

# Sowing Revolution

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Last September, inflation, as indicated by the wholesale price index, rose to a seven-month high of 6.46 percent. Food inflation was at 18.4 percent, and was led by skyrocketing onion prices, which increased by a whopping 323 percent. While the Union Minister for Agriculture, Sharad Pawar, ascribed the phenomenon to nothing more than a seasonal shortage, practices such as cartelisation, hoarding and price manipulation (all common in the industry) are more likely responsible. The fact that Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party traditionally holds sway in Nashik, which handles 70 percent of India's onion trade, may explain his reasoning. Whatever the causes, if even the well-heeled cannot at times afford basic ingredients such as onions, one may ask in perfect seriousness – and without inviting ridicule – what, if anything, are the poor expected to eat? In this context, the passage in early September 2013 of the National Food Security Bill in both Houses of the Indian Parliament is good news. The National Food Security Act (NFSA), as it is now known, has been hailed by some as a revolutionary step towards addressing hunger and malnutrition in India, while others have seen little more than rank opportunism in its pre-election promulgation. Over 300 amendments were made to the Bill, most of them to expand its scope through a universalised Public Distribution System (PDS) covering pulses, oil, salt and staple grains, and introducing schemes such as community kitchens for the destitute. Not surprisingly, the NFSA has been savaged by many mainstream economic experts who label the plan 'unaffordable'. Some have propagated fears that the Act will actually harm the economy and result in crores of rupees 'down the drain' due to the high levels of leakage and waste occurring in the existing PDS. The validity of these 'concerns' is, however, questionable. Indeed, those doubting the Act's economic viability do so based on erroneous calculations and the absurd assumptions on which they are premised. Contrary to the Union Food Minister K V Thomas's estimate that the annual food subsidy will increase to 1.3 percent of GDP, for example, economist Surjit S Bhalla projects the cost to rise to 3 percent of GDP. Bhalla's figures are, however, based upon applying the average consumption of PDS beneficiaries to the entire population, most of which do not use the service. Moreover, whether projected economic losses due to leakage could be avoided simply by addressing existing lacunae through institutional reforms (as has been successfully carried out in Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh) is a question that needs to be asked. But even if the challenges of storage, distribution and corruption are addressed effectively and the fears of its strongest detractors allayed, there are many reasons as to why the NFSA cannot be termed 'revolutionary' in any meaningful sense. Ignoring for a moment the benefits it might bring to the consumer, what – if at all anything – the NFSA means for producers in India's crisis-ridden agri-sector is unclear. If events at a December meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Bali are any indication, the Act does not bode well for the Indian farmer. The overturning of India's provision of subsidies on staple food crops – against stiff pressure from other developing countries – represents nothing but an abject succumbing to US pressure and the dispensations of the Global North, making any of the Act's promises to Indian farmers redundant. This must be condemned. Coming down heavily on the Indian government's apparent lack of spine, Suman Sahai of the Gene Campaign noted with acerbic irony that, "After Bali we should expect an influx of heavily subsidised agri-produce from outside. This will knock the stuffing out of Indian farmers already reeling under adverse domestic policies and the utter neglect of the agriculture sector." According to Sahai, Indian leaders at the WTO meeting should have argued on the basis of welfare and human rights given the country's appalling figures on hunger and malnutrition. The primary issues besetting India's agricultural sector are, however, unlikely to be addressed any time soon. For more than a decade, India has been suffering from an agrarian crisis, with indebtedness and suicide its most brutal – though by no means only – expressions. Indeed, the increasingly important role that private corporations play in determining policies that affect agriculture, the increase of agricultural production to feed automobiles instead of people, the endemic structural problems in the food distribution system, and the growing sway multinational corporations now hold over the food supply-chain system, are all symptoms of a malaise that is closely connected with the neoliberal model of capitalist development. Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar's whole-hearted endorsement of GM, taken together with his contempt for welfare measures like the Food Rights Act (as articulated in a recent diatribe against the National Advisory Council) foretells troublesome times ahead, both for the farmer-producer and for the beneficiaries of welfare measures – India's lumpen poor. Given the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shares Congress's neoliberal economic vision and openness to GM technology, the new agriculture minister will doubtless continue with old prejudices. **Why GM is not the way out**

