

**National / Essays**

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**Out of the green?** Our PM wants young people to move out of farming and seek jobs in the cities, which aren't prepared for them

ESSAY: AGRICULTURE

**No Country For  
Countrymen**

As the Manmohan Singh government makes evident its unfriendliness to villages, the nation hurtles towards disaster. It's a danger no one wants to face.

**ARUN SINHA**

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been trying for years to make us believe that agriculture is a vast marshland in which a huge population is stuck ankle- to neck- deep and it is his duty to rescue

them. "Our salvation lies in moving people out of agriculture," he says in one speech. "We need to move people out of agriculture by giving them gainful employment in non-agricultural sectors," he says in another. He says it whenever he talks of agriculture. His alter ego, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, echoes it whenever he can. Whether agriculture is a marshland or a Garden of Eden—and how it came to be so—is another thing. First, Dr Singh, we need to ask where you will take the evacuees.

Your government departments and public enterprises are cutting down on staff. Private companies are buying technologies to replace labour. Traditional industries, such as the glassware industry of Firozabad and the shoemaking industry of Agra, where labourers' hands and not machines produced goods, are devastated with the opening of international trade and inundation with foreign brands. Artisan industries are closing down because of growing consumer preference for the machine-finished quality of goods from big cities. Companies are not investing their surpluses in rural manufacturing, saying Manmohan Singh must first create infrastructure. Manmohan says his government has no money; only private capital can do it.

So, you see, the country is in a fix. Seventy per cent of Indians, who live in villages, are in a fix. And that makes more than 80 crore farmers, labourers, artisans...men, women and children. Where do you want to take them?

You say there is no food in the villages; food is in the towns. But how will you feed them? How will you house people from six lakh villages in 8,000 towns? How will you guarantee that they will not have to live in cramped, disease-breeding slums with open drains and no toilets? How will you ensure that they get tap water and

electricity? Will they have public transport? If you can't ensure all that, why are you moving them out of the villages in the first place? Why are you playing host in a royal Indian wedding when you have no food, accommodation, comfortable transport and no fans and lights to offer to the baraatis?



Photograph by Narendra Bisht  
Messrs Manmohan Singh and Montek Ahluwalia, you have already humiliated them enough. By saying that they are trapped in a marshland, you have made them feel there is disgrace in being a farmer. They have come to believe agriculture is an accursed occupation. They feel they have brought themselves greater disgrace by reproducing more. You are shrewd enough not to betray your Malthusian humour, but when you say the proportion of our population dependent on agriculture is very high and unsustainable, your attitude towards them barely remains secret. But is overpopulation really why they are in the bog? Are you not to blame?

The nation has benefited more from farmers than farmers have from the nation. The nation has used them as horses to gallop to the goal of food self-sufficiency, to come out of the crippling shame of the ship-to-mouth days. As long as the political leadership was assured of enough food in the stocks, they were not bothered how the farmers were producing more and more. The consequences are there for everyone to see in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. This was a region consciously selected by the national leadership for cruising to self-sufficiency because it was well-endowed with fertile soil, irrigation and robust husbandry traditions. The natural minerals of the soil have been driven away by chemicals. So much water has been pumped by tubewells that the groundwater aquifers have shrunk. The same hybrid seeds that produced plenty are not yielding more any more. Farmers have been left in the lurch.

Now, the nation awaits a technological breakthrough to end the stagnation. It has been waiting for that breakthrough for over two decades. It is causing anxiety in the national leadership. The anxiety is not about farmers. The anxiety is about the nation. The fear is about the nation losing self-dependence for food, it's about food inflation that will force town employers to raise wages. When Manmohan and Montek say, "Agriculture must grow at four per cent," they are talking about the GDP. The attitude of the post-reform leadership is no different from that of the pre-reform leadership. Farmers are still, in their view, no more than draught animals. The best example of it is seen in cotton. The leadership introduced a technological breakthrough in genetically modified (GM) seeds to meet the objective of reducing import of

cotton, which caused a drain on foreign exchange reserves. Within a few years, India became a cotton-exporting country. Then crop failure struck, as soon as the monsoon started failing, and thousands of farmers committed suicide. Bt cotton should not have been allowed to be grown in regions with low water availability, as it required a lot of water. But the leadership was not worried who was growing cotton where and how many were taking their lives—as long as its objective of achieving self-sufficiency in the commodity was met. The nation was happy, even if farmers were not.



