

## Seeds, Scarcity and Coercion

This essay looks at a period of agricultural ingenuity known as the ‘Green Revolution’ and at the same time, the totalitarian push to forcefully limit reproduction in India. The purpose of this article is not to endorse any agricultural methods of the Green Revolution nor its leaders per se, but to affirm that person-centered solutions can and do creatively meet the world’s needs.

In 1944, agronomist and plant pathologist Dr. Norman Borlaug joined the Rockefeller Foundation on a project in Mexico, focusing on soil development, plant pathology, maize and wheat production. The work was tedious and back-breaking, checking each individual plant for signs of rust: a plant disease caused by parasitic fungi. But after many trials and errors, Borlaug and his team successfully bred over 6,000 varieties of disease-resistant wheat. When the project began, the country was importing sixty percent of its wheat. By 1956, Mexico became self-sufficient. By 1963, Mexico was not only a self-sufficient wheat producer but an exporter.

In a move set in motion by renowned plant geneticist Dr. Monkombu Sambasivan Swaminathan, Borlaug was invited to visit India in 1963. At the time, alarmist concerns about India’s growing population continued to gather momentum. US President Lyndon B. Johnson refused food aid to India until it agreed to incentivize sterilization.<sup>68</sup>

In 1965 population control emissary, Paul Ehrlich and his family took their infamous cab ride in Delhi: “People eating, people washing... People, people, people, people.”<sup>69</sup> (It is of note that the population of Delhi was about 2.8 million, and the population of Paris was about 8 million<sup>70</sup> at the time and there are few published expressions of alarm how “alive with people” the streets of Paris were.) The experience only cemented Ehrlich’s belief that population control must be enforced: “by compulsion, if voluntary methods fail.”<sup>71</sup> Ehrlich even brought up the idea of adding “temporary sterilants to the water supply or staple foods” and supported “government mandated sterilization”<sup>72</sup>.

Borlaug and Swaminathan continued their work with local farmers and by 1968, India’s yield had grown so much that schools had to be used as temporary granaries. By the time Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* saw its 1971 edition go to print, Norman Borlaug had already won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work revolutionizing agricultural productivity in the developing world.

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68 Connelly, Matthew. Controlling Passions. *The Wilson Quarterly* 32, no. 3. 2008.

69 Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. New York, *Ballantine Books*, 1968.

70 Mann, Charles: *The Book That Incited a World Wide Fear of Overpopulation*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2018, available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/book-incited-worldwide-fear-overpopulation-180967499/> (last visited Nov 28, 2022).

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*

India was self-sufficient in all grains by 1974.

And yet, in 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi\* invoked a National Emergency. One reason stated was a need for rapid economic development and upliftment of those in poverty. Once the Emergency was imposed, the Prime Minister had the right to amend the Constitution – and this gave the central government the right to execute family planning programs. The central government mobilized the state political leadership and took decisive actions, setting up camps and sterilization targets. In the capital city of Delhi access to basic amenities became dependent on proof of a sterilization certificate. For many of the city's poorest inhabitants, the choice was sterilization or homelessness. Western countries continued to back the sterilization program; during the Emergency, World Bank head Robert McNamara remarked, "At long last, India is moving to effectively address its population problem."<sup>73</sup>

In 1994, the United Nations Environment Program made a joint award of its prestigious Sasakawa Prize to Monkombu Sambasivan Swaminathan and Paul Ehrlich. Had it escaped the judges' notice that Ehrlich had made numerous false predictions and undermined the very work of Swaminathan? When asked about sharing the award with Ehrlich, Swaminathan only laughed and said, "it puzzled me"<sup>74</sup>.

Today, despite population increase from 1975, global hunger is still on the decline. According to the UN, the global percentage of undernourished people has fallen to 8.9 percent. There is no lack of food, only a surplus of corrupt interests getting in the way of just distribution.

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\* No relation to Mahatma Gandhi.

73 Matthew Connelly, *Population and Development Review*. Vol. 32, No. 4. December 2006.

74 Gardner, *Future Babble: Why Expert Predictions Fail – And Why We Believe Them Anyway*, Random House, 2010.