

Why India (perhaps) does not need humanitarian food aid

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Following on from Ashwini Kakkar, Frédéric Landy takes a closer look at the Indian food paradox. He does so while reflecting on the Indian government's hostility towards the intervention of foreign organisations. Another paradox, no doubt, but one that does not disregard the actual resources the Indian Union possesses to improve the situation.

In India, 224 million people – or 16.3% of the population – are undernourished.¹ According to the latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS) covering the years 2019-2021,² 19% of women and 16% of men have a body mass index below normal, 32% of children under 5 years of age are underweight, and infant mortality stands at 35‰ live births (3.6‰ live births in France). In the 2021 Global Hunger Index, India ranked 101 (out of 116 countries), just ahead of Papua New Guinea and Afghanistan, and way behind its South-East Asian neighbours Nepal and Bangladesh (joint 76) and Pakistan (92).

In terms of health, the situation is not much better. A few indicators are enough to demonstrate this: according to the NFHS, 24% of women and 23% of men are overweight, whilst 14% of women and 16% of men have high blood sugar levels – an indication of the prevalence of diabetes. Furthermore, less than half the population has access to drinking water. Lastly, although not strictly speaking a health statistic and despite progress in this area, the fact that 22% of the population is still illiterate is certainly an aggravating factor.

As for environmental and political crises, not to mention the 16,000 or so deaths in the 2004 tsunami, we need only mention the problem of foreign refugees (Rohingya) or internally displaced persons. The conflict with the Naxalite guerrillas³ is a cause of displacement that is estimated to have resulted in some 645 deaths per year between 1996 and 2016. The proliferation of protected natural areas, dams and mines alone, however, is estimated to have displaced some 60 million people since Independence in 1947.

And yet... Yet the World Food Programme no longer delivers food to India and is only marginally involved in food programmes. Yet foreign non-government organisations (NGO) are not welcome, including in extreme emergencies, as was the case with the 2004 tsunami when India refused to accept foreign aid on its territory. And the nationalist attitude of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party government, which has been in power since 2014, has only accentuated this state of affairs. Yet there is a proliferation of Indian "NGOs" in the country even though they mostly correspond to what would simply be called *associations* in France, without necessarily intervening in the field of humanitarian aid.

¹ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF *et al.*, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable*, July 2022, <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0639en/cc0639en.pdf>

² National Family Health Survey, India, (NFHS-5) 2019-2021, http://rchiips.org/nfhs/factsheet_NFHS-5.shtml

³ See, in this issue, the article by Samuel Cédric Nguenda and Nancy Saurelle Ndjomo Kabayene, "The Naxalite conflict in India: what role for humanitarian organisations?", pp. 76–85.

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How can we explain this paradox? As this is a complex subject, we shall limit ourselves here to the question of food for which there are many historical, social and cultural explanatory factors. This article will therefore focus on the food policy implemented since India's Independence as it is this policy which, despite all its limitations, explains why India believes, perhaps rightly, that it does not need humanitarian aid to feed its 1.4 billion citizens.

Extremely fragile socio-economic bases

For agricultural production

The Republic of India, a federal union of twenty-eight states, is not as large a country as we might imagine, given that it is three times smaller than China or Brazil, but that makes the size of its population all the more remarkable. What is equally astonishing is that even though we know how enormous India's metropolises are (Delhi and Mumbai each have over twenty million inhabitants), the fact remains that most of its population is still rural: 69% according to the last census (2011), even though this official figure is overestimated.⁴ Four-fifths of this rural population, however, depend on agriculture. The average farm is no bigger than one hectare, and this is without taking into account the landless farm workers. This is a rare global phenomenon, and this farm size is even shrinking because without job-creating growth in other sectors or in cities, almost half the labour force is still involved in agriculture.

Agrarian hierarchies would therefore appear to be minimal in number: in 2015-2016, only 0.6% of farms exceeded 10ha and accounted for 9% of the cultivated area. These figures, however, hide other powerful dominance structures in terms of commercialisation (who owns the only rice-processing plant in the village?), credit (who knows the banker?) and political contacts. It is not just an issue of class but also one of caste since it is generally the "high" castes that remain favoured, whilst the former Untouchables (Dalits) or the indigenous populations (tribals) remain at the bottom of the social scale, both in the city and in the countryside.

