

Who will feed India?

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*An injured farmer is carried to a hospital in Nandigram. He was among those who protested against the government's plans to build an industrial park on their land.*

On March 21, 2007, in a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Jairam Ramesh, the Minister of State for Commerce made an extraordinary declaration: The setting up of special economic zones would not impact agricultural production in the country.

This declaration closely followed the Nandigram massacre, which was described by the West Bengal Chief Minister: "To control the situation, police initially fired rubber bullets, but this, again, yielded no results. Ultimately, the police had to open fire in self-defence causing dispersal of the mob."

At least 14 people were killed, probably many more. It was an occasion for the Indian media to point a finger at the Communists: "The Nandigram massacre stripped the CPI(M) of its carefully

cultivated facade of hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness that used to mask its Stalinist impulses and its spurious faith in democracy," wrote PR Ramesh in the Economic Times.

He added: "Why is this small piece of land — Nandigram — so important for a party that believes in the withering away of the State? When did they stop believing that Nation State is an artificial construct conceived and created by the bourgeoisie to oppress the working class?"

But the issue is even graver. It raises a more fundamental question: "Can India feed her people in the decades to come?"

In 1995, a book called *Who Will Feed China?* was published by the Worldwatch Institute by Washington. This remarkable study was written by one of the world's foremost agricultural experts, the American, Lester Brown. At the time, it forced the Chinese leadership to rethink their agricultural strategies. However, it was completely ignored in India, both by the 'experts' and the media.

In October 1996, the Beijing Review had admitted that China's total coverage of cultivated land dropped by an astounding 21 millions hectares between 1958 and 1995, while the nation's population grew significantly from 660 million to 1.2 billion during the same period. The theory advanced by Lester Brown was that with the growth in population in China — which will stabilise only in 2045 at 1.6 billion — and the escalation of the industrial development, the arable lands will shrink fast, while at the same time, the needs of the population will increase exponentially. As a result, China will have to import more and more grain from outside and the rise in the price of grain will increase in the world market till the point the planet will not be able to produce enough grain for the world demand and the poorer nations will not be able to buy their food.

Today, everyone admits that 90 million extra human beings on the earth every year collide will limit what the planet can produce or give to her children. China's problems always have larger dimensions. When a problem affects a country of 1.2 billion people, consequences are obviously drastically different than when related to a smaller nation. If, for instance, the entire Chinese population drinks two extra bottles of beer, it will take the entire annual grain production of Norway to produce these additional bottles.

A study was made of three Asian countries which, like China, were densely populated in agronomic terms before industrialisation. The conversion of agricultural land into other uses (factories, residential areas, airports, roads, flyovers, etc...) has led to the the loss of 52% of Japan's grain harvested areas, 46% of Korea's and 42% of Taiwan's. Though it started later, China's (and India's) development is not different from these three countries.

Another problem, which is a direct consequence of the rapid economic development, is that the affluence of the population has risen tremendously during the past two decades. Becoming richer usually means a change in lifestyle — first, a better diet, then buying a flat or a vehicle.

Traditionally, the Chinese are not vegetarian. They love to eat pork, eggs or chicken. To produce more of these animals more grain is needed and the problem of food grain becomes compounded. In India, the fact that a large section of the population is still vegetarian is a small mercy.

In 1995, Lester Brown asked a pertinent question: "Japan, Korea and Taiwan import 71% of their food grain, so how can China avoid facing the same problem?"

One of the solutions is to increase the yield, but it is not an easy solution as China's yield is already quite high and to succeed where Japan failed is not an ordinary task.

Eighty percent of the agricultural lands are irrigated land; one way to get better production is to increase irrigation. But the result is a depletion of the aquifers. This problem is compounded with irrigation water used for industries.

A few figures explain the problem. In China, one thousand tonnes of water produce one ton of wheat (equivalent to \$ 200) while in the industry sector, the same quantity of water can bring a revenue of \$ 14,000 which means 70 times more. For the planners, the choice is simple: water is synonymous with economic growth and job generation.

Lester Brown concludes his study by quoting the case of the Asian industrialised countries Japan, Korea and Thailand which in spite of the best conditions have become grain importers. In 1995, Lester Brown thought that "China's dependence on massive imports will be a wake-up call that we are colliding with the earth's capacity to feed us. It could well lead us to redefine national security away from military preparedness and toward maintaining adequate food supplies."

Since then India has also emerged as another development pole of the planet. The same consequences of untamed development are becoming visible in India too and Nandigram is one of the first indications of what we will face in a few years.

At the end of the day, India's 'democratically-elected' leaders must come to the same conclusion as their Chinese Communist counterparts: something must be done for the farmers and the poor.