

Food in post-independence India

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I'm old enough that when I was a child, I had to clean my plate because there were starving children in India. The country had always had famines, like most of the rest of the world before the end of the 19th century. Some were truly horrific, like the Bengal famine of 1769. By some estimates, around a third of the population of Bengal starved to death in a famine made much worse by the East India Company's disregard for Bengal's traditional agriculture and its people.

In this episode, I spoke to Benjamin Siegel about his book *Hungry Nation: Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India*.

His starting point is the Bengal famine of 1943 rather than the 1770s. Not quite as disastrous in terms of lives lost, but plenty bad enough and not helped by the British administration and its wartime policies, which gave Indian nationalists yet another reason to push for independence. They would treat their citizens properly. So what did they have to offer?

Benjamin Siegel: Essentially they were claiming, “Look, the difference is going to be is that we're going to plan for food.” That was the word, planning. Where the British government thought of food – basically started in the 19, in the teens, in the 1920s they started thinking about nutrition – and that was the idea that could suture together ideas of agricultural productivity and a laboring workforce. It was tied into ideas of industrialization. It wasn't planned. It wasn't the organization there; but Indian thinkers in the '30s, the '40s were starting to think about planning.

What does it mean to put a food plan forward? They were working against real material constraints. There were bad seeds. There was defective land. There was poor land organization, but the idea was that they would plan and the Imperial government had not planned. The promises that were being made in the '40s were morally loud and specific. They weren't always concrete. They were taking

shape in that period, and when they got the keys to the car, it turned out that this was a lot harder than they thought.

Jeremy: What was their first response when faced with hunger among what are now their own people?

Benjamin: There were two test cases that we can look at. The first came immediately after independence and partition with the feeding of refugees, and that actually gave Indian bureaucrats room to be optimistic. There was a lot of planning about how to feed refugees, how to take care of their immediate food needs, and even how to think about resettling agricultural laborers and farmers, particularly in Punjab, less so in Bengal, and that actually was something of a success story.

Refugees got fed, they got resettled in Punjab. There were some really savvy bureaucrats who had been trained really in the best traditions of the Indian Civil Service, and they got to work, meeting an emergency situation and also dealing with some of the thornier diplomatic questions of how would food move back and forth between India and the new state of Pakistan, and Pakistan had basically, almost all of India's arable land. India was left with a much lesser share of good agricultural land.

That was the first test case, and I think India passed it, if not with flying colors, then they did remarkably well given that it was all being put together on the fly. The thornier moment came about four years after independence in 1951 with the first – I won't call it a famine – but the first series of acute food shortages in North India that looked like it was going to be basically a repeat of what had happened in 1943. The government in this moment was really caught empty-handed.

They didn't have a lot to offer. They had programs like the Grow More Food Program, which was essentially Stakhanovite. It said we're going to hew more food out of nothing. We're going to basically buy inputs on the cheap. The hope was that farmers could simply produce more and people could simply consume less and that didn't work very well. This was probably the moment when Indian bureaucrats and politicians really began to realize that they didn't have anything different to offer in this moment.

Jeremy: Grow more food, and just this idea of skipping a meal, missing a meal? Maybe I've got the wrong picture, but were a lot of Indians in a position to miss a meal? Were most Indians getting three meals a day that they could skip one?

Benjamin: Absolutely not. It's hard to speak of an average Indian citizen in this moment. You would have urban citizens, consumers who were eating in restaurants who had access to some amount of abundance. You had rural producers, rural laborers who really were not getting a lot to eat. It usually wasn't three square meals a day. It was usually framed as two square meals a day, but no.

The numbers are really hard, but what we can say anecdotally and through everything that I've read, it's clear that Indians were not getting enough to eat and certainly not enough to miss a meal or to skip a meal. This was an idea that was promulgated and mostly by aspirational urban politicians, often their spouses, their wives, who wanted an act that was symbolically resonant, that felt patriotic but essentially did nothing. It was symbolic politics of the first order, and the idea of missing a meal was not going to do anyone any real good.

Jeremy: One of the great problems that India seems to have been facing in this period in the '50s was that they were heavily dependent on imports of wheat and rice. How does skipping a meal help to bring in more wheat and rice?

Benjamin: Well, it didn't directly. India was wedded in the 1950s and the 1960s to the promise of rapid industrialization. Every dollar you spent importing rice or importing wheat – and India was importing a lot of both of those commodities – was a dollar that you couldn't spend on industrialization. That was the functional logic there, and the numbers might've added up. There was an immense amount of India's foreign reserves that were being spent on rice and wheat imports, and that's not to say that there was always a direct trade-off. There were certainly other costs and there was a complicated basket of purchases, but the idea was if we can reduce, minimize, our consumption of these grains at a household level, we can do it at a state level. We can do it at a national level and free up cash for these more pressing needs.

