**South Asian agriculture revolution?**

[Ikram Sehgal](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/ikram-sehgal/)

February 19, 2021

An attempt at ‘revolutionary’ farming by the enacting of commensurate laws by the Modi govt last autumn has evoked widespread farmer protests in India. Centred around mostly India’s breadbasket of Punjab, Haryana and UP this important problem is certainly not only Indian specific, many initiatives all over the world have aimed at making agriculture more efficient while successfully fighting poverty and the financial dependency of farmers.

Agriculture being the main job provider is an important part of South Asian countries’ GDP. Providing food security for a growing population additionally offers rising opportunities for export business. Nevertheless, agriculture being neglected for decades has become the main reason for poverty here. Farmers making up 60% of the population in India provide 18% of the country’s GDP. 85% marginal or poor farmers own less than 3 acres of land. In Pakistan agriculture provides 18,9% of the GDP with 42,3% of the workforce employed there.

Since 1947 the few and half-hearted attempts to revolutionize agriculture were highly influenced by different ideologies. With his socialist leanings Nehru abolished the system of large feudal landholdings and introduced land reforms. With the largest feudals – including the Bhutto family- sitting in government and parliament, in Pakistan empty promises included the so-called land reforms, 5% of the country’s population own almost two-thirds (64%) of its farmland, one-half (50.8%) of rural households are landless.

The West invented the “Green Revolution” by adopting new technologies during the 1960s, including high-yielding varieties of cereals, especially dwarf wheat and rice. Associated with chemical fertilizers, agrochemicals, and controlled water-supply (usually involving irrigation) and newer methods of cultivation, including mechanization, Western development aid introduced these into the subcontinent and had negative– if unintended – consequences like widening inequality, growing poverty and environmental damage.

Sustainable agricultural production is vital for food security, particularly with climate change making a growing part of agricultural land worldwide unfit for food production

Under WTO’s commitment to economic liberalization, the Indian government is seeking to increase food security by increasing food production. ‘Revolutionizing’ measures include inviting investments from foreign corporate interests into the agricultural sector, allowing them to engage in contract farming and to trade in food products on market prices. Modi’s policy of economic liberalization has brought multinational companies into a dominating position in almost all sectors of economy and has suffocated independent local development, with similar result likely as the “Green Revolution”. Some of the rich farmers with big landholdings will profit while the mass of poor farmers will either get dependent on corporations or lose their land and be forced to sell their labour to better-off farmers and/or migrate to urban slums in search for a living. Poverty and inequality in South Asia will be aggravated, not solved by this policy.

Sustainable agricultural production is vital for food security, particularly with climate change making a growing part of agricultural land worldwide unfit for food production. Growing desertification and water scarcity endangers the livelihood of millions worldwide. With fertile arable land getting more precious today for feeding the world population it requires a spirit of sharing and compassion instead of global maximalization of profits.

WTO promotes the new western ideology of ‘digital agriculture’, tools that digitally collect, store, analyse, and share electronic data and/or information along the agricultural value chain impacting the entire agri-food value chain. “Agriculture 4.0” indicates its role as the fourth major agricultural revolution, following patterns of previous agricultural revolutions. Scholars forecast a further shift away from labour, a slight shift away from capital, and intensified use of human capital. A social backlash with diminishing need of workforce in agriculture— possibly around the use of artificial intelligence or robots — will arise with the fourth revolution. With digitizing the demand for qualified expert staff with appropriate skills will increase.

“Facebook” and other big global corporations are jumping into the business of providing the digital tools for running agricultural production, selling and distribution. The ‘Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation Act) of 2020 contains provision for alternate trading channels and allowing electronic trading, via direct online buying and selling through devices enabled through internet. While Ambani and his Reliance Group deny any involvement in the laws being passed or that they would benefit this is what Modi govt is trying to promote on their behalf. What followed was vandalism of Ambani telecom towers by the farmers.

Facebook will invest Rs 43,574 crore in Jio Platforms, belonging to Reliance Industries for about 10%, rolling out digital-based solutions for 60 million micro, small and medium businesses, 120 million farmers, 30 million small merchants and millions of small and medium enterprises in the informal sector. WhatsApp, owned by Facebook, is expected to play a key role in the deal, with features like WhatsApp Pay, currently in pilot. However, Mukesh Ambani claims “Jio is a start-up built in India, for India, by Indians and we have a special place in our hearts for start-ups”. That “special place” is meant for beggaring farmers while making enormous profits!

