

An Indian Paradox: Bumper Harvests And Rising Hunger

The World Has Enough Food, But Poor Can't Afford It; Growing Jobs and Crops

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Want Amid Plenty; A Taxi for Mr. Manangatti

THIRUKANCHIPET, India — In the 1960s, this country set out to prevent famine by boosting agricultural production. The push was so successful that wheat and rice stockpiles approached 60 million tons. By 2001, India had its own grain export business. But Murugesan Manangatti, a 29-year-old illiterate peasant, was still hungry. He had no land to grow crops and no steady income to buy food.

Last summer, an agricultural research foundation gave Mr. Manangatti some unusual advice: Drive a taxi. With the foundation's help, he and 15 members of this rural village received a loan to buy a three-wheeled, battery-powered vehicle. The taxi business earns up to \$25 a day and Mr. Manangatti takes home a monthly salary of about \$55. For the first time, he says, his family is regularly able to eat three nutritious meals a day.

The Thirukanchipet taxi is a fresh approach to solving a jarring paradox. The world is producing more food than ever before as countries such as India, China and Brazil emerge as forces in global agriculture. But at the same time, the number of the world's hungry is on the rise — including in India — after falling for decades. Despite its overflowing granaries, India has more hungry people than any other country, as many as 214 million according to United Nations estimates, or one-fifth of its population.

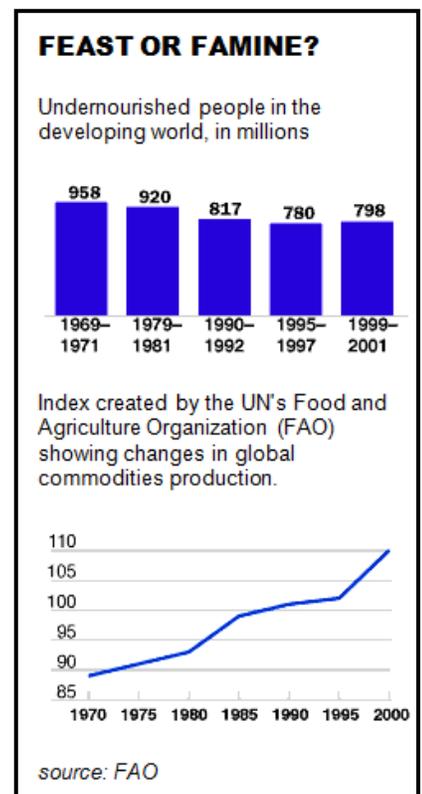
The paradox is propelling a shift in strategy among the world's hunger fighters. International agencies that once encouraged countries to solve starvation crises by growing more food are now tackling the more fundamental problem of rural poverty as well. The old development mantra — produce more food, feed more people — is giving way to a new call: Create more jobs, provide income to buy food.

"Increasing production is great, but we have to think about the whole chain," says M.S. Swaminathan, the 78-year-old scientist who helped engineer India's agriculture boom and whose foundation set up Mr. Manangatti's taxi. India has been able to conquer its famine of food, he says. Now it is suffering from a "famine of jobs and livelihoods."

The stark contrast between food production and rural poverty is helping to transform Indian politics. India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party had overseen a boom in the country's technology sector but was defeated in May elections largely by the votes of a rural population that felt left behind. The BJP's "India Shining" campaign, which highlighted the country's economic advances, was trumped by the victorious Congress party, which ran on a platform of aiding farmers.

There is plenty of supply on hand to meet global demand. Over the past 35 years, the world's food production has expanded faster than its population. In 2002, according to the United Nations World Food Program, farmers produced enough food to provide every person with 2,800 calories a day. That's equivalent to the general daily requirement of teen boys and active men, according to the U.S. government's dietary guidelines. The WFP's feeding programs aim to provide 2,100 calories a day to their recipients.

But inadequate infrastructure, local corruption and rural poverty have prevented the chronically hungry — those who don't eat enough to fulfill basic standards — from gaining access to this bountiful harvest. After falling for decades, the estimated number of undernourished in the developing world increased by 18 million to 798 million between 1997 and 2001, according to the



latest data from the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization.

In a typical year, the World Food Program distributes food to about 90 million people, many of whom are threatened with starvation in disaster situations such as drought. Most of the remaining 700 million live on isolated, stony land, and have neither the money to buy food nor the ability to grow it. They're beyond the reach of international feeding programs and also fall through national safety nets.

It's virtually impossible to simply hand out food surpluses to the hungry because of the cost and complexity of distribution. It would also turn recipients into permanent wards of the world. "I believe in Gandhi's strategy: Don't turn people into beggars," says Mr. Swaminathan.

Looking for solutions, countries are turning their attention to permanent development projects such as road building that can foster economic activity for the rural poor, and connect them to markets for their produce.

A recent summit meeting of the Group of Eight industrialized nations embraced a plan to "end the cycle of famine" in the Horn of Africa. One plan for Ethiopia involves creating work programs that would allow the five million people there dependent on aid to buy their own food. Earlier this year, the Chinese government said it would cut farming taxes and boost investment in rural areas. And at a recent meeting of the African Union, leaders committed to allocating at least 10% of their budgets to agriculture and rural development.

