

The Urban–Rural Divide and Food Sovereignty in India

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ABSTRACT

India is the second-largest nation in the world, with a population of 1.2 billion. As China rapidly urbanizes, India has become the last of the large nations where village life and traditional farm production survive. While weakened by neoliberal reforms, many government policies continue to support rural institutions. This article addresses the question: Could India become the most prominent exception to the trend that over the last century transformed the United States, Russia, Brazil, and most recently China, from rural to urban nations? If current trends continue, India could join many other nations in Asia and Africa that have shut the door on the possibility of alternative development scenarios that integrate urban and rural life, promote food sovereignty, and reduce their ecological footprints. However, if India's dynamic and diverse social movements have their way, another world may be possible.

Keywords: India, orientalism, urbanization, urban planning, food security, social movements

Metropolitan India and Orientalist Planning

Three of the 10 largest metropolises in the world are in India: Mumbai, Delhi, and Kolkata. Yet, only a small proportion of India's total population lives in these megacities; most Indians still live in cities with under a million population, towns, and villages. However, today, there are 42 cities with population under a million compared to only five in 1951 (Sankhe et al., 2010). In the long run, urban migration may be improving the living conditions for groups of impoverished farm workers who migrate, but it also makes them more dependent on the vagaries of the global marketplace. Most migrants live in poor neighborhoods with inadequate services, face food insecurity, and as urban land is redeveloped, they face continuing displacement. At the individual and household level, therefore, they

experience the consequences of dependent urbanization, the consistent historical and material factor shaping urban life throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. India and other postcolonial nations have unique and diverse histories, cultures, and geographies, but their development continues to depend, in varying degrees, on the leading centers of global capitalism, much as they did under colonialism.

Urban India is emerging as a poster case for orientalist urban planning – the way of thinking that sees the metropolis through the lens of the powerful economic and political forces in the world. Urban orientalism presents an oversimplified picture of life in the metropolis and magnifies some problems opportunistically to maximize control over land and people. The typical orientalist portrait of urban India today is one of chaotic cities with uncontrollable traffic, noise, and pollution. Three-wheeled vehicles and motor scooters with single-cycle engines clog the streets and sidewalks, while pedestrians and bicyclists skirt and often dart in and out of the motorized chaos. This is not a product of endogenous development but, contrary to the stereotype, a result of the “rational” planning model imposed on the complex patterns of human relations that evolved over centuries in the Indian village. This has produced what to Westerners appears as an irrational, disorderly, noisy, and unsanitary city.

Shocking narratives of dirt and disease yield orientalist solutions that impose even greater doses of the more “rational” Western order that only makes things worse: it brutally separates public and private space, sidewalks from roadways, front yards from sidewalks, public from private transportation, destroying the traditional integration of everyday life and replacing it with an urban territory of fragmented private enclaves. The ecological values of the village are absolutely and brutally relegated to the past and given no chance to thrive in the engineered and commodified urban future.

The orientalist theory and practice of urban planning is responsible for the “chaos” but planners claim that what is needed is more orientalist planning. Official urban planning continues to follow nineteenth- and twentieth-century British colonial traditions that reinforce the divisions within cities and the sharp divisions between urban and rural land use. Neoliberal urban policy is not a break with but a continuation of this trend. It reinforces the notion that economic development and progress require an unrestrained free market in production and consumption which is not to be encumbered by regulation or social spending.

Government policies have favored large-scale rural infrastructure projects, many promoted by the World Bank and financed by powerful

lenders, that displace rural producers in large numbers and make village and small town preservation difficult. Paradoxically, even as Western urban planning begins to incorporate food security and urban agriculture in its theory and practice (Kaufman, 2004), the current trends in India are producing greater food insecurity and cities that severely reduce the historic ties of Indians with the land. Planning for food is still mostly absent from urban planning. This raises the question of food sovereignty for India: Will the nation and its population, both urban and rural, gain greater control over the means of sustenance, or be increasingly subject to crises and dependent on global food monopolies?

