India Mortgaged? Forced-Fed Illness and the Neoliberal Food Regime

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Like many countries, India's food system was essentially clean just a generation or two ago but is now being comprehensively contaminated with sugar, bad fats, synthetic additives, GMOs and pesticides under the country's neoliberal 'great leap forward'. The result has been a surge in obesity, diabetes and cancer incidence, while there has been no let-up in the under-nutrition of those too poor to join in the over-consumption.

Indian government data indicates that cancer showed a 5% increase in prevalence between 2012 and 2014 with the number of new cases doubling between 1990 and 2013. The incidence of cancer for some major organs in India is the highest in the world.

The increase in prevalence of diabetes is also worrying. By 2030, the number of diabetes patients in India is likely to rise to 101 million (World Health Organization estimate). The figure doubled to 63 million in 2013 from 32 million in 2000. Over 8% of the adult male population in India has diabetes. The figure is 7% for women. Almost 76,000 men and 52,000 women in the 30-69 age group in India died due to diabetes in 2015, according to the WHO.

A study in The Lancet from a couple of years ago found that India leads the world in underweight people. Some 102 million men and 101 million women are underweight, which makes the country home to over 40% of the global underweight population.

Contrast this with India's surge in obesity. In 1975, the country had 0.4 million obese men or 1.3% of the global obese men's population. In 2014, it was in fifth position globally with 9.8 million obese men or 3.7% of the global obese men's population. Among women, India is globally ranked third, with 20 million obese women or 5.3% of global population.

According to India's 2015–16 National Family Health Survey, 38% of under-5s are stunted (height is significantly low for their age). The survey also stated that 21% under-5s are significantly underweight for their height, a sign of recent acute hunger. The prevalence of underweight children in India is among the highest in the world; at the same time, the country is fast becoming the diabetes and heart disease capital of the world.

India's mineral deficient soils haven't helped. This has been made worse by Green Revolution practices. Green Revolution crops, unlike their predecessors, fail to adequately take up minerals such as iron and zinc from the soil. So even though people might consume more calories (possibly leading to obesity), their intake of these key micronutrients has

fallen. A quarter of the world's population are affected by Green Revolution iron deficiency and research indicates that the condition impairs the learning ability of more than half of India's schoolchildren.

Many of the older crops carried dramatically higher counts of nutrients per calorie. The amount of cereal each person must therefore consume to fulfil daily dietary requirements has gone up. For instance, the iron content of millet is four times that of rice. Oats carry four times more zinc than wheat. As a result, between 1961 and 2011, the protein, zinc and iron contents of the world's directly consumed cereals *declined* by 4%, 5% and 19%, respectively.

While it is true that many other factors, including pollution, poor sanitation, working and living conditions, lack of income and economic distress, lack of access to healthcare and poverty, contribute to ill health and disease, a range of conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, certain cancers and obesity, have all been linked to modern food production and diets.

'Free trade' and poor health

To improve health, lifestyle change is often promoted, as if poor health is a matter of individual responsibility and personal choice. This message conveniently sidesteps wider issues concerning the global capitalist food regime and how our access to food is shaped.

If we look at the North American Free Trade Agreement, we can see how the subsequent flood of cheap US processed food into Mexico adversely affected the health of ordinary people. Western 'convenience' (junk) food has displaced more traditional-based diets and is now readily available in every neighbourhood. Increasing rates of diabetes, obesity and other health issues have followed. This report by GRAIN describes how US agribusiness and retailers have captured the market south of the border and outlines the subsequent negative impact on the health of Mexican people. This could be what is in store for India.

Western agribusiness, food processing companies and retail concerns are gaining wider entry into India and through various strategic trade deals are looking to gain a more significant footprint within the country. The opening of the food and retail sector to more foreign direct investment and the US-India Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture (see page 13 here) have raised serious concerns about the stranglehold that transnational corporations could have on the agriculture and food sectors.

We can already see one outcome in the edible oils sector. India was virtually self-sufficient in edible oils up till the mid-1990s, using healthy practices to extract oil from for example indigenous mustard, linseed, ground nut and sesame, all of which are deeply rooted in Indian culture. Due to the unscrupulous undermining of the indigenous edible oil seeds sector and the influx of cheap subsidised imports, some 70% of the population now consumes a narrower range of oils, not least (rain forest-destroying) palm oil and (GM) soy,

processed using unhealthy solvents. To facilitate this, thousands of small-scale food oil processing enterprises were put out of business to make way for grain trader and food processor company Cargill, whose role in drawing up health and safety rules was instrumental in driving the competition out of business.

It is part of the wider push by the global industrial food processing lobby to impose standardised, less nutrient-rich products and manufacturing processes along with unhealthy fats, sugars and chemical additives – courtesy of compliant regulators and policy makers in India – in order to consolidate its grip on the country's food base. As with the edible oils sector, it entails displacing more diverse, indigenous foodstuffs and healthy low-input food production processes, while robbing hundreds of thousands of their livelihoods.