Jeremy: Part of the policy as I understand it from your book is that instead of eating wheat and rice they were going to eat substitute foods, which could be bananas, could be sweet potatoes, could be

pulses, lentils, millets, small grains. How did the government go about promoting those things?

Benjamin: I think for people who think about food, this is always the part of the book that I think is the most exciting in some ways, because it plays with this premise: Is one calorie as good as another calorie? For nutritionists and scientists who had been working in India in the '20s and '30s, there was an idea that calories were fungible. That dietary preferences were just that, that they were preferences and that they could change. That a Pathan in North India could be convinced to eat rice and that a Tamil Indian from South India could be convinced to eat wheat or that anyone could be convinced to eat tapioca or millet or sorghum or any of these other lesser grains. In fact, there were some wartime successes in doing that.

During the second World War, particularly in what's now Kerala then was Travancore–Cochin, There were pretty successful wartime efforts to get people to eat substitute or subsidiary foods like tapioca on a short-term basis. That works during the wartime. During a later period, this was more fantasy, but it was a fantasy in which the state invested deeply. Starting in the late 1940s, a number of industrialists came up with the idea that in order to get Indian citizens to stop eating wheat and rice, that they would promote the consumption of substitute grains instead, and these were things like groundnuts. They were bananas. They were tubers of various forms. They were all of these starchy items that could make up a staple food, and they'd invested really heavily in this idea too.

On the one hand, they did things like, gave these out in ration depots and citizens were frustrated deeply when they came across them in their rations. They weren't that attractive to find when you were expecting wheat or rice. They tasked women in particular with making these changes, and elite urban women were dragged into an effort to serve as nutritionists or evangelists for the substitute or subsidiary grains. As I've written about, one of the ways they did this was they founded a restaurant chain. These were women who were often associated with the Indian National Congress. It was called Annapurna, it was named after a goddess of food that would basically showcase ... It was a test kitchen for substitute dishes.

You could go there and get a very cheap meal, and it became very chic for politicians to do their midday meals in the Annapurna

restaurant chain. It was not very far from parliament and it was a place where you could put your money where your mouth was, so to speak. This entered almost a level of farce though. These foods never really took off. There's wonderful recipe books from this period suggesting how to make chapatis out of various substitutes. For the most part, this didn't work at all.

Jeremy: The government doesn't really seem to have had any idea about how hard it would be either to create a national diet that somehow transcended the regional differences or about getting people to abandon these deeply rooted cultural preferences. Is that an elitist folly? Were they just out of touch?

Benjamin: They could have been out of touch, but I guess I'd read it a little bit more charitably. I have a lot of sympathy to what was being done in the '50s and '60s. In some ways, I think, and we're seeing this now, I think the Indian democratic experiment in the '50s and '60s is one of the most amazing human achievements that we've had. I think that the Nehruvian government was deeply invested in a couple of ideas.

One was the idea was that Indian citizens were going to be remade in the 1950s as really national citizens. This was evident in areas outside of food. I know we're on a food podcast, but allow me this two-second digression here, we saw it in language policy. There was the Nehruvian language policy that Indians would all learn three languages which functionally many do. You would learn your mother tongue, and you would speak that at home, or you would speak that in your state. You would learn Hindi and you would speak that at a national level. And you would learn English, and that would be the language that would continue to connect you to the world.

That was not ... It was fantasy, but I think it was well-motivated fantasy and it informed a lot of policy and ran up against a lot of obstacles. There was also the idea too that Indians would cease to ... That they would continue to belong to the regions that they came from, that ethnic, regional, religious identity would all be respected, integrated in different ways, but that there would be a national identity. The idea of a national diet was really compelling to that.

Now functionally, many Indians in cities in the '50s, '60s, '70s actually were coming to a national diet. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai have written about this for a long time. This idea that it would be a mix of

some Northern and Southern foods, that foods would start to transcend place, and you would see this Indian restaurant that there would be some pan-Indian diet that was recognizable to at least urban citizens. That was happening in some way, but as you said, this idea that preferences were mutable, that they could shift easily, that was fantasy. It was fantasy that didn't get them very far in the absence of other solutions.

