while youths are singing their protest songs on the street holding hands together to defend their turtles and trees.

Despite the political virtue of public protest, it is important to note that demonstration was mostly planned, if not all. Seattle hosts had authorised a planned march and demonstration by the AFL-CIO (the ally of the US administration and determined to protect US jobs at the expense of the developing countries), the Steelworkers Unions (demanding protection, quotas and antidumping investigations to keep out steel from the poorer countries), textiles and clothing unions using the plea of 'child labour' to shut out imports from the developing world, and the Teamsters Unions providing some muscle to the administration as well as to the Democrats. There were other peaceful protestors on the streets determined to save turtles and tropical forests but was not always interested about the human beings of Asia, Africa and Latin America

Therefore, even though the Seattle breakdown was a success yet one should be clear that to the developing country delegates the protest was officially staged by Clinton Administration to incorporate environmental and core labour standard clauses into WTO rules as means of protectionist device against which they were fighting desperately since Singapore ministerial. The main victory of the developing countries was more inside the WTO negotiations.

In the Working group discussions, the developing countries were either pushed aside or silenced by bilateral pressure. This was the common experience in all the working groups formed to facilitate negotiations. There were five working groups: Implementation, Singapore and other Issues, Agriculture, Market Access, Systemic Issues. The work of the five Working Groups commenced on 1 December. In the Implementation Working Group the African delegates, led by Kenya, put forward a consistent and very reasonable position regarding the issue of bringing TRIPS in line with the Biodiversity Convention. The protection of biodiversity and local and indigenous knowledge is a crucial issue for the

developing and the least developed countries. However, the work on TRIPS in the Working Group was ignored and a Green Room session was convened in the late hours of December 1st evening on that very issue. Only a small number of countries were invited. Not a single African delegate was at the table. The green room discussion produced an entirely different draft that was not at all acceptable to the developing countries.

In the morning of 2 December, the developing country delegates noticed that the texts they had been discussing had undergone major transformation in the course of the night as a result of Green Room consultations. The working groups were also postponed that morning and resumed in the afternoon only to be informed that a new Working Group at the ministerial level would be convened that afternoon — Ministerial Working Group on Trade and Labour Standards.

In Agriculture, despite developing countries' suggestions, there was no attempt to put the special and differential treatment provision to make it integrally operative within WTO rules. Countries based on agrarian economies will have no guarantee that there would be sufficient 'flexibility' in allowing protection to their agriculture against the onslaught of unfair competition with their highly subsidised competitors from the North. Angry and frustrated African ministers met on December 2nd. This was a crucial moment. The Chair of the General Council, the Ambassador of Tanzania, Muchumo, inspired his colleagues to speak up and denounce the non-transparent process. He was systematically sidelined and silenced by Mike Moore and dominant developed countries.

By evening, the Africans decided that they must be heard and they issued a statement to make it clear that they would not be bullied into compliance. This was perhaps the biggest blow to accelerate the final collapse of the Seattle. African Ministers said that 'There is no transparency in the proceedings and African countries are being marginalised... We are particularly concerned over the stated intentions to produce a ministerial text at any cost including at the cost of procedures designed to secure participation and consensus.



We reject the approach that is being employed and we must point out that under the present circumstances, we will not be able to join the consensus required to meet the objectives of this Ministerial Conference'.

Similarly, the Caribbean Community (Caricom) also issued a statement expressing 'profound disagreement with some procedures that have been used in conducting the Ministerial Conference allowing for lack of transparency in the preparation of the very important text... as long as due respect to the procedures and conditions of transparency, openness and participation that allow for adequately balanced results in respect of the interests of all members do not exist, we will not join the consensus to meet the objectives of this Ministerial Conference.'

Seattle WTO ministerial collapsed, no doubt. WTO will not be same after Seattle. However, it is too early to say what does the collapse of new trade negotiations and failure to produce a consensus text in the Seattle mean. In the mean time we can definitely list the most obvious causes of collapse for our record. This is the first time that a number of small economies refused to be manipulated and marginalised by the strong and dominating economies and left out of the decision-making processes and acquiesce in decisions cooked in 'secretive' so-called green room processes. They have been effectively able to raise the transparency of WTO process and procedure. Second, major developing countries clearly taking position that they cannot enable the Cairns group of agricultural exporters, and the US, to gain concessions from the EC on the agricultural front. Third, the moral strength of developing nations to remain firm on their position against labour and environmental standards despite the pressure by the street protests and demonstrations by US trade unions and some environmental groups, organised and encouraged by the US administration as host country. [Farhad Mazhar, 'Collapse in Seattle, A view from the ringside', *Holiday*, December 10, 1999]

It is in this context, that we would like to present our strategies for change. Just before the WTO meeting in Seattle, Bangladeshi

farmers, workers and various political activists staged demonstration on 29th November in Dhaka saying No to Millennium Rounds and specially raised concerns against patents on life forms.

## Resistance Strategies

Since 1992, the international concerns regarding environment and specially on biodiversity became familiar among the NGO community due to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The debates about the unequal resources among nations and among people and the cause of environmental degradation became sharp. The blaming on the poor for environmental degradation, specially blaming the overpopulation in the developing countries could not get much popularity because of the hard facts of over-consumption of the north and of the rich. The Agenda 21 and the Biodiversity Convention signed in Rio and afterwards became a reference point for the NGOs in their works. Sustainable development and, more importantly, sustainable agriculture also became popular terminologies as the growth-oriented mainstream development discourse proved to be harmful for the people and for environment.

Over next one year, concerns were raised at national and international level regarding the role of multilateral bodies and transnational corporations. In UBINIG, through our fortnightly Bengali journal *Chinta* we started publishing the translated reports on GATT negotiations. To our surprise we found that there was great interest in this issue and the environmental, social and political activists used the information in their works. They were hungry for information. In 1994, when the final document of the Uruguay Round of GATT was signed in Marrakech, it was hardly known to people. The government signed it without any consultation with the people's representatives in Parliament. People did not know what was signed in their name and what consequence they were going to face. At that time, UBINIG published a special issue of *Chinta* on GATT and the different agreements under GATT leading to the formation of WTO. This issue of *Chinta* was sold out immediately, a second reprint was issued. This shows how much people are conscious about the trade issues which affects their lives so directly. Commerce, Agriculture were of particular concern to people. No one accepted the patenting of Neem by an American Company W.R. Grace. For, a Bangladeshi

farmer who has a Neem tree in the homestead land, cannot imagine that the patent belongs to a company! So the resistance started building up among people as they understood clearly that the WTO is becoming an institution of the transnational corporations to grab and control the resources of the people. For this, more information was necessary. Our links with various international organisations such as Third World Network (TWN) in Malaysia, Grain in the Philippines, Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) in Canada, Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) in US were very helpful as we could get latest development on the WTO negotiations.

UBINIG's involvement with the garment workers' movement was also very important. The garment workers, majority being women, are being exploited in their workplace without recognition to their rights for fair wage and for their rights for weekly holidays and maternity leave. It was in 1993, that the Child Labour Deterrent Act was passed in US Congress proposed by Senator Harkin against the use of child labour in the garment factories. As a result, the garment sector was threatened for entry into the market of North America having workers below the age of 15 years. Although it was very clear that the Harkin Bill was nothing but a protectionist measure of the US government against the products of developing countries, it appeared as a concern about the exploitation of children. So it was widely publicised and received support from international agencies such as ILO, UNICEF, etc. The termination of jobs of over 60,000 children happened in phases over two years. It was a disaster in many families, the children were out of the garment factories but not out of work. They were working in other sectors which were worse than the garment factories. The schools, which were started for the education of these terminated children, remained vacant. The hypocrisy of the US government became very obvious. Bangladeshi trade unions and garment workers organisations never accepted this. Through the experience of the Harkin Bill the resistance strategies developed against the attempts to include the Social Clause into trade negotiations. We wanted the elimination of the exploitation of child labour, not the elimination of children's work. It is a hard reality that must be taken care of. One cannot just stop it by law. The results of such policies of terminating children from works resulted in more and more trafficking. The trade unions and various workers

organisations held meetings on the mechanism of WTO and its implementations. The general consensus was that the workers issues must be handled by the UN body like ILO and not the World Trade Organisation.