India's Dependent Urbanization

The Indus Valley was the site of some of the earliest human settlements in the world, and before the onset of global urbanization in the nineteenth century, the Indian subcontinent had many important urban centers. During the century-and-a-half of British rule until Indian independence in 1947, India's largest urban centers grew as sites of British economic activity and political rule. They were the most important centers of political power but were separate from the vibrant indigenous, rural economy. The British first made Calcutta (now Kolkata) the center of colonial India, and then moved their capital to Delhi.¹ In recent decades, these colonial-era metros were joined in the top ranks by the Mumbai metropolitan region which, in 2010, housed over 20 million people (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2011). Mumbai is India's most important economic powerhouse, with a large and diverse industrial base and service sector, an important financial sector, and real estate matching some of the highest-value properties in Asia, Europe, and the United States. It is the fourth-largest metropolitan region in the world after Tokyo, Delhi, and São Paulo (*ibid.*).

In 2010, 152.1 million people – approximately 13 percent of India's population – lived in cities with over one million population (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2011; also, see Nath, 2007; Sivaramakrishnan, 2005). This is far less than the metropolitan portions of other large developing nations such as Brazil (41 percent) and China (20 percent), and developed Asian nations such as Japan (29 percent). India's rate of urban growth (1.2 percent between 2000 and 2010, ranked 35th in the world) is relatively low, compared to other former colonial nations (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2011). This may be related to the government's strong pro-rural policies in the period

immediately following independence. But it is also worth noting India's relatively recent break with direct colonial rule and the continuing role of feudal relations. Thus, most Latin American nations became formally independent by the mid-nineteenth century, a full 100 years before India, and today, Latin America is the most urbanized of former colonial regions.

Corresponding with a dramatic expansion in direct foreign investment in the Indian economy since the 1990s (Bajaj & Sengupta, 2009), however, urban growth rates have mushroomed.² Two major industrial centers expanded in the last two decades due to substantial investment in information technology (IT) – Bengaluru and Chennai. However, investment also grew in other economic sectors of these local economies and in all of the expanding metros. The average size of metropolitan regions in India is around three million, one of the largest averages of over-million cities in the world, though similar to the rest of Asia. This is no doubt related to the diversity in economic functions: single-function factory towns rarely grow into metropolitan regions unless they diversify economically, a rule that holds throughout Asia and the world.

Neoliberalism and Dependent Urbanization

In recent years, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have been giving greater priority to urban spending. This follows almost a half-century of their antiurban policies that looked askance at investment in urban infrastructure, often claiming that those investments would spur rural-to-urban migration and stimulate the demand for higher wages and social expenditures. The earlier generation of antiurban policies gave priority to investments in rural infrastructure – roads, dams, and irrigation systems – that promoted export-oriented resource extraction and extensive industrial agriculture. While these megaprojects continue, the new priority for global investors is access to large sectors of the more educated urban working class (for example, in the IT sector), which requires greater investments in urban infrastructure and services.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the Government of India began a gradual shift in economic policy in line with the World Bank's priorities. They embraced, though with many provisos, the leading tenets of neoliberalism: privatization, deregulation, contracting out services, and the down-loading of central government functions to weaker local governments. Government subsidies to rural areas were gradually reduced and services once financed by central government were made the responsibility of

local governments that raised revenues through partnerships with private firms. This gradual policy shift is formally acknowledged in India's most recent Five Year Plan (Government of India, 2007).³ Recent government programs to subsidize the rural labor force and sustain farm price supports serve as palliatives to buy social peace, support powerful local elites, and regulate immigration to urban areas, rather than a serious counterweight to national policies favoring neoliberal urbanization.