The world’s largest seed company Monsanto accounts for almost one-quarter (23%) of the global proprietary seed market. In Pakistan, Monsanto virtually forced the closure of local labs and seed research in favour of PT seeds, this had adverse effects on the economy and environment.

The Indian farmers are foreseeing that the same thing that happened during the British Agricultural Revolution, or Second Agricultural Revolution, when the unprecedented increase in agricultural production in Britain and the following industrial revolution required more cotton than they could produce on the limited land of their island. The English cotton machinery produced an acute effect in India. The Company’s soldiers broke up the looms of the women weavers as the de- industrialization of Bengal was done explicitly for the industrialization of the United Kingdom. All cotton produced was shipped to England to feed their textile industry and the indigenous cotton weaving that over centuries had produced the finest muslins worldwide was exterminated. Deprived of income and food, a famine set in. The Governor-General reported in 1834-35: “The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India.””(Karl Marx, Notes on Indian History”)

Indian parliamentarian, former Deputy Head of the UN and author of many books, Shashi Tharoor in his book “An Era of Darkness” described how the looting of South Asian sub-continent started with William Hawkins who started a small trading post on Indian soil of 1613-14 (during Emperor Jahangir’s rule) as representative of the East India Company that was established as a shareholder corporation in London in 1600. They had scant respect in the Mughal court, however 150 years later by 1765 the Company had browbeaten the weakened Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, and replaced his imperial revenue officials with the Company’s officials in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. Once in power the Company’s private army led by (later Lord) Robert Clive had in 1757already defeated Siraj-ud-Daula, the ruler of Bengal at Plassey. While the British were traders, the Indian textile trade had increased substantially – the handloom industry by at least 33%. The 18th and 21st centuries are economically similar. When the Company became rulers their tactics became ruthless, their modern methods using local proxies now are more efficient and effective at the cost of the local population. Favouring the multinationals against the Indian farmers Modi and BJP will ensure famine sooner rather than later. Hunger epidemics -an unheard-of feature in pre-colonial India – killed millions of people. There is a clear danger that the locals by blindly carrying out the instructions of their masters like during the time of the “East India Company” in the 18th and 19th centuries could easily produce similar effects.

On the contrary, consider the positive policies enunciated and implemented by men of outstanding calibre, commitment and integrity like Sartaj Aziz in Pakistan during the period 1985-1988 and Maj Gen (Retd) Nurul Islam in Bangladesh during 1979-80. Returning from FAO in 1984 Sartaj Aziz became the State Minister for Agriculture. His initiatives, which included conservation of water resources, pushed through three important changes viz (1) removing the rationing system for wheat (2) removing support price for cotton and rice while keeping it for wheat and sugar and (3) ensuring sale price of agriculture products be determined by input e.g. seeds, wheat, fertilizer, electricity, water, etc so that farmers get an equitable price. Among other things like promoting fish and poultry farming accelerated by the Grameen Bank concept, Shishu (as Gen Islam was nicknamed) on becoming Agriculture Minister in 1979 changed the eating habits of the then three districts Rangpur, Dinajpur and Bogra, encouraging planting of wheat during the winter dry season (there was US$ 7 million in unused food aid lying with the US Embassy, the then US Ambassador was only too happy for purchasing of wheat seeds from 4 countries including Pakistan). This increased the wheat tonnage from 0.12 million tons to more than 0.78 million tons. People taking to eating “Chapati” reduced the requirement of rice commensurately. These things can be done, it requires honesty and sincere commitment like leaders like Sartaj Aziz and Nurul Islam.

Whatever ‘progress’ is made elsewhere should not be allowed to be dictated upon South Asia. Historical, social and economic conditions in the subcontinent are different and need to be handled carefully so as not to damage the lives of the people on the ground and the national interests of the respective countries. Rather than a revolution what is needed is a careful evolution of legal, economic and social conditions so that a maximum of people can partake in the gains. Fertile agricultural land together with our population are most precious assets that should not be endangered by running after the phantom of ‘progress’.

*The writer is a defence and security analyst*