

# Indira Gandhi's Legacy at Risk in Indian Farm Crisis

by Ramtanu Maitra

India's rural sector has lain in deep distress for years now. It seems the present administration of the United Progressive Alliance—a coalition of political parties in power in India, under the leadership of the Congress Party's Manmohan Singh, is keen to drive the final nails into the coffin and bury the hopes of the agricultural sector for good.

Thousands of farmers have committed suicide in recent years for a number of reasons; the most important perhaps of those was the sheer neglect by New Delhi of a sector which needed immediate attention for years. Instead of attending to a sector which warehouses almost 60% of India's workforce, many of whom are nominally associated with farmwork, the Indian political leaders were eager to generate quick capital by investing big in the information technology sector, which provides jobs to the educated, skilled minority, amounting to less than 0.5% of India's workforce.

## The Undoing of the Green Revolution

It is evident where the present Indian leadership's priorities lie. But, it is a shame. It is a shame because of what has been done to India's farmers, who were the principal reason that India became self-sufficient in food, and kept its sovereignty intact in the difficult decades of the 1970s and 1980s. But it is a shame also because the present crop of Congress Party high-fliers are the so-called flag-bearers of the old Congress Party of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who fought the odds internationally to usher in the Green Revolution that lifted India from being a "basketcase" to a food-self-sufficient nation. Despite the devastation caused to the agricultural sector by India's current leaders, and those who lost political power recently, it is still the effect of the Green Revolution that allows India's 1 billion-plus people to be fed with minimal food imports.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who dominated India's political scene during the difficult Cold War period, spanning the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, and even when she was out of power between 1977 and 1980, will always be remembered for her contribution of the Green Revolution to the nation. The success of the Green Revolution not only prevented large-scale hunger within India, but enabled the world to see that such a seemingly impossible objective can be reached within a few years if the leadership remains committed, focused, and dedicated to the purpose. It also provided India the necessary legs to stand on

before the world, and project itself as a nation capable of handling difficult odds.

Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, India's leading agro-scientist, who, along with the legendary Dr. Norman Borlaug, was the brain behind India's Green Revolution, said that Mrs. Gandhi's efforts to make India self-sufficient in food grains was "more remarkable than even the man walking on the Moon." Dr. Swaminathan reports that Mrs. Gandhi herself used to say, "The discovery of a new seed variety stirs rural people as much as a spacewalk or a transplanted heart does the more literate classes."

### Tearing Down the Legacy

It is a disgrace that tradition no longer exists among today's Indian leaders. What can be found instead is the tolerance among them to let things move backwards. According to economist Utsa Patnaik, large sections of rural India are already starving, or on the brink of starvation. In 1991, per capita average Indian consumption of food grains was 178 kilograms (about 384 pounds). In 2002, it had fallen to a per capita consumption of 155 kilograms (342 pounds), equivalent to consumption between 1937 and 1942, at the height of the British Raj's policies.

How much damage has been done to the rural population in recent years? In the words of Utsa Patnaik in 2005: "According to National Sample Survey (NSS) data, five years ago [in 2000] more than one-third of the rural population of three states had a daily intake of less than 1,800 calories. Today, according to the latest NSS figures, eight states fall in this category. Half our rural population, or 350 million people, are below the average food energy intake of sub-Saharan Africa." The eight states include the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and West Bengal.

There are a number of manifestations of the rapid deterioration of India's rural sector. The most frightening is the large-scale suicide by farmers—particularly in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. P. Sainath, the rural sector editor of the English-language daily, *The Hindu*, and an insistent voice revealing the plight of the neglected farmers of India, points out that about 100,000 farmers have taken their lives in the last five years or so. New Delhi cannot be blamed for the death of all the 100,000 because some farmers, in expectation of a "successful" crop, became indebted heavily in advance. Later, failed crops doomed many such farmers.

In a recent interview, Sainath pointed out that an anti-farmer attitude has entered the Indian political decision-making process in the form of corporate farming. He said that "this is basically the American model. In the U.S., 100-odd family farms are going bankrupt each week. Corporate farming, while it is huge, employs hardly anyone. There are



700,000 people employed in corporate agriculture; even their prisons hold three times as many people (2.1 million). So, basically there's an effort to drive people out of agriculture. And, in the Third World, this is projected as the way to go for us too."

As a result of New Delhi's policy, the farmers find themselves in a hapless state. India's National Sample Survey data showed that 40% of the people in agriculture do not actually want to continue in it, and they want their children to seek other kinds of work.