Neoliberal urbanization policy shapes the growing metropolitan regions to accommodate global investment. Land use policy and regulation is mostly passive, guaranteed not to interfere with the real estate and finance sectors as the leading forces in urban expansion and local revenue generation. Thus, for the first time, a real estate industry linking global and local capital is shaping India's metropolitan development. Neoliberal policies emphasize public–private partnerships that result in the expenditure of state funds for infrastructure development (including roads, mass transit, water and sewer systems) that serves economic sectors dominated by global investors. They include public programs to displace low-income neighborhoods in favor of profitable land development. They provide the conditions for the reproduction of the highest-value labor power and the growth of investment capital.

The imposition of neoliberal policies in India has been anything but linear and inevitable. The Indian state is a complex nexus of government bureaucracies, regional interests, powerful individuals, competing local economies, and conflicting ideologies. Interpretation and administration at the local level may differ substantially from the structural and legal skeletons established by executive and legislative authorities (Kumar, 2006). The continuing influence of hierarchical and informal relations within government, themselves influenced by both the feudal and colonial past, may contribute to divergent outcomes. However, there is also a growing sense that urbanization and free-market capitalism are inevitable and, to use the phrase coined by neoliberal pioneer and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, "There is no alternative."

A major instrument of neoliberal urbanization is the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). This program has allocated 50 billion rupees in low-cost financing to 63 local governments (Pallavi, 2009). About half of it is going into road building, and a significant portion also goes into "slum improvement," which in practice usually means the displacement of people with limited incomes in favor of profitable real estate and infrastructure development. For example,

in Delhi, “slum clearance” resulted in the demolition of 45,000 homes between 2004 and 2007. In a ruling supporting the displacement, India’s Supreme Court claimed that Delhi should be the “showpiece of the country” and poor people were encroaching on public land (Bhan, 2009). The JNNURM funds come with a set of conditions that include promotion of public–private partnerships (public money helps private investors), generation of local revenue (local taxes help pay off the loans), and the use of citizen participation (public discussions help legitimize unpopular programs).

Along with neoliberalization and deregulation came a boom in India’s urban real estate markets serving the extremely wealthy. In Mumbai, between 40 and 50 million square feet of residential construction is underway, most of it targeting the elite (Shefali, 2010). In 2005, a single Mumbai parcel – a vacant textile factory – sold for a record \$160 million (Kripalani & Shameen, 2005). While India’s real estate sector has been affected by the global credit crisis, even Bhopal, a city contaminated just 25 years ago by one of the most brutal industrial disasters in history, continues to experience tremendous real estate growth. In 2010, home sales in Bhopal went up by 42 percent (Bhuva, 2011). The growth of India’s real estate market is directly connected to the country’s dependent urbanization. It depends on global trends in construction and development and the continuing privatization of land, which was promoted by the World Bank’s 1991 structural adjustment program and has roots stretching back to the British Land Acquisition Act of 1894 (Shiva, 2011). The real estate boom is both a symptom and a cause of the rapid changes in land tenure that are taking place across the country, and is creating a crisis for India’s agricultural working class.

Orientalist Urban Planning Policy

The pattern of dependent urbanization that characterized India’s colonial period continued after independence in 1947. Even though the largest cities maintained their dominant economic and political positions, the socialist policies of the Indian government put a damper on any significant new urban development. The five-year economic plans attempted to distribute, more evenly, the capital flows to the states and cities. But powerful elites at the state level often retained their powers and were able to control both public and private capital. And as the nationalist policies instituted by Jawaharlal Nehru wore thin and neoliberal policies filled

the void, foreign capital began to flow freely to cities. In the 1990s, all major cities received injections of foreign direct investments, and several secondary cities mushroomed as well. Thus, India's urbanization became even more dependent.

Perhaps the most dramatic example today of dependent urbanization is the much-publicized growth of Bengaluru (Bangalore). Beginning in the 1990s, the city saw the dramatic growth in the IT sector (Heitzman, 2004). New industrial campuses sprouted throughout the city center and periphery. Jobs once located in the US were outsourced to Indian workers at a fraction of the US wages. Bengaluru has grown as a resource city – a city that serves as a resource for the command and control centers of global capital (Pani, 2009). Investments in the IT sector were attracted to the city's highly educated labor force that was developed at Indian expense. The city was home to the Indian Institute of Science and a host of other high-level technical and research institutions, which was a further incentive.