For consumption

These socio-economic contrasts are even more pronounced in the city, even though the proportion of poor households is lower in urban areas. The poverty rate has not been published for a long time – largely for political reasons – although the World Bank has estimated, probably in a rather optimistic way, that in 2019 (before the Covid lockdowns) 12% of the rural population and 6% of the urban population were below the poverty line of \$2.15.⁵ Generally speaking, a large proportion of Indian consumers is in a precarious situation, with food accounting on average for half the general household budget. Even though most meals are vegetarian, this is for both cultural reasons (meat is regarded as an impure element) and economic reasons: vegetable proteins such as peas and lentils (*dal*) are cheaper than animal proteins.

Disparities and power relationships

⁴ Frédéric Landy et Aurélie Varrel, *L'Inde. Du développement à l'émergence*, Armand Colin, 2015 ; Christophe Jaffrelot (dir.), *L'Inde contemporaine. De 1990 à aujourd'hui*, Hachette-Pluriel, 2019.

⁵ R. Andres Castaneda Aguilar, Carolina Diaz-Bonilla, Tony Fujs *et al.*, "September 2022 global poverty update from the World Bank; 2017 PPPs and new date for India", World Bank Blogs, 14 September 2022,

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/september-2022-global-poverty-update-world-bank-2017-ppps-and-new-data-india>

In addition to class and caste inequality we can also add gender inequality (according to the NFHS, over 30% of Indian women find it normal that a man can beat his wife) and strong regional inequality. Central-eastern India, with states that have remained fairly forested and “tribal” such as Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh, is the main pocket of poverty, whereas Kerala, in the far southwest, has a good level of development. The social disparities transcend the spatial disparities, however, as prominent people and rich politicians live in poor regions, whilst the so-called “rich” metropolises are home to many poor immigrants and slum dwellers. This reality unfolds in an extremely harsh, hierarchical and, at times, cynical social framework, in which there is very little institutional social security (hence the reliance on family and caste structures) and considerable wage disparity (a university lecturer can earn fifteen times more than a cleaning lady).

Priority to national food security

“Food dilemma” is the name given to the situation where governments have a choice of two options: on the one hand, cheap imports to feed consumers but at the expense of sacrificing domestic agriculture; and on the other, protectionism that encourages producers but penalises consumers. India has refused to make up its mind: since the 1960s, the State has been helping both groups. To encourage farmers to invest in the increasingly intensive agriculture advocated by the “Green Revolution”,⁶ a floor price was set for an increasing number of crops. It is effective because, for rice, wheat and sugar cane at least, the public authorities agree to buy the production of any farmer who so desires. In 1965, the Food Corporation of India was launched to manage this apparatus. This federal body (and its equivalents in most Indian states) is responsible for purchasing from farmers. The State currently buys 40% of the rice and over 50% of the wheat marketed by farmers. Public stocks are then redistributed by train and lorry via the Public Distribution System (PDS) on journeys exceeding 1,500 kilometres on average. Designated shops then sell these stocks at subsidised prices, which vary from state to state and according to household income. Two-thirds of Indian families benefit from this system – in the State of Tamil Nadu, rice is even free (25 or even 30 kilos per month per household of up to five people). By helping to prevent overproduction crises and simultaneously supporting consumption, this system reflects the refusal to make a choice in the food dilemma, thus reconciling productivism and food justice.

Other associated systems

Some of the food grain collected by the State is also used to supply the Midday Meal Scheme, a programme of free school meals rolled out in State schools throughout India in 1997; Tamil Nadu had been a pioneer in this field since 1962. This programme, 40% financed by the states and 60% by New Delhi, was renamed PM-POSHAN in 2021 and is guaranteed by the National Food Security Act of 2013 (as is the PDS). Not only has it improved the nutritional status of children, but it is a key factor in encouraging attendance at school – even though parents send their child to school mainly at lunchtime. It also encourages social mixing even though many families refuse to have their children share their meals with schoolmates from too low a caste. Conflicts can also arise if the teacher-cook is Dalit, but in this case, parents who can afford it will often send their child to a private school.

