

Greed Revolution?

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[Sumithra Prasanna](#) [1] , 19 May 2011

Subjects:

- [Science](#) [2]
- [International politics](#) [3]
- [Economics](#) [4]
- [Democracy and government](#) [5]
- [Culture](#) [6]
- [Civil society](#) [7]
- [India](#) [8]



[9]



[10]

Even if we believe that the first Green revolution benefited India by making it a food-surplus nation, it is important to distinguish it from the second Green revolution that unabashedly ties the nation's agricultural interests to the vagaries of institutional and corporate market forces.

Nature worship has always been an integral part of living in India. Many festivals celebrated throughout the year are opportunities for people to show their appreciation for the bounty that nature has graciously bestowed on them. Should any of the natural processes fail, daily activities that depend on these may suffer. Our ancestors understood this, and perhaps as a way of conserving the things that support and sustain humans, they thought it best to attribute divinity to all natural resources since it follows that what is divine is sacred, and therefore, needs to be preserved and treated with respect. Thus the land, the rivers, the monsoons, the cyclical changes of seasons, and all things that humans cannot create, came to be considered sacred, and even embodiments of Hindu gods and goddesses. Ironically today, the message has been lost in translation, and all that remain are empty rituals - poor reminders of an enduring bond that human beings shared with nature. We have overused our lands, abused our rivers, denuded our forests, and eroded our coastlines and mangroves, showing little respect for these resources. As the world grapples with the challenges posed by climate change, chief among which are negative impacts on the agricultural sector, scientists are busy at work to create climate-change-ready and yield-increasing transgenic hybrids, or genetically modified (GM) seeds, that can respond to the needs of the world's hungry masses.

It is an important chapter for India as it faces a challenge of feeding its growing population, 1.2 billion now and counting. The nation is preparing for what is referred to as the 'second green revolution' that is expected to transform India's eastern drylands into surplus-producing food bowls. The initial plan towards making this a reality was forged in 2005 by former US President George W Bush and Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in the form of a '[US-India Knowledge initiative](#)' [11] that seeks to facilitate 'technology transfer, trade, and investment' to pave the way for an 'environmentally sustainable, market-oriented agriculture.' It is not inconceivable that the initiative would promote US agribusiness interests in the long run since the presence of a large and growing population dictating the need for augmenting food capacity in the coming years as well as an availability of unexplored lands make India an attractive investment option for American multinational corporations who will look to benefit from the initiative by way of using India as a trial ground for research, patenting technology, testing transgenic seeds on Indian soils and also selling those seeds to Indian farmers at high prices. It goes without saying that Indian farmers' agricultural knowledge and Indian agro-scientists' inputs are critical to this research. So it is not without reason that prominent Indian ecologists and activists have viewed this initiative and the government's claim

to launch a second green revolution with suspicion especially since Monsanto, the world's largest producer of GM seeds, and Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, are on the board of this new initiative.

India's first Green revolution (1967-78) came about when American agronomist, [Norman Borlaug](#) [12] together with Indian agro-scientist, [Dr. M.S. Swaminathan](#) [13] helped the country's phenomenal transformation from being a mere grain importer to becoming a food self-sufficient and surplus nation. Mexican dwarfs or High Yielding Variety (HYV) hybrids were planted in Punjab improving yields per unit of farmland by over 30 percent and making India one of the biggest grain producers in 1978 with a record output of 131 million tons. On the downside, serious doubts remain regarding the sustainability of this kind of intensive agriculture. The green revolution put the focus on water-guzzling varieties of rice and wheat, caused the decline in cultivation of nutritious food crops like pulses and millets, increased the dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides with Punjab alone (occupying roughly 1.5 percent of the nations' geographical area) accounting for nearly 10 percent of national consumption, wrecked biodiversity by introducing monocultures, depleted soil health, and caused severe land degradation.

That the Green revolution created any real benefit is a fact that has been contested by many. For one, it has not solved the problem of hunger where the [Public Distribution System](#) [14] (PDS) intended to deliver food to the poor has failed miserably in most parts of the country. For another, it has not addressed the problem of malnutrition; India has nearly 40 percent of the world's undernourished children. So, what was the whole point of the revolution? In his masterfully researched book, [Seeds of Destruction](#) [15], William Engdahl asserts that world domination through agriculture was "one of the central pillars of post-war Washington policy, along with world oil markets and non-communist world defense sales." The Green Revolution may have been a "thinly veiled form of food imperialism," and "the boldest coup over the destiny of entire nations ever attempted." Prior to 1967, India had been an agriculturally sound nation boasting of more than 100,000 varieties of rice. Each of these strains evolved naturally with time and adapted to changing soil and temperature conditions requiring no external inputs or human interference, whereas the inserted gene in HYVs not only lacked any such self-sustaining traits, but also mutated to create dangerously unintended characteristics. The huge inputs that industrial agriculture requires also point to its inefficiencies.