Photograph by Apoorva Salkade

**The government wants Indian agriculture to take the American road. But the conditions that shaped American agriculture are not the same as those in India. For us, the American road leads to ruin.**

The political leadership has left the farmers to themselves. It says: if you can survive, stay on; if you can't, too bad, swallow your pride—and your pesticide. We won't intervene. We are going to spend less and less on agricultural subsidy, support, infrastructure. The State must withdraw as the market takes over. (But the market is not taking over.)

Of course, you can't help wondering what actually public spending in the past yielded. Dams and canals took decades to build, guzzled money several times the original budgets and yet could not deliver as much water to as many farmers as they promised. Trillions of rupees supposedly advanced to farmers as credit still left most of them dependent on borrowings from food traders, moneylenders and relatives. What happened to the long list of programmes intended to insulate farmers from the vagaries of monsoon in the rain-fed areas—60 per cent of the total area of cultivation?

Why did the Planning Commission introduce a programme in one Five Year Plan, calling it key, crucial, game-changing, and then express regret in the following Five Year Plans that it was not properly implemented? Why was the nation rich in ideas, poor in practice? Why did we see little implementation, but plenty of lamentation? And why it is still so? What revolutionary restructuring of administration have you brought about during your two terms to change that?

The institutional failure in alleviating poverty was not only obvious in the poor management of crop productivity-raising programmes, it was also evident in the non-implementation of land ceiling and redistribution policies. Only, in these policies, the political leaders consciously opted to be poor managers. They would do

nothing to destabilise the class and caste hierarchies in the village; on the contrary, they played along with them to survive and thrive in politics. Had they sincerely worked to see that the landless got even an acre or less, poverty would have been much less acute, as the beneficiaries would have conceivably at least grown food for their families. The consequence of unbroken social hierarchy was not only that the poor in the village remained poor, but they could either get no jobs or only low-paid jobs in towns where men from the higher castes would have a monopoly of better-paid and skilled jobs.

But what political leaders dare not do, the higher castes and classes have brought upon themselves. Never keen as agriculturists, they have sold their land or divided it among inheritors or ceded to militant cultivating peasants. The number of large farm holdings (10 ha and above) has plunged from 4.37 million in 1960-61 to 1 million in 2010-11. During the period, the total number of farm holdings has risen from 48 million to 137 million. Holdings under 2 ha (small and marginal farms) make 85 per cent of this total. In the next 20 or 30 years, most large holdings will split up, making India a country almost wholly of small farmers.

How does the nation take care of the crores of small farmers? Our economist-doctor knows only one remedy: Move them to towns. Urbanise, urbanise, urbanise. But he does not say all should move or only a certain percentage of them. What would be that certain percentage? Or does he want India to follow the path of America, where 80 per cent of the population was engaged in agriculture in the 1850s and only one per cent today is?

He will ruin India if he takes her along the American road. The historical factors—a small

population of settlers and a continent of land; the World War II, which drew rural populations to the army and the post-war reconstruction boom—that shaped US agriculture are not to be seen in India. Nor are the cultural factors—a meat-eating population, requiring large grazing lands for animals. Nor indeed the economic ethos—a faith in capitalism bred by blind hatred of anything resembling socialism. The World War II and India's wars with China and Pakistan did not drain villages of youth. India was a largely vegetarian country, comprising self-contained villages where peasants grew food for themselves and needed small pastures for their draught and milch cattle. The mean size of farms in the US increased from 50 hectares in 1870 to over 200 hectares by 2000. The average size of a farm in India shrank from 2.3 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.16 hectares in 2010-11.