While IT investments have sprouted in many other cities, particularly Chennai, the kind of physical, economic, and social development occurring in Bengaluru is emblematic of the neoliberal model of urban planning. Bengaluru has traditionally been known as India's "Green City" because of its enormous tree canopy, wide boulevards, and lakes and wetlands. It once evoked comparisons to Paris and London. Today, the traditional oriental city is being transformed into the contemporary oriental city, fragmented by private real estate development and reorganized under neoliberal urban policies. It is becoming a city of private enclaves – shopping malls, commercial districts, gated residential communities, IT campuses – along with the previously existing enclaves for research and education. While the planning principles guiding official urban development in Bengaluru are similar to those in effect in other major Indian metropolises, the changes they are bringing are most dramatic there.

The private real estate market is the main force shaping Bengaluru. The more densely developed districts are being cut up for malls and commercial strips. Lakes and wetlands are being filled. And the traditional multi-use street space shared by pedestrians, merchants, bicyclists, auto rickshaws, and scooters is slowly giving way to the monopoly of the car. This policy has prepared the way for massive car ownership, perhaps led by the new Tata Nano, a small car built in India that claims to be the cheapest in the world. This could have the same revolutionary impact on urban life that the Model T Ford once had in the US (Angotti, 2009).

While real estate rules, public infrastructure and services are developed to serve it. To link the separated public and private enclaves, a new transportation system is needed. Priority is given to the transportation needs of the most active sector of the economy, the IT sector, and its relatively privileged (in the Indian context) labor force. The priority mode of transportation is now the private automobile. Bengaluru's wide boulevards are being re-engineered for higher speeds, often resulting in the removal of mature trees and intense protests by environmental and civic groups; the city's streets and boulevards are becoming highways.

This private transformation of Bengaluru and other Indian cities could not occur without the support of public programs, infrastructure, and services. The JNNURM, mentioned previously, is financing "slum clearance" that displaces existing neighborhoods in favor of upscale enclaves and new highway infrastructure. Residents of one neighborhood, Hosabala Nagar, are fighting the project and do not believe the promise that they will be the beneficiaries of replacement housing (Kozhisseri, 2009). Bengaluru is also building a new mass transit system similar to those in other Indian cities. The elevated rail system in Bengaluru will serve only 5–10 percent of total travel demand, mostly to the newly emerging business and elite districts.

As with the urban planning models developed in Europe and the US, the Indian approach brutally excises the ideas, traditions, forms, and soul of life in rural India. The green and the gardens are now aesthetic options for the well-to-do, not essential elements of everyday life. There is no place for food production, only mass consumption. While peri-urban agriculture survives barely at the margins, wherever land has not been blacktopped or built on, the new city is rising as a center of consumption for the goods of industrial agriculture.

The Crisis of Agriculture and the Village

Over 58 percent of India's labor force was engaged in agriculture at the time of the 2001 census: 31.7 percent lived on and cultivated the land and another 26.5 percent worked as agricultural laborers.⁴ This population has sustained the Indian village, town, and non-metropolitan cities. The agricultural labor force has dropped from around 80 percent at the time of independence but is still significant. If we look at the composition of the rural workforce alone, in 2005, 70 percent worked in agriculture (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, p. 4). The significance of this high proportion

of labor in agriculture is tempered by the low rate of participation in the labor force (in 2001, 39.1 percent, and only 25.6 percent among women). The statistics do not reveal the true role of the “informal economy” in both urban and rural areas, but do underline the continuing importance of agricultural production for the majority of India’s population. The continuing high participation of the labor force in agriculture may be contrasted with the declining share of agriculture in the gross domestic product (GDP). In 1973, agriculture contributed 41 percent of GDP and in 2005, that proportion had been cut in half, to 20 percent (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, p. 5).

