

Why India's Manmohan Singh Faces a Long, Hot Summer

by Ramtanu Maitra

A number of violent events in recent weeks in India indicate that the apparently hapless Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government is staring at a long and hot Indian Summer. Although the Prime Minister has begun to address the importance of rejuvenating India's depleted agricultural sector, which harbors most of India's population, the majority of whom are poor, the damage done over the last seven years of GDP growth-driven economics has begun to take its toll on the population, and on the security of the country.

On May 29, the Rajasthan state police fired upon protesting Gujjars, a large sub-caste of Rajasthan, with a significant presence in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, and Haryana. At the time, members of the Gujjar community were involved in blocking the highway between Jaipur and Kota in Rajasthan. More police firings were reported from other parts of the state on the same day, causing the deaths of 13 protesters and a policeman. The Gujjars, who belong to a category called the Other Backward Castes (OBC), were seeking to gain the status of Scheduled Caste (SC)—one step lower in the caste category. The reason: India's caste-based reservation system which ensures more government jobs, and more seats in the educational institutions, for the lower castes. The Gujjar community, in general, is poor, and its main livelihood is agricultural work, raising of goats for meat, among other activities. The Rajasthan state government, under Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule, instead of going through the pains of reaching a negotiated settlement, reached for the guns.

As a result, the agitation has continued, and has now spilled over to the Delhi-Rajasthan borders. Violence has been reported in Gurgaon—one of the IT centers in India, where thousands of young call-center employees work and give foreigners the impression that India is progressing rapidly and surely. As of this writing, the UPA government has brought out the Indian Army to stage a flag march along the Delhi-Jaipur highway and confront, if necessary, the agitating Gujjars.

India's Granary Disturbed

On May 13, violence broke out in parts of India's granary state of Punjab, following the appearance of one Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, head of a heretic Sikh sect, in various advertisements portraying him as the revered tenth, and last Sikh Guru, Guru Govind Singhji. This was a sacrilege committed

to provoke the majority Sikh community members. Some hard-liners within the Sikh political parties, who have little to show in the electoral field, seized upon this opportunity to commit violence. Thousands of sect people fled when the mainstream Sikhs, backed by the Sikh religious center, attacked them and burned down their homes.

The genesis of this incident reveals the mindset of political leadership that is now in power in India. In the last Punjab state assembly elections on Feb. 13, the alliance of the BJP and the main Sikh political party, Shiromani Akali Dal, ousted the ruling Congress Party handily. Reports indicate Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh and his sect had worked hard for the Congress Party. In other words, as observers point out, the sect leader's insidious act that set off violence throughout the state, may have had the blessings of New Delhi who wanted to impose Governor's Rule by dismissing the duly elected opposition government, because of its ostensible failure to maintain law and order in the state.

The Punjab situation continues to remain tense. Although the heretic Sikh leader, under pressure from saner sections, has apologized to the Sikh community, the Sikh religious center has not made up its mind whether the apology offered was adequate.

In the early hours of March 15, Maoists, in what is considered the biggest-ever strike, killed at least 55 police personnel in the state of Chhattisgarh, located in central India. Reports indicate that more than 300 heavily armed rebels stormed a police station in the Bastar region. The Naxalites, led by the military wing of the banned Communist Party of India-Maoist, attacked Rani Bodli police outpost, 325 miles from Raipur, police sources told the Press Trust of India (PTI).

Following that carnage, hundreds of miles south of Chhattisgarh, in a daring attack, Maoists blasted the main control room of Donkarayi canal hydro-power station in Visakhapatnam district late on the night of May 29. According to sources, a group of 50 Maoists raided the power house and later blasted the main control room with explosives, thereby plunging parts of Visakhapatnam port city into darkness.

These two Maoist incidents are only a thin slice of the amount of violence carried out by the Maoists over a large swath of land that stretches from the Nepal-Bihar border in the north, to the northern borders of the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The entire Maoist movement is run by poor and dev-



suicide, failing to see any prospect of living with dignity. Many others have joined the Maoists.

Why So Much Violence?

These acts of violence, which are increasingly making India uncertain and unstable, will do exactly what the UPA government refused to acknowledge. As of now, a good part of the Manmohan Singh government's "hope" is that in the future the foreign investors, attracted by the manpower capability that India possesses, will come in droves to help push up India's GDP growth rate. What the leaders in New Delhi will soon find out is that the inability of the UPA government to maintain law and order will cause the investors, foreign and domestic, to wince and stay, or move away.