We not only have Wal-Mart making inroads to complete the global food regime chain from seed to plate in India, but Western style fast-food outlets have already been soaring in number throughout the country. For example, Pizza Hut now operates in 46 Indian cities with 181 restaurants and 132 home delivery locations (2016). KFC is in 73 cities with 296 restaurants, a 770% increase over five years. According to a study published in the Indian Journal of Applied Research, the Indian fast food market is growing at the rate of 30-35% per annum (see this).

Heart disease, liver damage, stroke, obesity and diabetes are just some of the diseases linked to diets revolving around processed 'convenience' food. Frequent consumption of this food has been associated with increased body mass index as well as higher intakes of fat, sodium, added sugars and sugar-sweetened beverages and lower intakes of fruits, vegetables, fibre and milk in children, adolescents and adults.

Modern processed food also tends to have higher energy densities and poorer nutritional quality than foods prepared at home and in comparison with dietary recommendations (see this). To further appreciate just how unhealthy today's food is, a 2015 report in the Guardian reveals the cocktails of additives, colourants and preservatives that the industry adds to our food.

Moreover, in many regions across the globe industrialised factory farming has replaced traditional livestock agriculture. For example, just 40 years ago the Philippines' entire population was fed on native eggs and chickens produced by family farmers. Now, most of those farmers are out of business.

As world trade rules encourage nations from imposing tariffs on subsidised imported products, they are compelled to allow cheap, factory-farmed US meat into the country. These products are then sold at lower prices than domestic meat. There is therefore pressure for local producers to scale up and industrialise to compete.

Factory farms increase the risk of pathogens like E coli and salmonella that cause food-borne illness in people. Overuse of antibiotics can fuel the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, the use of arsenic and growth hormones can increase the risk of cancer in people, and crowded conditions can be a breeding ground for disease.

The Modi administration's restrictions on cow slaughter – making it difficult for many livestock farmers to operate – are regarded by some as a tool to facilitate the running down of small-scale livestock farming, paving the way for the industrialisation and corporatisation of the livestock industry.

Green Revolution, micronutrient-deficient soil and human health

We often hear unsubstantiated claims about the green revolution having saved hundreds of millions of lives, but any short-term gains in productivity have been offset. This high-input chemical-intensive model helped the drive towards greater monocropping and has resulted in less diverse diets and less nutritious foods. Its long-term impact has led to soil degradation and mineral imbalances, which in turn have adversely affected human health (see this informative report on India by botanist Stuart Newton – p.9 onward).

Adding weight to this argument, the authors of this paper from the International Journal of Environmental and Rural Development state:

> "Cropping systems promoted by the green revolution have increased the food production but also resulted in reduced food-crop diversity and decreased availability of micronutrients. Micronutrient malnutrition is causing increased rates of chronic diseases (cancer, heart diseases, stroke, diabetes and osteoporosis) in many developing nations; more than 3 billion people are directly affected by the micronutrient deficiencies. Unbalanced use of mineral fertilizers and a decrease in the use of organic manure are the main causes of the nutrient deficiency in the regions where the cropping intensity is high."

India might now be self-sufficient in various staples, but many of these foodstuffs are high calorie low nutrient, have led to the displacement of more nutritionally diverse cropping systems and have effectively mined the soil of nutrients. The importance of renowned agronomist William Albrecht, who died in 1974, should not be overlooked here and his work on healthy soils and healthy people.

In this respect, botanist **Stuart Newton**'s states:

> "The answers to Indian agricultural productivity is not that of embracing the international, monopolistic, corporate-conglomerate promotion of chemically-dependent GM crops… India has to restore and nurture her depleted, abused soils and not harm them any further, with dubious chemical overload, which are endangering human and animal health." (p24).

India is losing 5,334 million tonnes of soil every year due to soil erosion because of the indiscreet and excessive use of fertilisers, insecticides and pesticides. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research reports that soil is become deficient in nutrients and fertility.

Newton provides insight into the importance of soils and their mineral compositions and links their depletion to the 'green revolution'. In turn, these depleted soils cannot help but lead to mass malnourishment. This is quite revealing given that proponents of the Green Revolution claim it helped reduced malnutrition. Newton favours a system of agroecology, a sound understanding of soil and the eradication of poisonous chemical inputs.

Although this system is certainly gaining traction in India – there are encouraging signs for agroecological farming in places like Andhra and Karnataka – what we are also seeing is GMOs illegally creeping into the food system. Recent reports show GMOs are in commonly used food products and GM seeds are prevalent. The fear is that approval by contamination is what the GM industry has desired all along.