The WFP, in one strategy shift, is emphasizing schools with a classroom-based feeding program that so far reaches 15 million. It's designed to encourage children, who constitute about 300 million of the world's hungry, to attend school and at the same time combat malnutrition. "An ill-educated, unhealthy population can't take advantage of an open economy," says John Powell, a WFP deputy executive director.

India's agricultural program of the 1960s, dubbed the Green Revolution, was launched after the country suffered through a series of famines. Under the guidance of local and international agronomists

and scientists, Indian farmers were introduced to hardy, fast-growing wheat strains and better uses of fertilizer and irrigation. As a result, crop yields multiplied and in recent years India's wheat production topped 70 million tons, surpassing that of the U.S. The Indian government estimates that wheat output may pass 100 million tons in the coming decade.

In the country's northern grain belt, wheat grows almost everywhere there is a level field, between houses and schools, and brick factories and gas stations. During the harvest season, the roads are clogged with tractors such as the small Massey Ferguson model driven by 19-year-old farmer Gopal Kumar. He recently pulled a wagon piled with five tons of wheat as he made his way to the mill in Mathura, a 30-minute drive from the Taj Mahal.

The Kumars have been farming wheat for three generations and now work 36 acres. "This is a pretty good year," said Mr. Kumar. He maneuvered his tractor and wagon past Mathura's McDonald's and delivered his wheat to Rajender Bansal's mill. Mr. Bansal opened his mill about 10 years ago with capacity to process 2,000 tons of wheat a month. He has since expanded to 3,000 tons.

As India's grain production grew, so did its surpluses. By 2001, the national stockpile of rice and wheat was approaching 60 million tons, according to the government. The country had also become one of the world's leading producers of fruits, vegetables and milk. India set up a distribution network to supply surplus grain at reduced prices to 180 million families.

But with inefficiency and local mismanagement plaguing distribution, it couldn't move the grain fast enough through the system. Some even spoiled in warehouses. A 2002 government survey concluded that 48% of children under five years old are malnourished. That's an improvement from three decades ago and even today, given rapid population growth, the proportion of chronically hungry Indians continues to fall. But in a sign that there are limits to the Green Revolution, the absolute number of hungry people in India began to rise again in the late 1990s, according to the U.N.

With the cost of storing surpluses spiraling, the government opened the door to grain exports in 2001. India sold more than 10 million tons of grain to overseas customers that year, mostly in Asia and the Middle East.

Traders from traditional wheat and rice exporters were critical of the Indian trade. How could the country export grain while so many in the country are hungry? D.P. Singh, chairman of the All India Grain Exporters Association, says the grain surplus has been big enough to allow for both exporting and distribution to the rural poor. "If [the grain] didn't reach the hungry people, it's too bad, but it has nothing to do with availability," he says.

At the same time, India made a donation of one million tons of wheat to a World Food Program project in Afghanistan. A few European members of the WFP's executive board questioned the propriety of India's action. Himachal Som, India's representative to the U.N.'s food agencies in Rome, made an impassioned speech to his critics arguing that the donation didn't affect the country's ability to feed its poor, a more intractable problem than simply growing greater amounts of food.

The results of last month's election in India are concentrating attention on the paradox of hunger. In the two states where the former BJP-led government fared especially badly — Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu — the gap between India's high-tech centers and surrounding farming areas had become the most pronounced. Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh, grew prosperous as the state's government courted U.S. companies such as Microsoft Corp. and General Electric Co. and the World Bank praised the state for its economic progress.

But about 100 miles outside the city's glittering office towers, farmers in the town of Kalimela say they've benefited little. A three-year drought hit farm production. Many blamed the state government for failing to invest more in irrigation systems and roads. In addition, farmers were hit hard when the state increased electricity rates.

"The government hasn't helped us. No roads. No water. Right from the beginning," says Jarappa Sonia, 35, a sugar cane and wheat farmer from Kalimela. Mr. Sonia joined a government work

program building roads in a district four hours from his home. "I prefer to be a farmer," he says.

The opposition Congress party promised free power for Andhra Pradesh's farmers. Within hours of taking office, the state's new chief minister, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, honored that pledge.

It's too early to know how fully the Congress-led government will implement its ideas. The Congress party and its allies have agreed to support minimum-wage public-works programs such as a guaranteed 100 days of employment for rural households. They have also promised to improve farmers' access to credit and restructure outstanding debts.

Providing rural folk with an income to buy food is a theory the Swaminathan foundation has extended to 9,600 people in 800 self-help groups in five states across the country.

In the small southern village of Thirukanchipet, the best the rural unemployed can hope for is seasonal work in rice paddies for \$1 or \$2 a day. Earlier this year, with the help of the Swaminathan foundation, 28 men and women formed a dairy group to improve their credit worthiness and received a micro-credit loan of about \$10,000 from a local bank.

The group bought 20 cows and 19 calves, and built a milking shed. The cows produce more than 40 gallons a day, which is sold to a local dairy cooperative for 80 cents a gallon. Much of the daily income of about \$30 is set aside to repay the loan. The rest is distributed among the members who for the first time are able to afford the higher-quality rice and wheat sold in the private stores instead of that in government ration shops.

"It tastes better," says M. Kanagaraj, a tall, thin man of 34. He is one of four workers who milk and manage the cows and makes about \$40 a month. "We eat two meals a day now," he says. They are waiting for the calves to mature, so they can double the milk production and their income.

"Then," says Mr. Kanagaraj, "we will eat three meals a day."