Another indicator of the crisis in agriculture is the dramatic decline in the size of the average agricultural holding. Between 1961 and 2003, the average holding plunged from 2.63 to 1.06 hectares, an average which also conceals the disproportionately large number of small holdings and a small number of very large ones (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, p. 7). This drastic change in the pattern of landholding is related to a number of factors: the subdivision of plots within families; sale of a significant amount of land to the small number of large owners; conversion of farmland to other uses; and the taking of prime land for dams, forestation, and other large-scale projects.

As a result of neoliberal policies, private investment in agriculture has grown much faster than public investment. In 1971, 60 percent of agricultural investments were private and by 2003, the proportion was 75 percent. Agricultural subsidies as a proportion of GDP have nevertheless grown, constituting mostly subsidies for fertilizers and food price supports, which disproportionately benefit the larger farmers (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, pp. 47–51).

These changes in the structure of agriculture have not resulted in higher overall productivity. Compared to other nations with more heavily industrialized agricultural sectors, India appears to be less productive. According to the World Bank, value added per worker in India is \$392 compared to \$3,126 in Brazil, \$23,967 in Italy, and \$41,797 in the US. This low productivity is not mainly a reflection of a scarcity in arable land; India has 15 hectares of arable land per 100 population compared to 13 hectares in Italy and 10 hectares in the United Kingdom, though another large developing nation, Brazil, has 32 hectares per 100 population (World Bank, 2008).

The growing inequities in rural India follow inequities in the implementation of land reform legislation. After independence, India enacted

land reforms that aimed to limit the size of large holdings, redistribute land, eliminate exploitative sharecropping, and abolish powerful usurers and intermediaries (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, pp. 3–43). They focused on reducing the power of the zamindar – large landlords who the British relied on to collect taxes from the peasants. Initially, the considerable economic and political power of a government that formally adopted central economic planning helped to stabilize small-scale agriculture through the provision of financial and technical assistance. However, the reforms were implemented unevenly by state governments in which landed elites had varying degrees of influence and control. The Chinese Revolution in 1949, and later the Vietnamese Revolution, also enacted vigorous agrarian reforms that reinforced rural development and gave a lesser priority to urban development.⁵ Unlike China and Vietnam, however, Indian independence, in many areas, did not alter private property or the hegemony of the urban elites and upper castes who had economic and cultural ties to the former colonial power, and in parts of the country, the power of large landholders was left intact.

Strong support by the Indian government for agriculture in the decades after independence helped to sustain the village economy and the political base supporting the ruling Congress party. At the same time, however, government investments in rural infrastructure contributed to distress among farmers and exacerbated the problems facing villages and towns. The most damaging of the investments were in dams. In the span of 62 years, the government launched 4,291 large dam projects and displaced between 21 and 56 million people (there is no official data about the number displaced or where they went) (D’Azario, 2009; Sainath, 1996, p. 71). Once an area is designated for dam construction, no government investment occurs in that area, even if construction is delayed or prolonged. This encourages greater distress and migration. Those without land rarely get compensation and when they do, it is limited. Forty percent of displaced people are members of tribes, who account for only 8 percent of the population (Sainath, 1996, p. 73). In the era of neoliberalism, private companies are often the main developers and they are less vulnerable to appeals by villagers. As mentioned later on, the vibrant struggles against dam construction have brought to light alternative and sustainable strategies for rural development.

Most of the regions that have the highest levels of participation in agricultural production are the poorest in terms of gross income.⁶ Poverty is most deeply felt by those who live in rural areas but own no land. The

relationship between agricultural production and poverty is borne out in the sharply declining per capita incomes of agricultural workers compared to other sectors of the economy (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, p. 28).