The business circle also got involved into the discussion of WTO. In the beginning they did not care as most of the business people were involved in import business and made huge amount of money through liberalisation of import policy. But the industrialists faced tremendous setback and did not know what was the problem. The privatisation of industries did not help very much as they faced tremendous competition in the market without any kind of protection. There was interest among the business and industrial community to know about the WTO and to determine what strategies they could take as a sector to prevent themselves from negative impact. They started developing linkages with the NGOs working on trade issues. In this regard UBINIG had interactions with the Ministry of Commerce and Industries and with Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industries. The Handloom Textile Forum realised the problems of the open trade and urged for the need of protection of the industry. The specialised handloom sector, such as Jamdani, became concerned when Jamdani was being promoted as Indian handloom product.

## **The Alternative Movement**

The Bangladeshi people do not like to lament over what is being lost. They are ready to fight against any giant that comes up to disrupt their lives and their livelihood. So the issues of WTO which may sound too high up for the educated people was not as remote to the farming community, the weavers, the workers and to all those who are concerned about environment and ecology. Our discussions first started at the grassroots level with the farmers of Nayakrishi Andolon - a movement of farmers to conserve biodiversity. The Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agricultural Movement) of Bangladesh is a movement for ecological agriculture. It is based on simple principles like no use of pesticides and chemicals, soil management rather than external input of fertilisers and practice of mixed cropping and crop rotation for pest management and risk reduction. Mixed cropping is also crucial to increase productivity through management and production of biodiversity, rather than quantitative yield of a single monocultural crop. The central approach of the initiative squarely lies in the

conservation, management and use of local seed and genetic resources and adopting and improving production techniques suitable for farmers' seed. Thus hundreds of local varieties of rice, vegetables, fruit and timber crops, etc. have been reintroduced within a short period of time. For example, farmers in Nayakrishi area cultivate at least 300 varieties of rice, and the number is increasing. The movement now is negotiating with the national genebank to help them regenerate the collected germplasm and internalise the conservation of genetic resources as an inbuilt operation of the movement.

The success of the approach is directly related to the commitment of the movement to evolve upon the local and indigenous knowledge system and critically integrates the success, failures and insights of modern science. The movement does not mechanically separate formal and informal knowledge systems, and does not subscribe to the two-system theory of knowledge. It strongly believes in the capacity of the farmers as authentic knowledge producer, no matter how it is articulated, orally or otherwise. At least 50,000 farmers all over Bangladesh practice Nayakrishi.

Besides organising the farmers for biodiversity based agricultural production, the Nayakrishi Andolon is actively involved in raising awareness among people against the harmful effects of pesticides and hybrid seeds. Villages are being declared as pesticide-free village. In one district of Tangail, at least 24 villages were declared pesticide free, in another district Sirajganj, a union comprising 12 villages was declared pesticide free, many villages in five districts are on the way to stopping the use of pesticides.

After the flood of 1998, multinational corporations like Monsanto, Novartis and ACI aggressively promoted hybrid seeds and genetically modified seeds through the micro-credit schemes of NGOs. But this was resisted by Nayakrishi farmers in their villages. The Monsanto-Grameen deal to promote Monsanto proprietary products like Bt Cotton and wheat was called off in the face of resistance. ACI in its aggressive marketing of hybrid rice, Alok 6201, faced tremendous resistance from the farmers because of its false claims on higher yield of the crop.

There was protest against the secret visit of Monsanto official in Bangladesh. The members of Nayakrishi Andolon along with UBINIG

stood in front of the Pan Pacific Hotel Sonargaon, where Monsanto official Mr Navaretti was staying. This protest was very effective in making his visit controversial.

One of the important steps that Nayakrishi has taken up over the years is organising Biodiversity Festivals. The Biodiversity Festival, commonly known as *Pranboichitra Mela* is a yearly event jointly organised by Nayakrishi Andolon with weavers associated with Prabartana and with singers associated with Nabapran Andolon. The farmers and weavers take this opportunity to share among themselves a lot of issues that needs to be addressed. This year, the fifth Biodiversity Festival 2000 was held in the southern part of Bangladesh in a remote coastal area in the union Badarkhali, of Chakaria thana in Cox'sbazar district. This is remote area with a belt of mangrove forest, recently destroyed by commercial shrimp cultivation.

This year, it is the fifth Mela held so far in different places. Every year it is held in an area where Nayakrishi Andolon has very strong organisational capacity. It first started in Tangail in 1996 where farmers and weavers from other districts started participating. But soon farmers and weavers of other districts demanded that they would like to hold the festival in their own areas to mobilise people. The fourth Biodiversity Festival was held in northern part of Bangladesh, in the village Hazaripara in Ishwardi thana of Pabna district.

In the fifth biodiversity festival, over 55,000 farmers, fisherfolk and weavers from different parts of Bangladesh have pledged to preserve biodiversity and genetic resources, particularly local and indigenous seeds. The *Pranbaichitra Mela*, held in Badarkhali, a remote coastal area in the southern part of Bangladesh, was organised by the local communities with Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agricultural Movement), the peasant's eco-agriculture movement for happy life. The Nayakrishi Andolon, a national level movement of the peasants, grew strongly in the area since the devastating cyclone and oceanic surge of 1991. Women, men and children have joined the festival of Magh-Falgun to celebrate life, diversity, and creativity of Bangladeshi people during the shining moon in the sky during Purnima (full moon) time. The unprecedented participation of local communities made the mela a huge success with total participation of more than 100,000 people from all walks of life during the four days from 11 to

14 February, 2000. According to the local people this is the first time an event of such magnitude and theme has ever taken place in the history of Badarkhali, where more than 60 percent of the participants were women. Being a coastal zone and an interface between terrestrial and oceanic eco-system, the mela quickly turned into the celebration of Earth, Water and Moon and the cosmic interconnectedness of living and nonliving beings.

The farmers, weavers, fisherfolk, cultural activists and others in a joint statement declared that we will PRESERVE biodiversity, and we will RESIST any attempt to DESTROY biodiversity. They have expressed their clear position against the use of pesticides, hybrid seeds, deep tubewells, commercial shrimp cultivation and destruction of mangrove forest, destruction of indigenous knowledge and skills, destruction of local industries and community skills such as handloom, pottery, blacksmith, bamboo works, etc. They have said NO to World Trade Organisation and a resounding NO to the exploitative practices of transnational corporations and corporate "globalisation". The pledge was to resist any form of exploitative and colonising relation imposed in the name of "free trade" or any alien production system that destroys local livelihood and the possibility of a true global order of unity, equality and diversity. It was declared that patenting of any form of intellectual property will not be acceptable to the people and Bangladesh with the people in the South Asia region will resist such attempts by all means.

All the occupational groups present in the festival found a common link among themselves. Their existence and livelihood are threatened by the so-called 'development' interventions which in essence means destruction of local knowledge, local skills and disintegration of rural life. The free trade and commercialisation reinforced the economic and political power of the urban elite and created a new consuming class of foreign products and foreign technologies making majority more and more poor. The pauperising impact of structural adjustment programme has already created an absurd reality that is socially unstable and politically violent. The WTO Agreements, particularly the TRIPS and the Agreement on Agriculture will be devastating to the already precarious situation of the people at the grassroots, specially the farming communities and the rural life.

## Regional Actions Through Networking

Since 1996, the regional groups working on ecological agriculture started getting together in consolidating their position on various international issues related to agriculture. A network was formed called the South Asian Network on Food, Ecology and Culture (SANFEC). In addition to various environmental and developmental activities, these organisations are actively involved in their own communities mainly around the fundamental necessity of life: food. The contributions of the organisations leading the network in the areas of ecological agriculture and food security are well known. They are solidly grounded within the food producing communities.

It started through a meeting of some crucial organisations in the region during 18-20 August 1996 before the World Food Summit (November 1996) held in Rome. In the meeting an important document came out, the *South Asian Statement of Concern on Food, Ecology and Culture*. This was a response to the official documents that the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of United Nations had produced. The Statement was widely distributed by the South Asian groups during the WFS meeting, both in official events as well as in NGO forum. It became the basis of the formation of the network within the South Asian countries. It received instant support among a large number of NGOs, including wellknown international groups such as TWN, RAFL, IATP. More than 300 organisations and individuals in five South Asian countries and many other countries around the world eventually endorsed the Statement. It became the basis of networking and the vital document for groups active in the area of food, agriculture, biodiversity and social justice.

The spontaneous personal commitment was the crucial strength upon which SANFEC grew over the last few years. To consolidate the positions expressed in the 'Statement of Concern' detailed discussions also took place on international trade, intellectual property rights, biotechnology and genetic engineering from the perspective of the food producing communities. The network is active on major policy issues that affect the lives of the food producing communities of South Asia.