Jeremy: Let's move forward to the 1960s and the Green Revolution, which was an unqualified success in terms of producing food. Why do you think India was such fertile ground for the package that represented the Green Revolution, which was better seeds, irrigation technology, fertilizer technology. Why was India the place where it really took off?

Benjamin: C Subramaniam is the food minister who is often credited with ushering in the Green Revolution in India. The phrase he always used to describe this phenomena is that international foundations, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, were knocking on an open door. That's always the phrase that he used. I think it's an accurate phrase. He was speaking about a particular political dynamic in the Indian bureaucracy that was very split at this moment. We have to go back just a little bit, the 1950s, early 1960s, particularly when Nehru was alive. This policy was really a Nehruvian Policy, though I think it's a widely shared, if not completely shared one.

The idea was that India needed agricultural productivity, but they could not sacrifice the idea of equity and no farmers could get that much further ahead of other farmers. No one should be given privileged access to fertilizer or better seeds. The best they could do would be land reform, but even that didn't work that well. Throughout the '50s, there was a real struggle between the majority of Congress politicians who believed equity should rule the day in agriculture, and those who said, "Wait, this is folly. You actually need to give people the raw material to develop better agriculture." Other politicians, even people within the Congress party were objecting strenuously to this.

There was the idea of, "Look, give some inputs, let some farmers go off, and let some farmers really prosper here." By the time Green Revolution technologies became apparent in India, this debate ... Nehru was dead, and this was a compelling idea that you could bring in inputs selectively. The Ford Foundation ushered in a pilot project.

What do you know? They did exceptionally well in these 10 districts too. There were policy makers at that point in time who said, "Look, let's open the floodgates here." There was a little bit of a stick at the same time too, which is that India was bearing down, particularly in '65 and '66, into a number of interlinked political and ecological crises.

There were a number of crop failures that were unexpected, a failed monsoon. India was desperate for assistance. I think it's a well-told story, but the Johnson administration in the United States used this opportunity to lean on India pretty harshly to adopt these, but there was a lot of receptiveness and the results were very quickly made plain.

Jeremy: It is interesting though that despite the success of the Green Revolution – India now exports wheat and rice I believe – there's still a real problem of undernourishment. India has one of the worst levels of food security in the world. The stunting of children under five is huge. There's hunger. There's also obesity. I know there are three times, four times more people than there were at the start of independence, but even so why is that? Why has India somehow both succeeded in changing its food policy and also changing its food environment, but also completely failed to deliver that?

Benjamin: Let me give the good news before the bad news. The good news is that India has not had a famine since independence. That really is a success story. We can give a little bit of credit to that, that there's not aggregate famine. I think that that really confounds the expectation of a lot of planners at independence. A lot of cynical, imperial bureaucrats, believing who said this is going to be a basket case.

A lot of economists in the '50s and '60s who were saying the same thing, and the population pessimists of the early '70s, like Paul Ehrlich, who looked at India and said, "This is a disaster waiting to happen." It hasn't been as bad as is that, but it is stark. The most prosperous corners of India are well-nourished and well-fed, and the poorest corners of India look worse than anything you see in Sub-Saharan Africa. That's very clear.

There's a real disconnect between the stated aims of many different Indian governments on the left and on the right, which have said, we need to tackle this – which is that they've made broad commitments

to health, to welfare, to access, to food – and actually some very slow moving bureaucracy and a very slow moving policy machine in India that tends to dis-incentivize efficiency, questions of how a supply chain should move, and also has allowed for a really distorted agricultural sector to take root.

India has really delayed making hard decisions about what its agricultural economy should look like. Lots of people have come in and have promised performance. Those range from people down the block at the Poverty Action Lab at MIT who were approaching it through randomized control trials and even Walmart, which tried to rationalize supply chains in hopes that they could make a dent in this problem too.

In all of these cases, they've come up against the Gordian knot of rural policy in India and agricultural policy in India, which is now playing out very dramatically in farmers' protests, but the short version of that story is I think that Indian agricultural policy lags around 30 years behind – maybe 40 years behind – what it needs to do in order to deliver adequate nutrition, which it certainly can provide to citizens who are outside of metros or who are in metros, but at the fringes of them.

Jeremy: I'm just wondering from your point of view, what explains the current farmers' demonstrations and how does the past 75 years or so of independence lead us to these demonstrations? What do they want and where are they going? Where's the country going?

Benjamin: These are big questions.

Jeremy: [laughter] I'm sorry.