Neoliberal reforms in agricultural policy have led to an overall decline in loans and subsidies to farmers (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, pp. 20–22), and an increase in spending for research and development and extension spending, which tend to favor expansion of large-scale industrial agriculture. This is leading to the privatization of the seed industry, making more farmers dependent on industrially produced seeds, and experimentation with genetically modified foods that would further increase the dependency of rural producers on corporate suppliers (Pal, 2009). Chemical fertilizers and insecticides have already caused extensive pollution of the land and ground water, and poorly designed irrigation systems increase soil erosion. The environmental and public health problems of industrial agriculture are growing along with the economic problems for farmers.

Urban Food Insecurity

In the large metropolitan regions of India, food production tends to be limited in scale and mostly confined to peri-urban areas that have not yet been consumed by real estate speculation. Household gardens and livestock are common wherever land is available, but they are largely used to supplement a food supply that is generally provided through wholesale markets. These markets still include fresh produce, most of it brought from within the local region, but they are gradually giving way to fast food, processed and packaged goods, and goods produced far away in the industrial food system. This contributes to the new urban epidemics of diabetes and obesity. There are currently over 35 million diabetics in India, and this is predicted to rise to 75 million by 2026 (Kleinfeld, 2006, p. 1). The World Health Organization warns that in India's urban areas, obesity rates approach 40 percent (Cecchini, Sassi, Lauer, Lee, Guajardo-Barron, & Chisholm, 2010).

One of the consequences of the uneven development of Indian capitalism and the uneven implementation of reforms by Indian states is a wide divergence in levels of food insecurity. A recent study found significant problems in 16 states; using a composite index, three of the poorest states were rated “extremely insecure”: Jharkhand, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh. The most secure included Kerala, Punjab, and Himachal Pradesh (M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, 2001). The proportion of poor and

undernourished people in India has grown since the 1980s. One source claims that while the number of poor people doubled, the number of undernourished farmers increased nearly sixfold (Reddy & Mishra, 2009, p. 29).

The case of the southern state of Kerala, one of the most food secure, is worth noting. Kerala's food production is integrated throughout its unique urban and rural settlement structure, often characterized as rural–urban sprawl. The state extends along the western coast of India, and is characterized by many gated household plots, a pattern originally established by migrants from northern India fleeing economic hardships. This sprawl has helped sustain household food production. There are 4.32 million home gardens totalling 1.33 million hectares. Census data report that only 7 percent of all workers cultivate the land ('Management of Ecology', n.d.), so household food production is an important supplement in the food system and enhances food security in times of scarcity and economic recession. Low-density sprawl in Kerala, while increasing transportation time and costs, may also have some environmental and health benefits. Kerala's relative prosperity is also reflected in long life expectancy, high literacy, and low infant mortality. Radical social reforms in Kerala have helped to protect the population from crises of insecurity (Franke & Chasin, 1999).

Kerala has the second-highest population density among Indian states and its agricultural holdings are relatively small (0.24 hectares on average). This calls into question the proposition that higher densities are incompatible with agricultural production and food security. Also, Kerala's small plots and gardens tend to grow multiple species for home consumption, a practice that is more likely to sequester carbon than monocultures; this helps explain the relatively small carbon footprint in Kerala compared to other Indian states ('Management of Ecology,' n.d.). Nevertheless, the relative prosperity of Kerala may be changing as global capital sweeps the state to turn the lengthy coastline into a major tourist destination and take advantage of the highly educated labor force.⁷

People's Struggles: Looking to the Future with Gandhi

Current trends are leading to the rapid growth of large metropolitan regions and the transformation of India from a diverse nation of villages, towns, regions, religions, cultures, and languages toward a homogenized nation integrated in the postcolonial Anglo-Saxon empire. This is much

more than a belated modernization, and it is resulting in the destruction of sustainable production and consumption practices, with all their problems and contradictions, and replacing them with new forms of dependent development. Sixty years after independence, India is gradually falling into the arms of global capitalism. This is the backdrop for the current crises of food sovereignty, Indian farm communities, and food insecurity.