What is Manmohan's vision—that we draw out most of the farmers in order to facilitate the takeover of the countryside by big capital? In the United States today, less than 10 per cent of the farms account for 65 per cent of sales of agricultural products. Despite the 'prosperity' from the Green Revolution, even Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh have not witnessed concentration of cultivable lands on such an epic scale. The 'rich' farmers do not have much capital to buy lands. Corporates have big capital. Agribusiness multinationals have big capital. And they are eyeing India. They are goading the doctor at the top to do the surgery on rural India.

We have had a 'socialistic' past, the Congress party is shrinking, and there is a very real danger of disaffection among farmers turning toxic: so the doctor fears going for his scalpels and retractors. But that



is what his heart seems to be telling him to do; he is obsessed with it, so he is doing it without surgery. His alternative remedy is: supply less nutrition to agriculture; smoke out the village population by causing a conflagration in their bellies.



**The model that seems workable in India is for most farmer families to grow their own food, while extra income comes from jobs in industry or services in towns or the smaller cities near their villages.**

But that is going to be destructive. Agriculture is the engine of economic growth. To weaken agriculture is to weaken India's foundations. How can we forget that the tiger economies of Southeast Asia were built upon a strong agricultural base? How can we not see that China could cope with the loss of millions of jobs in towns in the global financial meltdown because the job losers could go back to work the farms in

their villages. Manmohan cannot run away from his responsibility to strengthen agriculture. The guilt of the past governments (mostly Congress) in weakening agriculture is obvious. He has joined the galaxy of the guilty. Yet there is so much that can still be done. The crop productivity of rain-fed areas is less than half of that in irrigated areas. The productivity in irrigated areas is far lower than in developed economies. If we improve agriculture, farmers will stick to villages. America and Europe are allocating special budgets to sustain their village populations. They have recognised their mistakes belatedly. We are still in a stage where we do not have to lure populations to villages; they are already there.

Get rid of the misconception that farmers want to leave agriculture. A lot of migration is natural; members of farming families take up non-farm jobs in towns. But let that be voluntary. Today migration is forced. Let agriculture develop and let youth from farming families move to non-farm jobs by their free choice.

Farmers are deeply attached to the land. Even landless labourers are using earnings from non-farm employment to buy land, for land provides food security, is still a good asset and source of prestige. Villagers' attachment to the land, their skills and their indigenous wisdom are pillars on which a strong edifice of agriculture can be built.

What better examples of this can one find than in the villages where farmers, frustrated by institutional failure, have developed and are managing water resources on their own. In the command area of the Waghdam dam on the Kolwan river in Maharashtra's Nashik district, it is farmers' water user associations—and not irrigation department engineers—that are managing the operations and maintenance of the

canal network. The cash crop boom resulting from their water management has ended out-migration and is attracting in-migration.

In Ralegan Sidhi village in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, Anna Hazare brought water to the fields simply by mobilising villagers to go in for watershed development, reducing out-migration. In the Bhaonta-Kolyala village in Alwar district of Rajasthan, villagers developed watersheds in a similar manner, reducing out-migration. Rajendra Singh—the ‘Waterman of India’—is credited with bringing assured irrigation through participatory watershed development and management. This he has done in over a thousand villages through Tarun Bharat Sangh, his voluntary group. That just goes to show that if watershed is developed and managed by water users, the rain-fed areas—where much of India’s poverty resides—can grow crops round the year, raise productivity, create round-the-year employment and raise agricultural wages to reduce pauperisation and migration.

Census 2011 has discovered that fewer migrants are coming to megapolises like Mumbai, Delhi and Chennai, and more to smaller towns. That goes to show that given the choice, migrants would work in non-farm jobs, even if less paying, in towns nearer their homes.

An ideal India would be one in which non-farm jobs are available to working-age members of farming families near their villages. Food can come from the small farm, while the non-farm income fulfils other needs, without breaking the families, without breaking up the communities. But for this to happen, there must be robust rural industrialisation. And for that the State has to draw private capital to new places and

provide education and skills to youth in farming families. Manmohan's State is not taking the farming families in that direction. It is forcing the rural youth to move far away from their villages. That will leave only old people in villages and there will be nobody to cultivate their land after they die. Who will take their lands? Our economist-king is keeping that secret to himself.

(The writer is working on a book called *No Country for Countrymen: How India is Ruining its Villages.*)