The prevalent idea of food, seen merely as a consumer object, is not acceptable to the members of SANFEC and this critical view brought various organisations and individuals together to form the



Network. Food is viewed as the embodiment of material, ecological and cultural relations and these relations are brought to the centre of practical activities, and consequently in the policy advocacy campaigns. The bottom line is to ensure the role of creative ingenuity of the communities and enhancement of their capacities to cope with life. Food, as the embodiment of these relations, is the central guiding principle of all other activities including activities to ensure food security. This premise is fundamental in the reconstruction and reordering of community relations. This view also implies cultural constructions and future visions for a truly common and united world for diverse cultures and communities. The centrality of this premise lies in class and gender perspective. The withering away of class and patriarchal relations is still a challenge to human history. The members of the network shoulder this challenge as a task, but never in a narrow and closed manner as we witnessed in history in its various political expressions. All expressions of global monoculture of greed, destruction and intense egocentricism must be challenged, while new potentialities and possibilities must be seized, to create new visions of transformation. Resolutions of critical questions of science, technology and knowledge and the problematic margin between ecology and economy are to be made from the premise of transformative values and practice. The bond between the members of SANFEC is strong commitment to this value and not any artificially created connections between organisations or individuals with antagonistic and/or widely different perspective and practice.

One of the major challenges identified by the Statement is the form and status of community knowledge within the formal knowledge systems of mainstream science and/or disciplines. It is being realised more and more after the signing of Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD). The CBD explicitly recognises the importance of local and indigenous knowledge. While the value of community and individual local knowledge is well recognised, the form by which it can be reasonably presented, shared and disseminated is still debated. Translating local knowledge into the language of formal knowledge structures can decontextualise it from the living culture and day to day practical life it embodies. This risk is great because of the predominantly oral character of "informal" knowledge. Rich and profound knowledge and cultural practices related to agricultural biodiversity are usually not approached for an

understanding on their own ground but rather through the structure and paradigm of the formal knowledge system. As a result, local and indigenous knowledge at best obtains the status of an “object” of study or source of “raw material” from where the formal knowledge system draws resources to turn them into valid scientific knowledge. The legitimacy of the process of informal knowledge production, its functioning through community memory, individual experience and observation, metaphors, culture and rituals still have a long way to go to secure a status of its own parallel to formal knowledge. As a result, such knowledge has not been able to fully express its potential and value in its own right as a living and practical wisdom that has direct implications in agricultural biodiversity and natural resource management

SANFEC is a Network about South Asia, not a South Asian network. Nevertheless, for logical and practical reasons the leading organisations are from South Asia, mostly Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Links are being built up with Bhutan and Maldives. Most of the members have strong community-based activities as well as active roles in national and international level campaigns and advocacy work. The participation of the farming community, especially women farmers, through the member organisations is very prominent, and perhaps the most unique feature of the network. The SANFEC member organisations, in principle, do not claim to represent farmers, or pretend to speak on behalf of the farming and food producing communities. In fact, there is always a direct participation of the farmers in major events, particularly where decisions are made and discussed on vital policy issues. In the formal meetings of the SANFEC members, the participation of the farmers is ensured and the farmer to farmer linkage is built up through regular exchange programmes and through practical works related to agriculture. SANFEC also works closely with international networks and organisations such as RAFI, TWN, GRAIN, IATP and others. The implication of the work of SANFEC is therefore local, national, regional and global. There is no formality for joining the network, except that individuals and organisations agree and put to practice the principles spelled out in the Statement of Concern. The Network takes positions in a very democratic and transparent manner. Once a consensus is built up democratically within the network it cannot be disregarded without discussion among the members and it is expected that the accepted

position are reflected in the activities of individuals and organisations. In a series of meetings, SANFEC has spelled out their position on biotechnology, TRIPS and Intellectual Property Rights, particularly on Article 27.3(b) and farmers' rights. In a meeting held in Tangail in February 1999, SANFEC declared, "No IPRs in life forms no IPRs in micro organisms, as well as on plants and animal varieties. Micro organisms need to be excluded from TRIPS through an exclusion for "biodiversity" at large. TRIPS impedes the implementation of the Convention of Biological Diversity, specifically the CBD objectives such as conservation of biodiversity, sustainable use and rights for local communities."

In short, SANFEC position is "Biodiversity out of TRIPS. Article 27.3(b) should be reworded to provide a full and unconditional exclusion of all forms of biodiversity be they microorganisms, plants or animals, from IPRs regimes."

SANFEC is very active in advocacy works for the South Asian State level cooperation — the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This is very important to deal with the regional issues related to food. In such activities the network works closely with another regional network, called the Resistance Network. It is the most active network of South Asia against trafficking in women and children. The two networks jointly organised the SAARC People's Forum, parallel to the 10th SAARC summit held in Colombo, Sri Lanka. In the SAARC People's Forum links were established between the lack of food security, migration and the trafficking in women and children. To combat trafficking, the South Asian governments were going to sign a Convention. SANFEC and Resistance Network played a crucial role in the Convention. SANFEC members also brought out a statement on the situation of food security in different countries of South Asia and formulated recommendations to governments regarding what they can do to address this problem (SAARC People's Forum, 1998).

SANFEC believes that there is also a need to go beyond the farming communities in order to build solidarity with other social groups and extend the message of ecology, peace and human values to a range of actors in civil society who are active on issues of human rights and social justice. This can be done through strong basis of cultural activities at all levels. In SANFEC, this is very evident.

Traditionally folk singers, cultural activists, poets, painters, and creative writers have been strong allies of ecological and environmental movements and have played significant roles in awareness building in their own societies. SANFEC member organisations have in the past effectively built solidarity with these segments of civil society and succeeded in disseminating their message strongly, widely and creatively. It is also important to note that South Asia is rich in secular spiritual movements and the leaders of these movement have historically played a strong role in social reforms and challenged social injustice not only in political terms, but often in terms of moral and spiritual knowledge. It is also striking to note that some of these movements have strong commitment to the conservation of life and resources that are held in common. Caring for all life forms, and deep reverence for Nature as a life giving process, are some of the key features of these movements.

SANFEC members are always very busy with actions. Mobilisation of the farmers and regular exchanges between farmers of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan are happening. The SANFEC members in different countries are organising Biodiversity Fairs. Three major biodiversity fairs took place recently. One was in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh (January, 1999). The second in the Pabna district of Bangladesh (February, 1999). The third major biodiversity Fair took place in Badarkhali (February, 2000) and the fourth will take place in late February, 2000 in Sri Lanka. Advocacy and lobbying at the national, regional and international levels are important SANFEC actions. SANFEC members join each other on common regional issues. Besides the festivals, the SANFEC members have started the farmers caravan of Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan starting from Bangladesh to go upto Sri Lanka. The group of over 50 farmers are travelling by train from one district to another, stopping for press conference and public meetings.

## **Last Words**

Actions are only meaningful with strong national mobilisation among farmers, weavers, environmental and political activists. Without a strong national movement the regional or international networking are not useful. At the same time, the building up of solidarity relationships among the likeminded groups at the regional and international level is very important for sharing of information and

for taking collective actions. We believe in the strength of collectivity and diversity of actions according to national, regional and international needs.