Fortunately, however, there are powerful counter-trends. The overall rate of urban growth in small cities remains relatively low and agricultural production is still a major source of economic livelihood despite sharp regional differences and inequalities. More importantly, however, the revolutionary spirit that animated the struggle for independence survives in the diverse social movements that are contesting the destruction of the village, in both its material and spiritual forms, the displacement of people, and environmental degradation. They include the movements to protect local agriculture and the farmers from giant infrastructure projects, industrialized agriculture, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Today, many in these movements are creating new systems of thought and practice (Visvanath, 2007), as they rediscover the seeds of sustainable living that Mahatma Gandhi helped to plant during the struggle for independence.

At the time of India's independence, almost the entire population of the nation lived in rural areas and small towns. The largest cities were the former British strongholds of Kolkata and Delhi. The leaders of the independence movement who came to power enjoyed a wide base of popular support in the villages and towns even if they themselves were prominent individuals from the urban elites. The rulers of independent India were modernizers to differing degrees, but they faced an overwhelmingly rural nation filled with deep suspicions of urban elites who seemed to have greater affinities with the English rulers. At the same time, the continuing influence of the caste system and feudal relations tended to reinforce local conservatism. Thus, the political space for any government stimulus for urbanization was limited and the demand for government action to improve rural life was intense.

Inspiration for the new government's program favoring investments in the countryside came from Mahatma Gandhi, whose earliest writings reinforced traditional values of local self-reliance and implicitly rejected dependent urbanization. In Gandhi's seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, we find a philosophical basis for India's policies promoting rural development (Gandhi, 1997). A re-reading of this seminal work, however, suggests

new approaches to the urbanization and food security problems of today.⁸ Gandhi's critique of Western civilization laid the basis for independence not simply as a political act, but a matter of liberation of both body and soul; not an act of expelling foreign rulers but of rejecting their "civilization." He begins with the individual as the basic unit of society, promoting self-reliance, village life, the local economy, and decentralization. According to Gandhi: "[India]...has 750,000 villages scattered over a vast area...The people are rooted in the soil, and the vast majority are living a hand-to-mouth life...Agriculture does not need revolutionary changes. The Indian peasant requires a supplementary industry..." (Gandhi, 1997, p. 65).

The given quote is from a longer response by Gandhi to charges that he was against technology. Far from being a Luddite, Gandhi favored what we might call today sustainable technology that did not threaten to throw people off their farms or put them out of work. His advocacy of *khadi*, locally produced cloth, over imported textiles was not a "Buy India" campaign but a rejection of the inevitability of the global marketplace and its dislocations. These were not abstract dreams but part of a popular resistance to British colonialism and the havoc reaped by its technology on India's local economies. His thinking reflected the *swadeshi* movement that arose in the early part of the twentieth century in Bengal; *swadeshi* is understood as the soul of *swaraj*, and *swaraj* means self-reliance.

Gandhi's views, put forth in *Hind Swaraj*, included a passionate belief in the need for bottom-up democracy in post-independence India, where individual freedom is linked to community power: "Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs..." (Gandhi, 1910). Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and the central political figure in post-independence India, rejected Gandhi's radical approach and became a major advocate for modernization and scientific strategies of development (Das, 1961). In 1945, Nehru explicitly rejected Gandhi's approach in *Hind Swaraj*. But he could not help but be influenced by Gandhi and the very practical political fact that most Indians lived in small towns and rural areas. Thus, Nehru stated that, 'Personally I hope that heavy or light industries should all be decentralized as far as possible...' (Gandhi, 1910). He also saw the need to restrict urban growth: "Many of the present overgrown cities have developed evils which are deplorable. Probably we have to discourage this overgrowth and at the

same time encourage the village to approximate more to the culture of the town” (Gandhi, 1910).