Sainath points out that these agriculturists need options—and these should be real options. "If we're not going to do that, but simply try to force them out of agriculture somehow, we may as well be bombing the countryside. We're underfunding develop-

ment greatly. Look at Utsa Patnaik's work—it shows that in 1989, nearly 15% of GDP was spent on development, but by 2005, this had dropped to 6%. No wonder that millions of people—neither workers nor peasants—are moving into the urban areas. They can only work in unorganized jobs, where exploitation is easy." Sainath said.

### Fallout From Neglect of the Rural Population

This brutalization of the rural sector has not been confined to situations in which some farmers commit suicide and others move to urban areas, eventually becoming part of the criminal underworld; many others have revived the violent Maoist movements.

The Indian Maoists are referred to by friend and foe alike as Naxalites, after the village of Naxalbari in the northern part of the state of West Bengal, where their movement began in 1967. Through the 1970s and '80s, the Naxalites were episodically active in the Indian countryside.

There is no doubt that an extensive Maoist movement—whose territory cuts a wide swath of land, from the foothills of the Himalayas in the north, where the Indian state of Bihar meets Nepal, all the way to the southern state of Tamil Nadu—thrives, enveloping in the process, tribal and poor citizens belonging to the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. As India's GDP growth rose, so did the disparity between rich and poor—and violence and strength of the Maoists.

According to the noted historian Ramachandra Guha, who has traveled extensively through the Maoist-infested areas of India's landmass, in the tribal areas the twin marginalization—economic and political—has opened a space for the Maoists to work in. Guha, in a recent article, wrote, "Their most impressive gains have been in tribal districts, where they

have shrewdly stoked discontent within the state to win people to their side. They have organized the tribals to demand better wages from the forest department, killed or beaten up policemen alleged to have intimidated tribals, and run law courts and irrigation schemes of their own.” Guha said.

A recent article by Rajeev Sinha, writing for the *Daily News and Analysis*, revealed that a recent weapons haul from a Maoist rebel base in inner India included arms from an ordnance factory located in Wardha, Maharashtra. This is in addition to sensational revelations that Maoists were in possession of two-minute transcripts of top-level counter-Maoism meetings, chaired by none other than the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh.

Such a compromise of security leads one to question the loyalty of top-level politicians, bureaucrats, and officials. One report indicates the Indian intelligence agencies have come to realize that Maoist rebels may have access to top-secret policy-related intelligence formulated by the Indian government, Sinha pointed out.

How powerful are the Maoists today? Reports indicate that Maoist influence has grown in recent years since New Delhi went big with globalization and economic liberalization. The official record shows that only a few years ago, the insurgents were influential in 76 districts in nine states. This has grown to 118 districts in 12 states now. The umbrella Communist Party of India (Maoists) was formed on Sept. 21,

2004, by the merger of two prominent Maoist outfits—the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People’s War (PWG), and the Maoist Communists Center of India (MCCI).

According to India’s foreign intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), many Indian Maoists have tried to hook up with international terrorist groups and organizations who are working against India, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Indian Maoists reportedly have engaged in weapons transactions with the LTTE in the recent past. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief, Rajnath Singh, alleges links between the Maoists and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

In recent years the Maoists have mounted a series of bold attacks on symbols of the Indian state. In November 2005, they stormed the district town of Jehanabad in Bihar, fire-bombing offices and freeing several hundred prisoners from the jail. Then, this past March, they attacked a police camp in Chattisgarh, killing 55 policemen and making off with a huge cache of weapons. At other times, they have bombed and set fire to railway stations and transmission towers.

The devastation wrought by the Maoists has contributed significantly to the breakdown of India’s agricultural sector and the degradation of its farming population; this, in turn, has fed the insurgency, leaving India’s growing population to face a dangerous shortage of food.

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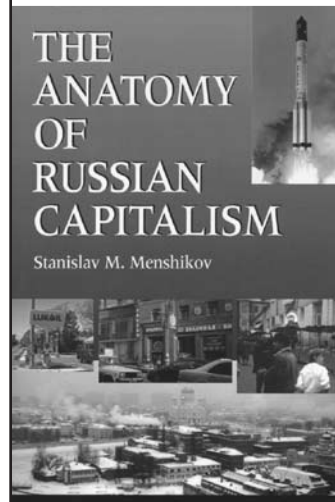
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