# On the Famine Trail

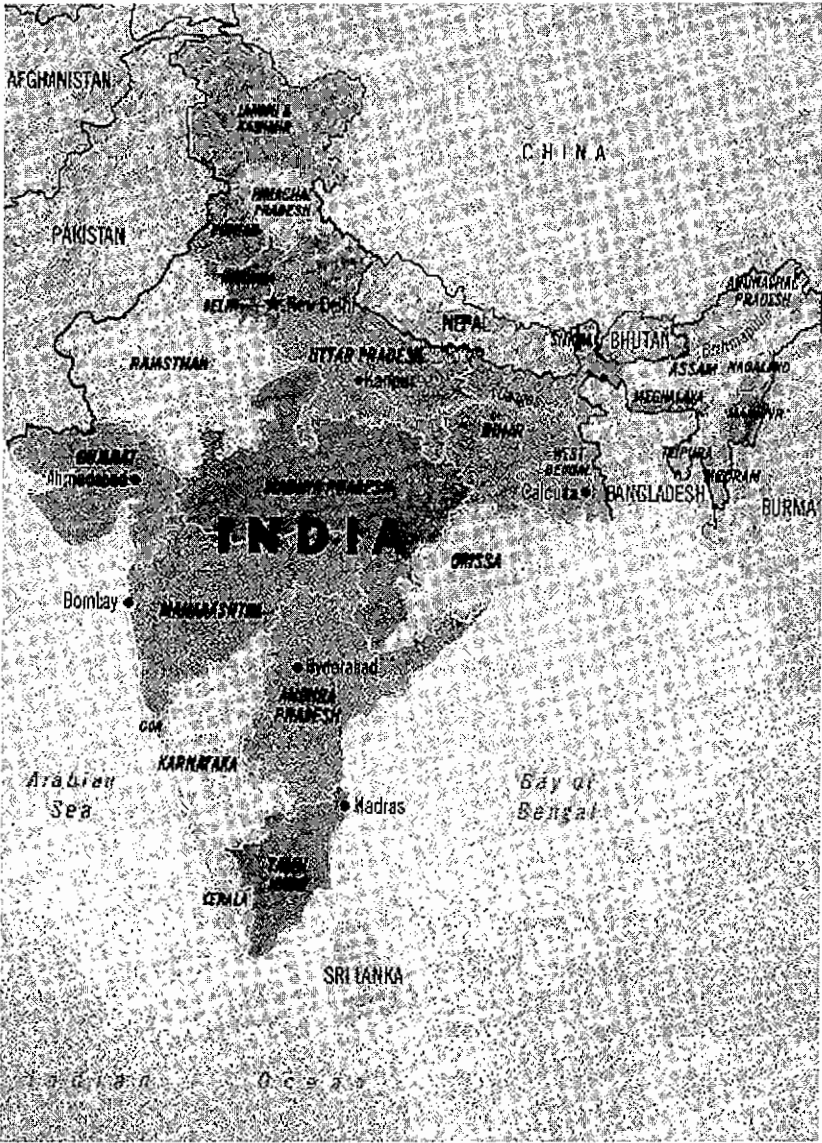
## *- an exploration of the food (in)security situation in India*

SUMIT CHOWDHURY

### **Four and a counterpoint**

*Soon after Prof. Amartya Sen received the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics for his seminal works on famines in colonial India and post-revolution China, we were commissioned by an international NGO to make a film on the food security situation in India on the threshold of a new millennium. The topic encompassed a sweeping and complex universe about which we had impeccable theoretical notions but very little real-life experience or understanding of conditions at the ground level. The film offered a rare opportunity to test our subjective perceptions on the altar of objective reality.*

*After months of gruelling groundwork and passionate, often tempestuous, brainstorming, we formulated a gameplan for the making of the hour-long visual feast. The decision was to tell four micro-level stories that would throw some light on the major facets of the food security issue. Put together, these individual, apparently unconnected stories, would offer a more generalised macro-vision. Our framework predictably led us to four very diverse locations across the vast subcontinent: Punjab in the north which has been the hub of the Green Revolution since it was heralded in the mid-*



*60s; Kalabandi in the east-central that has been experiencing a perpetual famine-like situation at the same time as the Green Revolution was making its presence felt in several pockets; Telengana to the north of peninsular India where a drastic shift in cultivation and cropping pattern is driving farmers to a 'dead-end' of pests and exploitative credit systems that have culminated in a spate of suicides; and Bellary to the peninsula's northwest, where introduction of genetically manipulated seeds by the global merchants of biotechnology have spelt doom for indigenous farming and biodiversity and has given rise to a series of actions, often violent, of mass resistance. Each of these stories were to be personalised narratives told by an ordinary victim of the food production-cum-distribution regime: a traditional farmer who finds agriculture becoming unsustainable in the aftermath of the Green Revolution, a once-self-contented tribal peasant now reduced to landlessness and starvation, a cultivator switching to cashcrops and driven to desperation, an impoverished seed farmer venting ire against transnational attempts at genetic tinkering.*

*All the four case studies pointed to accelerated commercialisation and rapid intrusion of capitalist ethos as the root cause of the destruction of Indian agriculture today. Wanting to extract a more positive resolution for the film, we created space in our package for yet another item, something that, devoid of a clearcut narrative and juxtaposed between the main stories as a conduit for fluid transition, would stir the subconscious with visions of an alternative scenario. For this we singled out Jardhar, a quaint mountain hamlet in the picturesque Garhwal Himalayas, where traditional agriculture and community-centred living have been willingly retained in the face of inevitable onslaughts by forces of 'market agriculture'. The idea was not to valorise or even romanticise what is being lost but to underline the self-sufficiency and sustainability that agriculture assumes under harmonious lifestyles and holistic ideals, as a counterpoint to the depressing ruin all around.*

*So with four stories and a counterpoint to capture, we set out to look for a breed of television anchors hitherto unheard of, characters from the fringes of village society, poor, unlettered and exploited, who had stories similar to our scheme of things. The numerous recces and shooting stints that ensued provided us the*



*experience of a lifetime, an exposure to rural India at its starkest. Here are a few sketches of this truly perceiving encounter.*

### **Where have all the waterwheels gone?**

"We are farmers for generations. It's our life. Even in my sleep I think of chores in the field. But look, now agriculture is a shambles. We cannot sell what we produce, no one has the money to buy our crops. Our labours go waste, farming has become a burden. We have no future."

Daya Singh's languorous rambling resonated from the tangles of his flowing white beard. Even his soothing demeanour and the softness of his voice could not hide the alarm signals he set out to draw before us. Sunlight streaking in through the door illuminated the comfortable 'front' room, where we were ensconced on a spacious sofa, but eluded the elderly Sikh sitting cross-legged across from us on an incongruously large bed. The half-light formed a halo around his burly figure, making him look like a dervish delivering ominous oracles.

Why does he sound so hopeless, I must have wondered then. He has got everything an ordinary Indian wishes for and more — metalled road right up to his doorsteps, a nice double-storied house, a living room, cable television, washing machine, smattering of English, family in Canada and Australia — he has even been to London, twice ... Maybe his crop is failing, his granary is not full, I tried to reason with myself.

"Last year tomatoes and potatoes, even paddy, were going a-begging. No one would pay, they were rotting in the streets. Cold storage had no space for them." Daya Singh's monologue rolled on without a break. "It was the same last year. And the year before that. This is quite a new phenomenon that I do not understand..." his voice trailed off, bewilderment palpable on his creased forehead. Brooding, he pulled out a long strip of white cloth from under a grimy pillow and, after carefully folding and refolding it, proceeded to deftly wrap it around his head. As if the assertion of his religious identity might provide a solution to his troubles.

Well, his granary is not empty: it's just that there is no market mechanism, a network, through which he can sell his produce, I

tried to work the arguments over in my mind. The mouth-watering aroma of buttered *parantha* and iced *lassi* interrupted our concern for the future of Punjab's agriculture.

Breakfast was served by Daya Singh's portly wife and smiling daughter-in-law. They were unusually quiet but perfect in their hospitality. The son, their only child and a graduate, hovered in the background, clean-shaven and sans turban. Clearly, he had eschewed the religious code of the family. Must have avoided his family occupation as well, I ventured to presume.

The *parantha-lassi* must have satisfied Daya Singh's appetite, for now his homespun articulation flowed in torrents, his analysis more lucid and taking on a rather philosophical mooring. He spoke less about himself, dwelling instead on the tragedy of 'the land of five rivers'.

Punjab, according to the 70+-year-old, had been a very fertile land. Stretching out in vast dusty plains from the foothills of the Himalaya and Shivalik ranges, its porous soil watered by five life-giving rivers, it was a land of plenty. In his youth, the golden hue of wheat and paddy, in hundreds of varieties, enveloped the landscape, the former being produced for the community's own consumption and the latter for selling in the marketplace during festive seasons. Irrigation, in its current state-of-the-art form, was unknown and waterwheels were in vogue for harvesting rainwater flooding the low-lying areas.

"Wherever you went, you could see rows of waterwheels, extending up to the horizon," Daya Singh narrated with a little romance in his voice. "We used to pedal those wheels by turns, through the day and by night, singing boisterous songs to break the monotony. Where have all the waterwheels, all those songs, gone?" A purple ray of nostalgia, tinged with immense sadness, loomed across his furrowed brow. The morning freshness was wearing out and an oppressive heaviness was gathering in the room. As the sweet *lassi* began to take its toll on me, the rattle of revolving waterwheels buzzed in my ears and a plaintive melody, sung in many voices, flowed in my head. I was transported to another time another world.