⁶ This term, first used by the USAID administrator in 1968, refers to a policy of agricultural intensification through the joint use, in India, of improved varieties of seed, irrigation and chemical fertilisers.

Children, young mothers and pregnant women benefit from the Integrated Child Development Scheme launched in 1975 by the government with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank, via childcare centres (*anganwadi*) whose facilitators are, however, notoriously underpaid, which does not allow for the scheme to be well run. Incidentally, it is important to make sure that the effects of better access to food are not undermined by health problems: dysentery, for example, prevents optimal food absorption. Water quality is essential, which is why a UNICEF-backed National Rural Drinking Water Programme has been introduced in 2009 in fourteen states.⁷

These projects are just a few of the myriad federal or state-specific projects. Not all of them work perfectly, far from it. In general, they are less successful in areas that need them most, *i.e.* those with poor infrastructure and administration or where poverty or corruption prevail. This is also the case with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA). A legacy of the public “food for work” projects initiated reluctantly by the British during colonial famines and then continued in different forms, it guarantees 100 days of work per year for all rural families (repairing roads, constructing canals, etc.) paid at the minimum wage. It helps to relieve the pressure on the budget of beneficiary households during the off-season for agriculture and indirectly benefits everyone insofar as it pushes all rural wages up.

The many flaws in these systems

In some regions, however, NREGA does not work: either the funds are misappropriated or the wages are too low to discourage seasonal emigration. Generally speaking, the overview we have presented suffers from economic and social as well as environmental criticisms – in other words, the three pillars of sustainable development.

Firstly, from a budgetary point of view, the framework resulting from the Green Revolution is deemed to be too expensive by the liberals (subsidies for chemical fertilisers, cost of grain storage), even though in total it represents no more than 1% of gross domestic product. Even though the World Trade Organization tolerates this departure from liberalism in the name of the country’s food security, it feels that India should not take advantage of it to exploit its system for the purposes of exporting its stocks, although the country is a frequent exporter of wheat and the world’s largest exporter of rice. Secondly, from a social point of view, the system is often ineffective: too many poor households do not have access to it (troubled areas, recent slums, migrants without food cards). If India is exporting cereals, if the silos are full, is that not because so many stomachs are empty? One thing is certain: large quantities of wheat or rice are being misappropriated, despite the computerisation of the system which now incorporates the biometric identification of beneficiaries – a cause of further dysfunction rather than improvement. Lastly, and from an environmental point of view, by focusing on wheat, rice and sugar cane that are bought by the State at guaranteed prices, the Green Revolution has swept other less water and input-demanding yet nutritious crops, such as small grain cereals (finger millet, sorghum), under the carpet. Competition from PDS grain from the highly productive regions (Punjab) penalises the small-scale farmers in poorly irrigated regions. At the same time, the exporting regions suffer from soil and water-table salinisation and from agricultural prices that are not remunerative because of the production costs.

⁷ See, in this issue, the article by Julien Eyrard, “‘Clean India’: why the undeniable success of the *Swachh Bharat* Mission does not signal the end of open defecation”, pp. 56–65.

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This explains why, even in Punjab, the suicide rate among farmers is higher than the national average, a phenomenon that is not limited to the confines of cotton-rich Madhya Pradesh.

The Covid-19 crisis obviously did not help much either. In March 2020, a sudden and unplanned lockdown led to the exodus of ten million migrants desperately seeking to return to their home regions. More than a year after this first lockdown, a survey in rural Tamil Nadu (the Malnourished by Debt research project) still showed that 12% of villagers were going to bed hungry – despite the strengthening of the PDS which, in 2022, is still allocating 5kg of grain per household per month in addition to the pre-pandemic quotas.