Benjamin: Let me back up a little bit. Since really the 1980s – early 1980s, late 1970s – there's become a very clear dynamic in Indian agriculture, which is some Indian farmers have done exceptionally well and have made prosperous, good livings out of large farms with expensive inputs and they're able to produce a lot of high-value crops. Those are around the country, but they're particularly located in places like Punjab. On the other hand, you have the majority of Indian farmers who have basically been operating on really small fractured plots of land, usually not very good land, spending a lot, but not necessarily getting profits from the farming.

Farming is basically not a paying business for the vast majority of Indian farmers and I don't have the numbers off hand, but it's vastly skewed towards the latter group. Then you have farmers who are caught up in the middle. Farmers who are eking out a certain living, but also proudly they're seeing their children not wanting to follow in their path. Over the last 40 years or so there's also been the growth of what sometimes gets called the farmers' movement but I think it's a lot of different farmers' movements which have basically articulated different visions of what the rural agrarian world of the producers should look like in India.

Essentially they've lobbied for greater and greater concessions to the agricultural sector. Some of that has really distorted the agricultural economy really strongly. There's a lot of subsidies that pour into farms in direct and indirect ways in Punjab, but in UP and other states as well. Those are subsidies for water, for fertilizer, for irrigation, basically everything that you can think of.

The Modi government last year introduced three bills that would shake up the agricultural sector. I'll just say I'm very sympathetic to the idea of shaking it up but I think that fewer people in India should probably be farming. Those farms should be efficient up to global standards of efficiency and probably a lot of that fat does need to be trimmed. This is almost a classic Indian red tape story, where this is not a decision I necessarily take in the States or in Europe but I do think in India there's room here.

But the bills basically were not doing that. They were basically paving the way. I think many Indian farmers saw this for what it was, which was an effort to make certain types of foreign investment in the agricultural sector easier, and I don't think that those were moves that would benefit Indian farmers of basically any level. The farmers who showed up – and these are amazing protests to watch – they're really interesting, are moving in some ways. They are also some of India's most privileged farmers.

They are protesting against the removal of subsidies that probably should go. They're looking to hold onto some real economic privilege and to keep a really profitable agricultural sector alive. These are not the romantic small scale farmers necessarily who we want to picture, but often are wealthy, big farmers. They're coming out on the street, they're making a case about the agricultural sector, what it should

look like. I think they're right in pointing out that the agrarian interest needs attention and it needs care and that these are citizens who need a place in a changing Indian economy. They are probably also protecting economic interests that could be shaken up productively.

Jeremy: Okay. That's a very [laughter] thorough description of what's going on, but how do you think it'll play out? You said you thought India was maybe 30, 40 years behind global agricultural trends, and there's this funny thing going on in Europe, certainly less so in North America, where we are turning away a little bit from intensive industrial agriculture, maybe going back towards a more mixed, low intensity agriculture. This is very long winded of me.

We saw this partially when Eastern Europe opened up a bit that a lot of people in the west were disappointed that they seemed determined to repeat the mistakes we'd gone through and make their own mistakes. This is my long-winded way of saying, is India going to leapfrog some of the assumptions that have been driving agricultural policy towards efficiency – quote, unquote – and maybe get to a better state without going through a trough?

Benjamin: It would be nice to think that, I don't anticipate that being the case. My basic prediction is that these, I mean ... So one of the things complicating the farmers' protest right now, obviously, is COVID and that the way that it ... I mean, I think COVID is essentially going to break these up. It's a really desperate looking situation in India right now. I don't know whether that's going to be the matter of weeks or months or years, but I suspect that may deal something of a fatal blow to the heavy intensive organization that we saw in India last year.

As for the broader question, I don't think unless something drastic happens that ousts Modi's government or reconfigures it in some way, I suspect that these bills will take hold, that there will be greater ease for foreign multinationals to invest in Indian agriculture and to essentially make it look like California agriculture in many places. I don't think of that as a positive outcome. What I suspect is going to happen over the next 50 years or so is a mix of things.

There's going to be the intensification of large scale agriculture in productive areas and rural areas, unless there's really assertive social policy, I think are going to slide into further, as is often said, agrarian distress. I think that those are places where farming will essentially be

abandoned and folks will move to cities, looking for opportunities there. That's already been happening for 20 plus, 30 plus years, so I think that that trend is going to continue.

The only thing that I can see possibly changing that is that India's productive farming districts may be reaching the end of their cultivatable lives without massive restorative projects. This is blisteringly clear in places like Punjab where we're looking at couple degrees every ... A certain rising temperature every year that even smaller amount are going to see impacts. Aquifers in Punjab are basically running out. You can't bring that much water in. Again, these are not very efficient farms, so I'm not hugely optimistic here. [laughs]

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