Nonetheless, it is not difficult to understand what is happening to India. On May 29, at the 53rd meeting of the National Development Council (NDC), which Prime Minister Singh chaired the entire day, a consensus was reached. It said India's agricultural sector, where at least 60% the country's workforce is engaged, is suffering from a "technology fatigue" for lack of breakthrough in production. The Prime Minister made the observation that farming in India has become unviable, and "till we make farming viable, it would be impossible to reduce rural poverty and distress."

At the end of it all, the NDC decided that it would be necessary to achieve a 4% annual growth in the farm sector during the 11th Plan (2009-14), announcing a Rs. 250 billion (about US\$6 billion) Additional Central Assistance Scheme (ACAS) over four years, to provide incentives to states for more investment in the agricultural sector.

It is to be noted that the Indian agricultural sector, upon which the food security of a billion-plus Indians depends, has been so grossly neglected, that more than 100,000 farmers' lives have been lost, and a measly 1.5% growth has been produced over the last eight years. Such neglect of the agricultural sector is also a very important reason why India is encountering so much violence.

But if words alone could rejuvenate the agricultural sector, India would have been on a much stronger footing by now, and violence would not occur at the drop of a hat. Manmohan Singh has called upon India's scientific community to work towards bringing about a second green revolution that would have a special focus on dryland agriculture, and address the needs of small and marginal farmers.

For instance, on Jan. 3, 2006, inaugurating the 93rd session of the Indian Science Congress at Hyderabad, Manmohan Singh had said, that though the farmers have benefited much from the contributions of science and technology over the past three decades and more, a lot more remained to be done.

Then he pointed out that the technologies and strategies unleashed by the first green revolution seem to have run their course. There was, therefore, a need for a second green revolution, but one that should not be confined to food crops alone.

astated agricultural workers who missed out completely on the economic "trickle down effect" that the UPA government, and its predecessor government led by the BJP, had falsely promised to the Indian poor.

On May 18, a bomb exploded during Friday prayers at an historic Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad, killing at least seven people and injuring more than 50 others. The incident sparked violent protests in which two protestors died in clashes with police. Later, police arrested a suspect, and New Delhi announced that the perpetrators were linked to a group of Pakistan-based terrorists.

Such an analysis, which observers pointed out, raises a question that if New Delhi has the capability to identify and capture the perpetrators so quickly, how is it that incidents of such magnitude were not prevented in the first place?

What must also be noted is that Hyderabad, a hub of India's software development, competing presently with Bangalore for attracting foreign investments, is the capital city of the state of Andhra Pradesh, and is surrounded by a sea of poverty among farmers and farm workers. Thousands of Andhra Pradesh farmers have, over recent years, committed

It should also cover non-food crops, horticulture, and new plant varieties. In essence, the Prime Minister's May 29 speech at the NDC is hardly different from what he said almost 18 months ago.

Time To Act

However, what needs to be done has not been addressed by the Prime Minister. India's success as a nation in the future will depend entirely upon how India succeeds in bringing hundreds of millions of people out of the poverty through a sustained and focused development of its agricultural sector. The decision to get a "4% growth" in the agriculture sector in the 11th Five Year Plan has no meaning, unless India builds the infrastructure that is necessary to get India's agricultural sector, and the lives of hundreds of millions associated with that sector, out of the dreadful morass.

To begin with, it needs to be understood how the first green revolution took place. The objective was not to set a growth rate, but to make sure the "laboratory" where agricultural work was done was fully furnished. In order to do that in the present circumstances, India will have to immediately unleash a program of setting up hundreds of small nuclear power plants all over the country, to provide power not only to the population, whose birthright it is, but also to enrich the land where crops are grown.

These small nuclear power plants will not only help in providing basic domestic power, but to set up agro-industries, agro-mechanization, research and development of high-yield seeds, desalination of inland brackish water, pumping of groundwater, and desalination of seawater all along India's vast coastal areas. These nuclear power plants will provide power not to the main power grid, but locally where it will be consumed. These plants will be designed in such a way that in the future, clusters can be formed when certain areas would require more power for enhanced activities.

In other words, 4 or 5% growth in the agricultural sector cannot be achieved unless it is tied to the development of an infrastructure that brings into play an overall development. India cannot be but an agro-industrial nation, which means agriculture and industry must help each other to grow, and complement each other in the process of the growth itself. One sector cannot be separated from the other. Beyond that, development in such programs as space, nuclear power, software development, and other areas where excellence can be achieved, are cogs in the machine that would help the population to sustain, and improve upon, the agro-industrial juggernaut.

This is a much more difficult task than attaining excellence in any single sector such as software development. And yet, this is the only viable pathway to remove poverty from this vast nation, and allow it to become what it can be. This is a nation where 10 million people come of age every year to join the work force, while sectors such as IT, where India surely has attained excellence, have employed, as of now, not more than a million people.