Furthermore, social security benefits are increasingly being paid by bank transfer, whilst many households struggle to manage an account, if indeed they even have one. The discontent, however, is far from generalised, “yet it goes round!”, as Galileo may have said. The population is still generally attached to the system and would like to see it improve but not disappear. This explains the paradox of the major farmers’ protest around Delhi in 2020/2021, which succeeded in repealing three federal laws further liberalising agriculture. Only a minority of the protesters wanted a complete overhaul of the system that has created a conventional agriculture that consumes a large amount of fossil fuels, industrial inputs and water. The prospect of a genuine agro-ecological approach, which would also include payment for environmental services produced by operators that are much more respectful of ecosystems,⁸ is therefore not yet on the cards. Instead, the vast majority of the protesters wanted to strengthen the system that emerged from the Green Revolution, with higher guaranteed prices and subsidies for chemical inputs. For decades this system favoured the bastions of the Green Revolution in India (Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh), and it was precisely in these latter regions that the rebellion was born.

Reasons for hope

During the pandemic, the solidarity of caste or faith, and the social security provided by networks (kinship, neighbourhood but also clientelism which is synonymous with domination, corruption or favouritism) proved their necessity, if not their full effectiveness. Such social structures are not unique to India, however, and can be found in Africa, for example, a continent that is particularly well “covered” by humanitarian aid. It cannot therefore be said that these social solidarity mechanisms are a major cause of the weakness of international NGOs in India: this situation must be attributed to the policy of the State, or rather of the Indian states.

Even before the advent of the Hindu nationalist party in New Delhi, federal governments, regardless of their political colour, have always been wary of the inherent risks of the “foreign hand”. The Indian State, at both central and provincial state level, has preferred to gamble on its own social programmes and economic development to establish a semblance of food security. It must be noted, however, that this security has still not been achieved. So far, most of the population seems to be happy with it, preferring to gamble on improving the system rather than turning it upside down.

Yet an increasing number of initiatives are emerging in an attempt to provide alternatives, not to mention some, at times, violent movements (Naxalite guerrillas). With regard to the food issue, NGOs such as the

⁸ Frédéric Landy et Bruno Dorin, « L'État au secours de la transition agroécologique ? Le cas de l'Inde », *Mouvements*, n° 109, 2022/1, p. 94-106.

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Deccan Development Society are trying to promote short food supply chains through the use of wasteland by women to produce sorghum or legumes in an attempt to circumvent the PDS. Whilst “organic” agriculture has become compulsory in Himalayan States such as Sikkim, its effectiveness and export-focused approach is still open to debate. Other programmes based more on agro-ecology and food security, however, are taking shape; some are State-led, such as in Andhra Pradesh (Community-Managed Natural Farming), although most are local initiatives. Many farmers are not “organic” in the Western sense of the term (certification is expensive), but they want to farm naturally, without chemicals, if only to grow produce intended solely for their families. As for the consumers, even the poorest and the least educated are aware of the problems caused by industrial inputs or by cereals with a high glycaemic index such as rice – a factor in the instance of diabetes, especially if it is polished.⁹ A window of hope for a new revolution that really is “green” is therefore opening. That leaves the problem of the purchasing power of consumers, few of whom are able to buy expensive quality products, and the problem of the supply chains that need to be built to connect producers and consumers. In this respect, India is just an extreme case of the problems encountered elsewhere, including in Europe.

Translated from the French by Derek Scoins

Biography

Frédéric Landy • Lecturer in geography at the Université de Paris Nanterre (UMR LAVUE), he is a former director of the French Institute of Pondicherry, where he is still an Associated Researcher. He is also a member of the Centre for South Asian Studies (CEIAS). Among other works, Frédéric is the author of *Un milliard à nourrir. Grain, territoire et politiques en Inde* (Belin, 2006) and (with Aurélie Varrel) *L’Inde. Du développement à l’émergence* (Armand Colin, 2015). A specialist in agricultural, rural and environmental issues in India, he is currently taking part in the PATAMIL project funded by the Centre-Val de Loire region. This project is building a regional food project [Projet alimentaire territorial or PAT] around Pondicherry, in conjunction with other PATs established in the Centre-Val de Loire region.

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⁹ Removing the husk around the grain increases the carbohydrate level.