Concerns regarding GM crops were raised in a 2012 report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee for Agriculture (PSCA), consisting of 31 members coming from across party lines, and more recently in a report by the Technical Expert Committee (TEC) appointed by the Supreme Court in a case of Public Interest Litigation on GM. Despite this, the Agriculture Minister and the Environment Minister filed a joint affidavit in the Supreme Court asking that field trials of GM crops be allowed. Back in 1962, Rachel Carson wrote in her seminal book *Silent Spring*, "If we are going to live so intimately with these chemicals – eating and drinking

them, taking them to the very marrow of our bones – we had better know something about their nature and their power.” Over 50 years later, we now know that these concerns are wide-ranging, addressing health, environmental, economic and sovereign matters. Despite this, the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) Bill was tabled in Parliament. It is intended to speed up the approval for GM crops stalled by the findings of the PSCA and the TEC. If passed, the Bill will do little to improve the moral legitimacy of GM crops given the lack of attention and active hostility to public concerns relating to the technology. Indeed, an often overlooked fact is that only six countries worldwide account for more than 90 percent of the total area under GM cultivation. Most countries are rejecting or restricting it.

If going GM was a panacea to issues of food security, the question of why farmers' indebtedness and suicides have not decreased despite wide adoption of Bt cotton is of interest. More to the point, considering GM farming will further consolidate power in the grip of multinational corporations such as Monsanto, the question of whether nature-transforming technologies will have any distributional and social consequences (beyond their impact on health and the environment) requires attention. Until answered satisfactorily (if indeed, they can be), promoting GM crops in the name of food security and poverty has little justification. That food security is less an issue of production and more one of distribution is a fact readily evident. India has produced bumper crops of staple food grains, all without GM technology, yet 200 million people remain hungry while grain rots in poorly managed government warehouses under a grossly inefficient and corrupt PDS. This observation need not, however, imply that the PDS needs to be scrapped: the invisible hand of the market will not automatically increase the buying capacity of the poor or ensure fair distribution.

Nothing revolutionary about the NFSA

To think that a 'food guarantee' is the same as 'food sovereignty' is to collapse two concepts into one. As matters stand, it seems that the NFSA as a welfare measure is absolutely unconnected to the agrarian crisis. After all, we still have, and will continue to have, surplus food – farmer suicides notwithstanding. All we need is an uncorrupt and efficient PDS.

We must, however, not forget that even if India manages an efficient PDS, and builds better warehouses to store food surpluses, this will not necessarily mean a lessening of bureaucratic control, or worse, privatisation and usury. There is no guarantee that the state will not privatise the PDS as well. Moreover, under the BRAI, how can it ever be guaranteed that the food that gets stocked is non-GM? Will getting rid of Monsanto ensure that monopolies are kept out of food production and retailing? Or that the poor will have easy access to nutrient rich food from India's rich agro-biodiversity? Or that the small farmer will get fair and just remuneration without the scourge of middlemen siphoning their share? Food sovereignty would not only mean control over production and distribution by the small farmer, but also decentralisation, protection of the richness in agro-biodiversity, gender equity, caste empowerment and participatory farming. Since the NFSA is not connected with the notion of food sovereignty (and hence protection of the Indian farmer), it is status-quoist. It does not threaten existing power structures or class interests. At best it is a reformist welfare measure.

From the point of view of substantive equality and social justice, there is a need for thinking more creatively about how food gets produced, and who controls the production and distribution process. The need of the hour is substantively revolutionary measures that reinvigorate small farming practices that are non-GM based, yet scientific, sustainable and equitable. We need safer alternatives that, while being rooted in traditional knowledge systems, do not quarrel with modern science, protect our rich agro-biodiversity, guarantee social justice, ensure decentralisation of decision-making, protect localised production planning, and guarantee empowered community participation.