Even if we did believe that the first Green revolution benefited India by making it a food-surplus nation, it is important to distinguish it from the so-called second Green revolution that unabashedly ties the nation's agricultural interests to the vagaries of institutional and corporate market forces. The idea of maximizing yields to create food security and maximizing profits for corporates and large landowners seems too utilitarian in its logic as it rejects the individual rights of poor small farmers. It is nothing but a 'Greed Revolution' as Dr. M.S. Swaminathan says, one that is driven by "proprietary science" and "monopolistic control." Marginal farmers' holdings are each below 2 hectares of land, and they constitute about 45 percent of the poor in India, which is nearly 80 percent of all Indian farmers. Small-scale farming and retail are the largest self-employment sectors in the country. It seems that the right policies to encourage this rural population to continue to engage in what is both commercial and subsistence farming could help them solve their own hunger problems as well, instead of allowing large landowners or private corporations to grab their lands and drive the poor to urban areas making them even poorer into the bargain. Small farmers are not going to be able to afford the HYVs, and even if they could afford the seeds, the costs due to fertilizers, water and pesticides will far outweigh the money they may earn from crops cultivated in such small areas. Forcing these farmers to compete in a market society ridden with inequalities will serve to marginalize them even further. A fair marketplace must take its place between willing participants who have mutually agreed to the terms for such an interaction.

In all of this discussion about food security and food sovereignty, about what is profitable or what is not, about what is economic or uneconomic, what is being elbowed out is a deeper aspect of value that respects all humans as living, breathing beings rather than as big or small players in the overall growth of GDP. The crude cost-benefit analysis of market economics fails to consider the real cost to small farmers, their dignity, should their livelihoods be decimated on account of market-oriented agriculture. Moreover, seed and food sovereignty should be in people's hands, and not rest with profit-making corporates. There needs to be a just balance between macro-economic growth and

micro-incentives for marginalised farmers. Coupled with a process of democratization of critical agricultural expertise and resources, this can help mobilize the rural poor to control and define the terms of market trade.

In this context, it is important to highlight and applaud the efforts of some remarkable grassroots movements in India that are tirelessly striving to put the power back into poor peasants' hands. These are alternate movements that look to the original principles of sustainable agriculture to empower marginal farming communities. One such movement is spearheaded by [Deccan Development Society](#) [16] (DDS), an NGO that has been working for over two decades with small farmers at Medak district in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The cornerstone of the society is its pool of around 5000 women members drawn from women's sanghams (village level associations) in 75 villages. Most of them are from the Dalit community considered lowest in the Indian social hierarchy. These sanghams are a true testament to the fact that rural women are key economic agents of change. India is no different from the rest of the world in witnessing a dramatic increase in the ratio of women to men in agriculture - roughly 58 percent of men compared to 78 percent of women are engaged in farm-related labour and activities. The increase in numbers does not automatically shift the balance of power in favour of women given the 'consistent gender gap' that they face in accessing 'productive assets, inputs and services' (FAO). DDS has addressed this challenge beautifully through pioneering land-leasing schemes that allow women to share resources for the common good of all. Women lease-in lands jointly from private owners, or buy lands collectively through a government scheme initiated by the [Scheduled Castes Development Corporation](#) [17], then, farm in these lands, and share in the produce collectively. Since the Society's inception in 1985, the women have cultivated in over 10,000 acres of degraded land producing over 3 million kilograms of grain every year.

The women cultivate a variety of millets, about 6 to 20 crops at the same time, so that biodiversity is intrinsic to this farming system. Millets are known to grow in a range of ecological conditions that do not demand rich soils or much water or chemical fertilizers and they are absolutely pest-free making them 'climate change compliant' crops. Nutritionally in terms of protein, vitamin and mineral content, millets are three to five times superior to wheat or rice, and their edible stalks are great fodder for cattle.

If these aren't remarkable enough, since 1996, through a revolutionary arrangement called the [Alternative Public Distribution System](#) [18] (PDS) to enable local production, storage and distribution, some 3000 women have brought nearly 3500 acres of mostly fallow land under cultivation, and produced more than 1 million kilograms of extra food grains. What it essentially means in real terms for the poor communities living here is the creation of 1000 extra meals for each participating family per year (ddsindia.com) with benefits through this alternative PDS also reaching non-sangham members.

Yet another truly extraordinary fact is that DDS women manage and run their own market, which provides an opportunity for them to sell some of their produce and buy much of what they consume at prices that they can determine collectively. Instead of depending on an external certification agency, the farmers certify their own produce through a Participatory Guarantee System. The market has also managed to attract a steady stream of urban middle-class consumers who are eager to try the organic produce. According to P.V. Satheesh, Founder-Director of DDS, "each shareholder in this market earns between 30% to 150% of her share amount as her annual dividend. The market in ten years of its existence has grown 15 times in terms of the volume of its transaction," making such an enterprise a very viable one that can help reclaim the dignity of farmers by empowering them.

The women refer to their seeds as 'satyam pantulu' or 'crops of truth' that they store individually in their homes while also managing community seed banks in 60 villages. They have salvaged about 80 wild varieties of millets that were destroyed through modern agricultural methods. This is agriculture that respects the earth, and believes in treating the land and all natural resources as sacred. It's a belief - "as if people mattered" - that inspired [EF Schumacher](#) [19]'s philosophy of economics, an economic theory based on Buddhist values, regarding the land as the greatest among material resources, and putting the emphasis on human beings rather than on the products of their work. The true test of an economic initiative is whether it promotes the overall well-being of all the people it is

intended to reach rather than benefitting only those that are closest to wealth and power.

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 About the author

Sumithra Prasanna is an independent writer and documentary filmmaker based in Singapore.



[21]

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[13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M._S._Swaminathan

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