There are well-documented economic, environmental, ethical, social and health implications associated with GM. And unlike the Green Revolution, once the GM genie is out of the bottle, it can't be put back in and the changes to the genetic core of the world's food will be the legacy bequeathed to subsequent generations.

Pesticides, food and the environment

There are currently 34,000 pesticides registered for use in the US. Drinking water is often contaminated by pesticides and more babies are being born with preventable birth defects due to pesticide exposure.

Illnesses are on the rise too, including asthma, autism and learning disabilities, birth defects and reproductive dysfunction, diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases and several types of cancer. The association with pesticide exposure is becoming stronger with each new study.

In Punjab, pesticide run-offs into water sources have turned the state into a 'cancer epicentre'. India is one of the world's largest users of pesticides and a profitable market for the corporations that manufacture them. Ladyfinger, cabbage, tomato and cauliflower in particular may contain dangerously high levels because farmers tend to harvest them almost immediately after spraying. Fruit and vegetables are sprayed and tampered with to make them more colourful, and harmful fungicides are sprayed on fruit to ripen them in order to rush them off to market.

Research by the School of Natural Sciences and Engineering (SNSE) at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore has indicated disturbing trends in the increased use of pesticide. In 2008, it reported that many crops for export had been rejected internationally due to high pesticide residues. Moreover, India is one of the largest users of World Health Organization (WHO) 'Class 1A' pesticides, which are extremely hazardous.

Research by SNSE shows farmers use a cocktail of pesticides and often use three to four times the recommended amounts. It may come as no surprise that a recent report about children in Hyderabad are consuming 10 to 40 more times pesticides in their food than kids in the US.

Forced-fed development

In 1978, T.N. Reddy predicted in the book 'India Mortgaged' that the country would one day open all sectors to foreign direct investment and surrender economic sovereignty to imperialist powers.

Today, the US-led West, clings to a moribund form of capitalism and has used various mechanisms in the face of economic stagnation and massive inequalities: the raiding of public budgets, the expansion of credit to consumers and governments to sustain spending and consumption, financial speculation and increased militarism.

Under the guise of globalisation, we also see an unrelenting drive to plunder what capital regards as 'untapped markets' in other areas of the globe. International agri-capital has been moving in on Indian food and agriculture for some time. But as an agrarian-based country underpinned by smallholder agriculture, it first needs to displace the current model before bringing India's food and agriculture sector under its control.

Devinder Sharma describes the situation:

> "India is on fast track to bring agriculture under corporate control… Amending the existing laws on land acquisition, water resources, seed, fertilizer, pesticides and food processing, the government is in overdrive to usher in contract farming and encourage organized retail. This is exactly as per the advice of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as well as the international financial institutes."

In return for up to £90 billion in loans, in the 90s India was instructed to dismantle its state-owned seed supply system, reduce subsidies and run down public agriculture institutions and offer incentives for the growing of cash crops to earn foreign exchange. According to the World Bank's lending report, based on data compiled up to 2015, India was easily the largest recipient of its loans in the history of the institution. To push through the programme, hundreds of millions are to be shifted out of agriculture.

Successive Indian administrations have been quite obliging. While India's current government talks about 'make in India' (self-sufficiency), the reality is subservience to western capital. Agriculture is deliberately being made economically non-viable for small-scale farmers: financial distress and 'economic liberalisation' have resulted in between 300,000 and 400,000 farmer suicides since 1997 with millions more experiencing economic distress and over 6,000 leaving the sector each day. This lies at the root of the ongoing agrarian crisis. But it goes much further. We are witnessing not only the structural transformation of India's rural base but an all-encompassing strategy designed to incorporate India into the US's corporate-financial-intel architecture.

Whether it involves the displacement of indigenous food and agriculture by a model dominated by western conglomerates or it is the selling of pharmaceuticals and the expansion of private hospitals to address the health impacts of the modern junk food system (in India, the healthcare sector is projected to grow by 16% a year), either way, it's a lose-lose situation for the population.

But it all forms part of the holy grail of neoliberalism, GDP growth. A notion based on an economic system defined by bad food and ill health, joblessness, mass surveillance, spiralling inequalities, environmental degradation, militarism and debt on one hand; on the other, by bail outs, tax havens, massive profits and subsidies for large corporations and

banks.

So, what can be done? Whether we are discussing India or elsewhere, the scaling up of agroecology based on the notion of food sovereignty offers an alternative. Much has been written on agroecology as a model of agriculture but also as a movement for political change. Part of the process involves resisting the dismantling of rural economies and indigenous agriculture and instituting a sustainable food system rooted in local communities, whereby producing for local and regional needs takes precedence over supplying distant markets.

It also entails rejecting the agenda of the WTO which subjugates local agriculture to the needs of global markets (determined by agribusiness interests). And, unlike the current system, it includes supporting healthy and culturally appropriate food, encouraging diversified food production and recognising that food is not simply another commodity to be traded or speculated on for profit.

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