Our host remained oblivious of my obvious discomfort in keeping my eyes and ears open. He resumed after a pause, falling back on

history. "Things changed swiftly after independence. When the Bhakra-Nangal dam came up, the centuries old waterwheels were wound up in one stroke; a network of canals criss-crossing for hundreds of miles took their place. It was a call for disaster. Construction of the canals put tremendous pressure on the exchequer which was passed on to our — the public's — pocket. Moreover, these separated us from our land, and their concrete embankments blocked the free outflow of rainwater from the low-lying fields." My confusion was only confounded by this revelation. The disappearance of waterwheels and the advent of canal-irrigation then were the reasons for the water-logging and salinity problems in the Punjab that I had been hearing about. The twin problems, I knew, had devastated thousands of hectares of land rendering them uncultivable. But was it environmental degradation that was at the root of Daya Singh's disquiet? I was still not sure.

Breakfast over, we now walked out to our host's wheat fields. The road wound through the quiet village, providing glimpses of advanced lifestyles prevailing in rural Punjab. Every building was *pucca* (brick-and-cement) and had electricity; tractors, even an occasional Maruti, passed by or were parked in front of houses; the streets were well-swept, the walls clean and devoid of graffiti or cowdung, tubewells adorned every corner, supplying clean, potable water, and television antennae shot up from every roof. We were far away from the poverty and squalor that defined Indian villages. A magnificent haze of golden-brown greeted us in the fields. Rows of wheat plants were standing man-high wherever we looked, stretching well beyond the horizon. Not long ago waterwheels dotted these fields, the thought flashed across my mind. The sun was already over our heads and blazing, its incisive rays just touching the tip of the swaying crop, unable to penetrate the dense undergrowth. A couple of tractors in the distance were working, kicking up a swirl of dust. It seemed that the fields were on fire.

We followed Daya Singh's strident footsteps along a raised path that zigzagged between plots of land spilling over with crop. The heat was fierce but there was no tree anywhere in sight to offer shade. Somewhere a songbird began to sing. Where on earth in this treeless expanse is it perched? It was the beginning of summer, harvest time. In a nearby field, about a dozen women and men were carrying on their heads enormous, neatly gathered sheaves, stacking

them away from the field. Their short stature and drab clothes were a clear indication they were not of Punjab stock. "We call them *bhaiyas*. They come from Bihar and UP (Uttar Pradesh). Poor people, they have no land of their own. Whatever they had they lost to their landlords. They have been coming for the last 30 years or so, ever since things began to change here. Now their number is dwindling. We ca not afford to keep them any more," Daya Singh was candid in his explanation.

"Things began to change," well, the Green Revolution! Just as I was going to ask our host for his views on the phenomenon, there appeared before us a couple of robust turbaned figures, drenched in sweat, their face and hair smeared with dust. I thought they were live scarecrows! They were Ajit and Harpal, Daya Singh's elder and younger siblings, toiling in the fields since daybreak. "We are six brothers," Daya Singh explained. "Two of them are abroad, one in Canada, the youngest studying for his PhD in Australia. Only the four of us, the unlettered ones, have remained farmers," he added with a wry smile.

"Earlier the family had all the land and we all worked on it together. Now each one of us lives separately and owns separate plots of land. So we have four tractors where one would have sufficed," Ajit butted in. Families, social cohesion was coming apart in Punjab, I surmised. But it was the consequence, it could not be the cause of this farming family's problems. What then was the real issue, why were not they spelling it out? I was exasperated but took comfort in the thought that probably the brothers did not know it themselves. I asked the brothers whether they, too, were troubled with their occupation as Daya Singh was. "Oh! yes," they responded in unison. "Our land is overworked, we ca not expect more and more from the same plot. Even if we do, where do we sell? There is no one to buy," Ajit said. "I wish I could give up farming and go abroad like my other brothers," added Harpal. "What do we do, if we give up farming? We can do no other work," there was despair in the elder brother's voice.

A rumbling noise, like that of a helicopter, from the adjacent field startled me from my reverie. A gigantic machine, which looked like an armoured tank, had revved up and was moving menacingly towards us. Daya Singh's laughter rumbled seeing me looking around fearfully

for cover. "These are combined-harvesters that do both cutting and threshing. Earlier we used to hire labour for these jobs, now we have these. They are very expensive, but are not they marvellous?" he could hardly conceal his pride in this marvel of technology. It was really fascinating to watch the harvester in action. How smoothly, and in almost no time, its rolling blades sliced the standing crop from its roots and then, with a few grinding-vibrating thrusts, separated the chaff from the grain! Machines could do real wonders to productivity! "First came the tractor. That was when everything went topsy-turvy... Now every mother's son has one. The harvesters are a recent acquisition. Soon every one will have that, too," said Daya Singh. "The *bhaiyas* will have to pack up and go home." I was not sure whether he was happy or not.

Tractors, harvesters, threshers, pumpsets arrived with the Green Revolution that was launched in the mid-60s and to these Punjab owed much of its present agricultural prosperity. Wherever you went, whatever the crop in the field, these were an inescapable part of the dusty brown landscape. What a contrast to the rest of India's rural canvas where ploughing bullock carts offer the overriding imagery! Indeed, the Green Revolution, from all accounts, had brought about a revolutionary change in the life of the Punjab farmer. The influx of agricultural hardware apart, the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and the cultivation of high-yielding varieties had given farming a massive boost. His fields were now filled with the golden crop, his granary was overflowing, his income showed a quantum leap and he could afford a television or make annual visits to his relatives in New York or Vancouver. What were Daya Singh and his brothers cribbing about? I was a bit disappointed with my host for wanting more out of life.

In fact, I could not make head or tail of the way Daya Singh's mind was working. Was he lamenting the loss of his old world? But then he was also quite taken up by the monstrous machine that was working on his fields. The earthy and pragmatic man that he was, he could not be bothered by the fading away of tradition. What was he like as a young man when the Green Revolution had not made an appearance? I wondered. "When we were young," Ajit started as if he could read my mind. "All of us, the brothers, even our wives used to toil in the field from dawn to dusk. There was so much work to do. It

was our life. If we did not toil, we knew there would be no food. Now that compulsion for toil has gone. And the charm, too."

The brothers set to lunch, spreading a sheet on the ground, unwrapping a pile of maize *rotis* (leavened bread) with *achar* (pickle) to go with it. We politely declined their invitation to share the meal, the late-morning breakfast was still doing tricks in our city-bred stomachs. Instead, we wandered around the fields watching the *bhaiyas* and the harvester by turns, astounded by the massive gap in their speed and output. They seemed to belong to two different eras.

The Green Revolution must have transformed the existing culture of this place, a whole new mindset must have been created. Perhaps an old Sardarji like Daya Singh was trapped between these two completely incompatible worlds, I guessed. A patch of shade was thrown by a leafless tree in the corner of a wheat-laden plot. I sat on the ground, leaning against the trunk. Almost immediately my eyes closed, weighed down by a kind of weariness. Somewhere in the distance, water was gushing out with the working of a pumpset. The rhythmic churning of waterwheels echoed in my mind's ears. Imperceptibly, it took on the contours of an earthy air sung by an out-of-tune chorus. Off-key, but sweet nevertheless.

The spell broke with Daya Singh's reappearance. He had trudged off to supervise the work of the *bhaiyas* and now he returned in a huff muttering under his hairy breath. "They are all shirkers, always chattering or idling, lazybones ... What's the point in paying them if they do not work! Money does not come free." He seemed agitated, angry. "Farming I told you does not pay any more," he pounced on his favourite hobby horse. He had taken off his turban and his long white hair hung loosely down his back. The sun, already halfway down behind him, cast his long shadow in front of me. "Everything is becoming dearer. The price of diesel has gone up and so has the cost of tractor maintenance, the price of seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, even electricity... And now, even the *bhaiyas* want more," disgust was implicit in his tone. "On the other hand, the price we get for our crops, the less said the better," he went on. "Government does not care for us farmers. Now subsidies are also being taken off. It extends all the help to industry but agriculture is not in their head."

The snooze must have done wonders for now I could put my thoughts into a coherent framework. No, it was not that Daya Singh and his ilk were not able to cope with the sudden and swift change that had come into their lives. In fact, they had absorbed the culture of the Green Revolution rather well, benefiting a great deal from it. When it came about the Green Revolution dramatically altered the economic and social life of Punjab's agricultural communities. Earlier cultivation had been primarily for consumption and family labour provided the free inputs. With the invasion of the Green Revolution, tractors, pumpsets, harvesters became the farmer's investments, fertilisers, diesel, power his running costs, and the army of migrant workers his supply of wage-labour. Soon as metalled roads linked the hinterland with the mushrooming *mandis* (wholesale markets), crops turned into commodities and the farmer got sucked into the vortex of a thriving market economy.