One such route is that of agroecology – a practice gaining prestige across the world given that it promises inclusiveness, participation, livelihood generation, the stemming of migration to cities, empowerment of the small farmer, and the stimulation of family farming practices. Even the United Nations (UN) endorses it. A 2011 press release in the wake of its report 'Agroecology and the Right to Food' states that: "Small-scale farmers can double food production within 10 years in critical regions by using ecological methods." Such agroecological methods are also safer from an environmental and health perspective. The UN Rapporteur on Food has documented that agroecological projects have shown an average crop yield increase of 80 percent in 57 developing countries, with an average increase of 116 percent for all African projects. Recent projects conducted in 20 African countries demonstrated a doubling of crop yields over a period of three to ten years.

For the uninitiated, agroecology is a science derived from traditional knowledge and advances made by modern agricultural research (except, of course, transgenic biotechnology and pesticides), utilising elements of contemporary ecology, soil biology and the biological control of pests. It thus involves a knowledge dialogue between the ancient and the modern. It is socially activating, as agroecology must be participatory and create interchange networks, without which it would not work. Being based on knowledge dialogue rather than top-driven policy initiatives such as BRAI, it is also more democratic. Because it will employ local resources (potentially involving thousands of small and medium family farms and farming communities) its implementation does not depend on imported resources and inputs. It is likewise more resilient to climate change, with increasing evidence showing that it is more resistant to major phenomena such as drought. On the other hand, monoculture, which tends to dominate world agriculture, is highly susceptible to the effects of rising temperatures because of its genetic and ecological homogeneity.

The United Nations recently declared 2014 the International Year of Family Farming, celebrating the global community of family and small-holder farmers. Through local knowledge and sustainable, innovative farming methods, family farmers can improve yields and create a more nutrient-dense and diverse food system. They're also key players in job creation and economic stimulus, supplying jobs to millions and boosting local markets. Agroecology is most feasible for small and middle-sized family units, and could play an important role in reversing unmanageable urbanisation.

#### **Change and its obstacles**

**It is unlikely that either the Congress or BJP, wedded as they are to neoliberalism, will ever undertake initiatives for seriously developing agroecological alternatives. Indeed, the choice of moving towards agroecology is a revolutionary choice that will affect Indian society from top to bottom. Under the current regime this is difficult to imagine. But even if for argument's sake we were to imagine that, somehow (!), the present governance structure were to embrace agroecological alternatives, the problem of extreme inequality that results from the structural logic of capitalism (and which explains hunger) would require mitigation. Without tempering the ravages of the market, hunger will continue, as will the disempowerment of small producers. Indeed, an agroecological alternative would simply be co-opted by capitalist relations of production and distribution, with community-based initiatives becoming mere decentralised production points within a supply-chain logic that centralises power and**

profits in the hands of seed corporations. In order to avoid this, India would need a government pursuing a radical programme for ecological sustainability and substantive social and political equality. It would mean a commitment to decentralised control over planning and production, and the sharing of income. Karl Marx's observation that "the capitalist system runs counter to a rational agriculture... and needs either small farmers working for themselves or the control of associated producers" is worth taking stock of. Though seemingly far-reaching, the importance of considering an agroecological alternative is apparent if one considers current malnutrition and hunger statistics, as well as India's ongoing agrarian crisis. Indeed, we often forget that food is not simply a commodity, but a throbbing and dynamic expression of history, culture and civilisation. It not only represents a way of life, it is life itself. Let us not forget the words of Jacques Diouf who, as Director-General of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization from January 1994 to 31 December 2011, said that "Hunger is not an issue of charity, it is an issue of justice." Food is an inalienable, fundamental and sacred right. Those who produce it for us deserve our greatest reverence. ~

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