But now there had been an inevitable setback. The Green Revolution was facing an unforeseen crisis typical of a capitalist order. Overproduction was breaking down the system from within, a glut overwhelming the working of the market. The problem had been aggravated by the rising input costs, resulting from an overall inflationary spiral, the fall in demand for agricultural produce due to dwindling purchasing power, the withdrawal of subsidies and the government's unwillingness to offer better remunerative prices to farmers. In short, agriculture had become economically unviable in the land of five rivers.

Daya Singh was plucking wheat grains from the standing plants, collecting them in his broad palm. By now the sun had touched the horizon and Daya Singh's immense silhouette exuded an air of melancholia. He seemed sad, tentative, unsure of what the future held for him. A flock of pigeons flew in to settle around the row of wheat stacks. The saintly Sikh from Hoshiarpur threw a handful of grain in the direction of the birds. Would he overcome? I knew it was not in his hands but wished him well.

One last time, I turned to look at the fields. The harvester had fallen silent and an eerie feeling gripped the approaching darkness. Was it possible that these fields would soon turn into a barren expanse? I tried to banish the catastrophic images welling up in my

brain. The songbird began its song one more time. I longed for that forgotten time that had vanished with the waterwheels.

### **Beyondtherainbow**

It was my first visit to Kalahandi and the picture it presented shattered all that I had imagined it to be like. True, the dominating colours were brown, mauve and yellow which characterised an arid land. But that was because summer was at its peak, temperatures rising to nearly 50 degrees Celsius and the trees in the forest had all shed their leaves, with only the branches sticking out like enormous thorns from bare trunks. It seemed nature had hacked with a pair of scissors all the foliage from the woods, making them skeletal, scrumpy. But woods there were everywhere, dark and dense, and stretching for miles broken only by the buttresses of black hillocks rising like pyramids. Both the forests and the hills were so old that age could only be defined in terms of geological time.

The highway running through this ancient landscape allowed little view of people or settlements. Only occasionally, we had come across a shepherd, when we had to make our way through the herd blocking the entire road, or groups of women in colourful *saris* on the roadside carrying headloads of fuelwood. The villages were hidden from sight, nestling at the foot of the hillocks and surrounded by jungles or cultivable land. A mountain stream or two and some almost dried-up ponds were the only signs of water anywhere. "Dig a couple of feet and there's water," the leading light of the NGO we had approached for help, said. We were sitting on the lawn in front of the building that served as the organisation's office as well as a commune for its 30-odd volunteers. It was late evening and we had just arrived at Khariar, a trading town in Nuapara district in the heart of Kalahandi. A cup of hot tea revived me from the gruelling jeep ride from Raipur, 200 km away, and I was all ears to my host.

"Drought in Kalahandi is a myth we're determined to expose," the NGO-man held forth on his organisation's area of work. He was amiable, sincere, and knew a lot about the way life was organised in this wildly beautiful country. Facts were at his fingertips and he rattled them off to prove that there was in reality no shortage of water in what was being passed off by the government and media alike as a perpetually drought-prone area. "We can never run out of



water here, it flows in subterranean streams everywhere,” he asserted. “Besides, there are ponds, lakes and innumerable tributaries of the Mahanadi and Indravati. You’ve come at a wrong time, the aquifers are running dry now. In the rainy season these are filled to the brim.” He was ashamed that he could not immediately substantiate what he was saying.

His eyes lit up when I asked if there was any device by which rainwater could be conserved and not allowed to run off. “Modern irrigation has destroyed the ages-old methods. They are a real bane. Every now and again the state government inaugurates a new project with a lot of fanfare to please votebanks. These never get completed. Thank God for that, else we would have had no water in our fields. Faulty in design, totally ineffective, these have caused more problems than they have solved.”

The announcement that dinner was ready put a break to the enlightening conversation. The culinary display awaiting us in the open space behind the office building made it hard to imagine we were in famine land. Soon we were sitting with all the other members of the commune and gourmandising on rice, fish curry and splendidly-cooked meat served on banana leaves while our host regaled us with stories of his thrilling encounters with the festival rites of the Kondhs. “They are the dominant tribe here, almost 50 percent of the population,” he elaborated, referring to the forest-dwelling people of the region. “A happy community living amid nature and living off its bounty. They have always known how to make the best use of their resources. Look at their water-harvesting method, absolutely ingenious; but city-bred engineers won’t learn anything from them. The irrigation government is forcing on us — dams, canals and all that — are ringing the death-knell for the traditional system.” I asked what the traditional method was and if it was still in use anywhere. “Go to Bisibahal on the fringes of Komna reserve forest just 20 km from here. You can see for yourself how efficient the *murakata* system used to be,” he replied, clearing the mess the community repast had made. The elaborate meal after the tiring journey invoked thoughts of a cosy, comfortable bed.

Our host got busy issuing instructions to his colleagues regarding the next day’s work and it was quite a while before he remembered me. “Thakurdas,” he turned towards a man sitting in a corner,

pouring over a thick red notebook and occasionally jotting down a line or two. "He's rewriting the Ramayana in Oriya. He's a poet... His Ramayana tells a different story, that of exploitation in the present social system. The epic battle of Kurukshetra in his tale is between the haves and have-nots." I had noticed the poet at dinner. He was in his mid-50s, clad in knee-length *dhoti* and *kurta* of coarse white cloth, the aura of introspection marking him out. He came up to us and greeted me politely with folded hands. "Thakurdas will take you to Bisibahal tomorrow. Be ready at six in the morning," my host announced. It was time to retire.

To reach Bisibahal we had to ford a tributary of the Indravati. The jeep driver was skilled enough to negotiate the vehicle through knee-deep waters and in a trice we were on the other bank. The road ahead was *kuchcha* (unpaved) and wound through undulating fields and tribal hamlets. *Mabua* and *palash* (red flowers growing on trees) were in full bloom, adding a dash of colour to the otherwise rock-brown landscape. Buffaloes were grazing in hordes while women and children bathed or washed on the stone steps leading to ponds.

On arrival, we did not immediately enter Bisibahal but skirted around to reach the other side of the village from where rose the hills of the Komna sanctuary. It was a sight worth making the effort to travel this distance. A magnificent lake, its blue waters so transparent that the bed was visible, lay before us extending from the foot of the green hills to the village. Spellbound, we stepped out of the jeep and made our way to the water's edge.

A mud embankment ran along the length of the lake. We marched on silently, drinking in this heavenly sight, stopping once in a while to catch a glimpse of the flash of silver when the sun's rays fell on the fish jumping out of the water. A flock of egrets skimmed the surface and kingfishers sat patiently on thin reeds sticking out of the water. The blazing heat of the sun was offset by the cool breeze blowing in from the far side of the lake. "This is a typical reservoir," Thakurdas spoke for the first time. "It was excavated a hundred years ago to store rainwater. Because it is in the higher reaches, it's called *mura*, meaning head. When water is needed at the lower levels for cultivation, a breach is made in the embankment. When adequate water has flowed down, the breach is filled up again. In Oriya, breach is *kata*. It works as a sluice." We had reached a point from

where we could get a view of the other side of the embankment.. Here the land was clearly higher, sloping gradually down to the village. Rows of palm and coconut trees were swaying above the paddy fields, a stretch of green spread out like an oasis in a wasteland. We descended to get a closer look. The gurgle of flowing water was the only sound in the hushed paddy fields. There were several canals coiling through the tangle of vegetation carrying water down to the lowlands. We trudged on along a precariously narrow and slippery trail, trying to keep our balance while jumping over large puddles, soaking in the fresh air, enraptured by the silence.

The open fields gave way to an impermeable, darker patch of plantation as we came down to a fruit grove. Luscious red litchis hung in clusters, a few ripe mangoes lay on the ground, their stems unable to bear their weight, lemon trees exuded a heavenly fragrance while bees swarmed all over, their steady drone sounding like bass being played on a bagpipe. "All this has been possible because of the *mura*," Thakurdas said. "Kalahandi was like this in my youth. It was the rice bowl of Orissa. It just dried up when they dismantled the *muras*."

Beyond the grove was a cowshed where some 30 bovines were chewing cud, tied to iron rings fixed to the ground. *Mabua* fruit was spread out to dry in one corner from which emanated an intoxicating smell. A double-storied house of wood and brick faced us, belonging to a prosperous household by its look. "The raja of Bisibahal lives here. All this land belongs to him. Most people in this village work on his land, at least they get work. The *mura* was built by his father."

The raja turned out to be a simple man, modest and friendly. His name was Dolamoni Naik. He told us the story of Bisibahal as we ate puffed rice and slaked our thirst with the sweet water of tender coconuts. "My father, Damodar Naik, was originally from Sambalpur. The land, 2,700 acres in all, was gifted to him by the scion of Khariar estate in 1919. He built the *mura* soon after he settled here. Some 50-60 people worked round-the-clock for a whole year. It irrigates 500 acres." Dolamoni Naik combined history and statistics with great ease. "This village was a paradise. There never was a shortage of food and everybody got work in the fields. But that was another time. Now people have no work or food: they say there's no water. The *mura* is falling into disuse ever since the government imposed water

cess in 1975. They've taken over most of the land of the reservoir, too, presumably for scientific irrigation. Nothing has happened so far." I could see the anger rising within him.

The spark was kindled by my wondering aloud whether the government action was in line with its avowed post-independence policy of disallowing concentration of land in a few hands. "What benefits have the poor got from land reforms?" he shot back. "It has only filled the pockets of bureaucrats, politicians, contractors, and traders... Fake independence!... Bisibahal could have been *biswabahal* (in Oriya *biswa* is world and *bahal* means land) but for the corrupt outsiders." We took our leave, feeling sad at the fading away of a living tradition. Thakurdas broke our brooding silence while we drove back. "He's right about the outsiders coming and spoiling it all. We had everything here, fertile land, water and, of course, the forests. The irrigation contractors played havoc with the water-harvesting while the forest contractors decimated the forests."

A troop of monkeys blocked the road, making faces at us. It took a great deal of honking and shouting before we got the right of way. "Monkeys have become a menace because their habitat is endangered," Thakurdas said. "Where will they go when the forests disappear?" He was in a reflective mood. "Forests are our life-givers. We find sustenance from them during lean times, fruits, roots, fibres, leaves, what not. When it rained, the water washed down dead leaves and other organic matter to enrich our soil. Now when it pours, there are no trees to hold the water and it comes down in torrents, flooding our fields and villages."

We were now back on the highway. Our progress was considerably slowed down by a sudden surge of people. It was marketday in one of the villages and men and women from far-off villages were trudging along with basketloads to sell, others to buy. We stopped at the *baat* (weekly market) for tea from a makeshift stall. The taste of the cold, rubbery jalebi we were served was more than compensated by the enjoyment we derived from the bustle around us. Women draped in bright coloured saris and wearing equally colourful trinkets were selling a wide variety of goods — from grain and vegetables to earthenware, readymade clothes and even ganja. Here and there were set up huge wooden balances on

which mounds of rice were being weighed, hurried calculations done and large amounts of money changed hands.

The sky had darkened with thunderclouds as we made our way back to the jeep. Thakurdas returned to his prognosis of Kalahandi's disease. "Once the tribal peasant just lived off his land. His family was fed on what he produced and the little surplus was sold in the market in exchange for necessary goods. Then the rice-mills came up and a price-tag was attached to paddy." We had just seen the exchange. "The peasant now produces entirely for the market. To feed his family he needs to increase his productivity. He needs money for fertilisers and pesticides. And in years of poor harvest he has to borrow to tide over the crisis. Who has the money to lend him but the rice-mill owners? For generations their families are money-lenders." Thakurdas' analysis had a clarity I had not found in any professional economist.

"Over time, the peasant-cultivator became a bonded slave of the ricemill owner-cum-moneylender. Gradually he lost his land, his property, everything he owned. You go to any village, you won't find a single young person. They've all gone to Bombay or Raipur or Bangalore or Calcutta in search of work. There they work as coolies on construction sites." I began to see what lay at the root of Kalahandi's tragedy. It was a land of plenty, still. But its riches were being appropriated by a handful of traders from outside. The famine-like situation here was not because of non-availability of food, but because of lack of access. This was Amartya Sen's analysis of the 1943 Bengal famine. And one could imagine that most of the famines in one corner of the country or another for the last 300 years were man-made.

We stopped to drop Thakurdas home. His was a tiny mud hut, not very different from the other dwellings in the village. The storm had broken but his wife had not returned from the field. He sent his neighbour's son to fetch her as we sat on the doorstep chatting. His wife came in while Thakurdas talked about himself and his family. His family was not large but he had two grownup out-of-work sons to feed. He held a meagre two acres of land after the ancestral property was divided among his five brothers. He cultivates only one paddy crop a year, which partly takes care of his family's hunger. The rest of the year, there is little else except uncertainty and insecurity.

His wife brought us a dish of puffed rice mixed with peanuts. As he munched Thakurdas went on. He had once cultivated onions and produced a decent crop. When he took his produce to the *mandi* himself, bypassing the middlemen, the price he was offered was less than a fourth of what he thought was fair. Not only did he not sell his onions, but he also had to dish out a considerable sum for hiring a bullockcart to transport his crop. "The *mandis* are controlled by the ricemill owners. It is they who manipulate the prices, both for buying and selling. There are just 20 of them and they are all outsiders. Marwari traders, it is they who control Kalahandi's economy." Thakurdas was not one to mince his words. The sky had cleared and I got up to leave. Outside, a magnificent rainbow graced the horizon. What a colourful land, I thought. How long will just 20 people dominate the lives of thousands? I looked beyond the seven colours, seeking for an answer.

### Living with poison

There were two reasons why I was excited about the trip to Telengana. This was the location where in the late 1940s the celebrated peasant uprising took place of which I had heard so much in my adolescent years. This was also the hub of the present Naxalite movement that is witnessing frequent eruptions of extremist violence and counter-terror by the state. Come to think of it, the latter was an extension of the former, both being insurgencies by poor, marginalised people and both challenging the existing social order. In fact, as a young man, it was during my brush with the initial Naxalite upsurge in Calcutta that I learnt about the Telengana peasant struggle.

However, history past or present, was not the immediate reason for my excursion to the Deccan plateau. What prompted the travel were the regular newspaper reports of cotton farmers in the region committing suicide by drinking pesticides. That cotton was grown in Telengana was news to me; and secondly, the act of taking one's own life, whatever the provocation, seemed out of place in a region known for its militant mass resistance to socio-economic exploitation. I wanted to see for myself what exactly was happening there, 2000 km away from where I live.

My flight reached Hyderabad's brash new airport in the dead of night. I had visited this southern metropolis a few times before and

was very fond of its old-world charm. But now, even at that late hour, I could see that a great change had come over the city. The capital of Andhra Pradesh was all spruced up, cleaner, and brighter than before. I had an uncanny feeling that the transformation came from a diligent and determined effort at modernising. The signs were everywhere.

The morning after and what I saw over the next couple of days confirmed my suspicions. Hyderabad was racing to catch up with the world to be. Neon lights and glittering billboards had brought in a new look and a feast of colour, luxury hotels and posh restaurants had sprung up all over, mushrooming highrises blocked out the sky, flyovers and subways were coming up at almost every road junction and glitzy shopping arcades sparkled to dazzle customers. The rapid rise of a consumerist culture was all too evident. However, the most striking aspect of the city's progress to modern times was its inhabitants' new-found passion for computer technology. From every corner, cyber cafes beckoned more and more people to the information superhighway, growing numbers of young men and women were getting hooked to the internet while public service institutions and government administration were being streamlined through web links. In short, Nizam's Hyderabad was fast becoming globally connected.

The modernising phenomenon was also catching up in Warangal, the biggest town in Telengana, 175 km from the capital and the epicentre of the Naxalite tremor zone. I had been apprehensive that it would be the back of beyond, a small trading town with filthy narrow lanes, decrepit houses and cows littering the roads. The reality jolted me: broad meticulously washed avenues lined with well-decorated shops, freshly-painted buildings, sprawling parks and a profusion of statues and fountains presented a picture quite at odds with my idea of the place. How far removed Warangal was from the towns of the same stature elsewhere in the country!

I knew the story I had come to capture in Telengana; my immediate task was to locate the narrator for the story. I was looking for a woman presenter this time, preferably the widow of a cotton farmer who had consumed pesticide. I managed to establish contact with some people active in the agrarian workers' union and they assured me that I would not have to look too far. There were four highways leading out of Warangal towards Telengana's interior. With

one of the unionists accompanying me, I took the one heading for the forests in Nellore.

Even before we had crossed the city limits, rows of factory sheds came into view. The signboards indicated they were cotton spinning-cum-ginning mills and my companion informed me they had all come up in the last couple of decades. An unending line of tractors and bullock carts, laden with bales of cotton passed us, headed for the *mandi* or the mills. After a while we approached the open countryside. The road became less crowded and the morning, light and mellow, shrouding the fields with a yellow hue. Tiny specks of white plopped out amid a sea of lush green. It was my first-ever sight of a cotton field and I felt a pang of yearning for something I could not explain.

The entire day we drove from one village to another. The Tata Sumo we had hired in Warangal kicked up a swirl of dust along the mud paths that emerged from the highway like scorpion legs. Red flags atop small, nondescript cement structures, presumably martyrs' columns stood as gateways at every halt, much like those in my native Bengal. I was scanning faces as we talked to members of the *mabila samitis* (women's groups). Locating an anchor was not as easy as my friend had said. The women were either too young, or not so articulate, or camera-shy, or their life stories were not directly related to the suicides, though its incidence, I discovered, was pretty high everywhere. By the end of the day I was in despair. My guide's assurance that he understood my problem and his promise that the following day we would be visiting tribal settlements failed to lift my spirits.

Early next morning we drove further along the same highway. Our first stop was Viswanathapuram, a large village with a population of over a thousand, mostly belonging to the Lombardi tribe. I noticed hardly any traces of the tribal way of life in the village. Men wore *dhotis* or trousers and women *saris*. Only a few very old men sported turbans and bushy fearsome moustaches, while some elderly women were dressed in the traditional attire of bright *choli-ghagra*, tiara and necklace encircling their heads and necks, enormous nose rings, and thick bangles carved out of cow bones along the entire length of the arm. The similarity of the outfits to those worn by tribes in northern India was uncanny. Later I learnt that the Lombardis



came from the desert in the west several centuries ago. Their original mother tongue had long been forgotten and they spoke a dialect they had evolved over the years. While everyone knew Telugu, the language of Andhra Pradesh, they preferred their homespun lingo.

We sat on a *charpai* (wooden frame bed strung with coarse coconut rope) in the open space in front of Nanda Saru's house. His brother V Gopal had committed suicide a year ago when he was just 24 years old. The young widow who stood at the door, her face covered, was penniless with two children and depended on the brother-in-law for survival. I tried to take her picture but she disappeared inside. A crowd had gathered around the *charpai*. I kept clicking as I asked questions, my unionist friend acting as interpreter. A voice from the crowd, a woman's, was very articulate: I looked up to identify the speaker and was immediately taken up. The voice belonged to a woman of considerable beauty. The looks were incongruous with the tattered *sari*, unkempt, perhaps lice-infested hair, and coddled hands. She was in her late twenties, of average height, extremely thin with hardly a hint of breasts. Despite her eloquence, she had an air of vulnerability about her.

Shakubai was her name. Her husband had killed himself about 10 years ago when she was still in her teens. That was during the first spate of suicides in the early 90s. There was silence when I asked what drove people to commit suicide. True, they were in debt, apprehensive about loss of land and property; but the situation was same everywhere in rural India. Was this a form of resistance, an odd kind of an expression of violence inherent in the Telengana peasants' psyche? It was a question of prestige, Shakubai began talking again. The idea seemed plausible: perhaps a warped sense of social standing engulfing the peasants here since the coming of a cash crop like cotton. Money must have turned their heads.

Shakubai had no hesitation in being our anchor, her only condition being that we compensate the loss of her daily wage of Rs 40 (less than US\$1) which she earned working in someone else's field. We agreed and she led us to her home. It was a *jhopri* (decrepit hut) beside the main road cutting through the village. Inside, there was absolutely no sign of her Lombardi lineage. Instead, pictures of Saibaba and Bajrangbali (the monkey god), the kind prevalent in

calendar art, hung on a wall beside a clock. The room was bare except for a hearth, a few utensils and an upturned *charpai*.

As we stood hunched under the low doorway, a young boy, just over 10, ran in from somewhere and clutched Shakubai. His torn shorts kept slipping off for the buttons were missing and his nose was running. This was Shakubai's younger son, the elder being in school. The Andhra Pradesh government provided education to only one child in a tribal family, and Shakubai could not afford to send the second child to school. Besides, he earned Rs10 (US \$0.24) a day from working in the fields, an income his mother could not forgo. Her aged parents who lived in a *jhopri* opposite hers — she had returned to her village after her husband's death — were workless. So she had to provide for them as well. Landless, husband-less, unlettered, a tribal, a woman, and five mouths to feed: Shakubai was truly vulnerable.

Why did her husband take his own life, leaving behind a lovely wife and children? Why were farmers committing suicide in such large numbers? The thought pounded in my head as we returned to Warangal that evening. For our film to bring out the plight of the Andhra cotton farmers through Shakubai's hard life, I needed to think and reconstruct the suicide scenario. Cotton, my research notes flashed across my mind, was never cultivated in these parts. Paddy was the main crop to which were added tomatoes, chillies, turmeric and other minor ones. The white gold was transplanted into this black soil some 20 years ago and that ended the practice of regular rotation of crops. In the first few years, the farmers made big profits and lured by lucre, they stopped cultivating anything else. Then in the late-80s disaster struck in the form of the American bollworm, a pest packaged with cottonseeds from the US. Crops in field after field were destroyed and farmers suffered heavy losses.

Even before he could comprehend the full import of the disaster, multinational pesticide companies with promises of salvation besieged the Andhra farmer. Mounting a major publicity blitz, they convinced the farmer that their chemicals were the only remedies for the curse that had infested their livelihood. The bollworm, however, could not be overpowered; on the other hand, the chemicals obliterated all other lifeforms indigenous to the land, which in time, could have become the bollworms' natural enemies. With the crop failing year

after year and unable to meet rising costs of fertilisers, diesel, electricity and, of course, pesticides, the farmer took to borrowing on an unprecedented scale. The practice led to the formation of an intricate web of credit provision, a system aided and abetted by the pesticides merchants. It was a revival of *mahajani* (usury) whose prevalence in Telengana had sparked the peasant uprising of the 1940s. Helplessly entangled in this web of borrowing, the farmer could not take the strain; his only way out was to consume the pesticide that had poisoned his life and lie in his field.

It was evident how the pesticides companies got their stranglehold on the Andhra farmer's life. Huge billboards extolling the virtues of one lifesaving insect-killer or the other lined the highway on either side, impossible to miss. Every wall in the villages was plastered with eye-catching slogans. Later during the shooting when we took Shakubai to Warangal's pesticides street — rows of retail shops, their shelves full of foul-smelling bottles — I found the chemicals they were peddling were all banned in the developed world. And they were supplied to the retailers at less than half the marked price, so desperate were the multinationals to push their products. I checked out the labels on some bottles and discovered many of the big players in the chemicals business, DuPont, Hoechst, ICI. Over the next five days we tried to capture the link these names had with Shakubai's life, the influence they exert over her economic and farming decisions. After all they had a hand in her man's death..

Our heroine was a revelation. Language proved to be no barrier in our communications for she was quick-witted and picked up the technique, the nuances of filming, with ease. A performer par excellence, she acted out her life in front of the camera with elan, despite a crowd of spectators watching the fun and screaming out instructions. When in the end we recorded her narration in the union office, she spoke coherently and precisely within the allotted time. There was hardly a repeat take. She could beat our suave, trendy television presenters hand down, teaching them a thing or two in the process!

Ours was a tremendous rapport. We understood her body language, her daily struggles, her moods, her anxieties. We also grew very attached to her very loveable sons who accompanied her to every shooting location. It was apparent she was a good mother. It

was her vulnerability which made us sad and helpless: to live without a husband among a group of idle folk whose sole preoccupation was drinking toddy — something we soon found out — required guts. To face a cruel world, to carry out the daily grind with no future to look forward to required courage. Shakubai, in spite of her frail form, had that courage. We left Telengana secure in the knowledge that no pesticide or poison could kill her indomitable spirit.





ARENA's goal is to build and sustain a community of concerned Asian scholars, intellectuals and activists that will spearhead a process of social awakening and thereby contribute to the people's struggle for a new, just and more humane social order.