Nehru and Gandhi perhaps understood with prescience the importance of rural life to India’s urban development, and the importance of urban India to rural life. Without an integrated, holistic approach to human development, the metropolis would develop and be divorced from the land and its productive capacity, a dependent metropolis that makes development of the independent village as impossible as the integration of nature, and food production, with the city. In parts of rural India today, for example, food is plentiful and locally produced, nature is still worshiped as a god, and self-built mud houses last four times as long as new concrete structures (Pallavi, 2009). This is not to say, however, that village life is idyllic, or free from serious economic and environmental problems, or to deny the extreme deprivations in most rural areas. To do so would be to essentialize and orientalize. Our purpose is instead to argue against the orientalist prejudices that consider rural life to be, by definition, backward.

Gandhi’s views on food and health were also related to *swaraj* (that is, self-reliance). His critique of Western medicine came long before the urban epidemics of obesity, diabetes, and asthma, and the notoriously ineffective system of public health promoted at the global center of neoliberalism, the US, where huge expenditures fail to yield better health outcomes and food-related illnesses are on the rise. Gandhi criticized Western food and medicine as a set of practices that both encouraged and claimed to combat food-related problems. The business of doctors, he said:

...is really to rid the body of diseases that may afflict it. How do these diseases arise? Surely by our negligence or indulgence. I overeat, I have indigestion, I go to a doctor, he gives me medicine, I am cured. I overeat again, and I take his pills again. Had I not taken the pills in the first instance, I would have suffered the punishment deserved by me, and I would not have overeaten again. The doctor intervened and helped me to indulge myself. (Gandhi, 1910)

The continuing strength of ayurvedic and other holistic systems of health care in India is an indication that holistic approaches are surviving in contention with the linear, reductionist, cause–effect practices that dominate in Western medicine. Most Indians are still vegetarians and have yet to suffer the health consequences of consuming industrial beef and livestock. However, Indians are now learning to reject traditional ways and have taken to fast food and fast medicines in a big way, even

while Western tourists visiting India consume idealized, sanitized, and orientalist interpretations of the Indian village. According to Raj Patel (2008), India's newfound dependency on industrial monocultures in the food system has resulted in one of the highest rates of type 2 diabetes in the world.

While Gandhi may well have failed to recognize some of the benefits of Western medicine and technology, his cautionary approach suggests how India might avoid dependence on the addictive medicines of the drug monopolies, the predations of the Green Revolution engendered by the industrial food conglomerates, and the epidemics like obesity, hunger, and malnutrition that they foster.

Grassroots Resistance

The powerful impulses toward local and national independence reflected in Gandhi's philosophy and political work have re-emerged in the extensive grassroots efforts to resist the "development" projects promoted in the neoliberal agenda for rural and urban areas. These movements, often dispersed and fragmented, nonetheless represent a serious obstacle to neoliberal and dependent urbanization.⁹

The first and most important aspect of the popular movements is their resistance against displacement in both rural and urban areas. The largest struggles against displacement in rural areas were triggered by government and private measures to implement the Green Revolution. These include plans for dams and irrigation systems designed to appropriate water for both industrialized agriculture and urban development. They include resistance to reforestation projects that would replace native forest with commercially attractive monocultures, for example, the eucalyptus groves planted with World Bank support that bankrupted local producers (Sainath, 1996).

Vandana Shiva has played a role in, and written eloquently about, many of these struggles and highlighted the central role of women (Shiva, 1991, 2000, 2002). The struggles have slowed down considerably the government's ambitious plans to control rural land. They led to significant changes in law that opened up access by local groups and individuals to India's complex and arcane postcolonial bureaucracy, such as the 2005 Right to Information Act (Pande & Singh, 2007). In addition, over the decades, farmers have managed to sustain influence as a political bloc on the formulation of national and state-wide agricultural policy (Varshney, 1998).

The struggles against displacement include the urban struggles against government-sponsored redevelopment programs that bulldoze working-class neighborhoods to make way for new real estate development and the highway infrastructure to serve it. In Delhi alone, at least 45,000 homes were demolished between 2004 and 2007, and fewer than 25 percent of displaced households received new homes (Bhan, 2009); in many cities, no new housing is provided for displaced people. Urban environmental movements in the large metropolitan areas are also protesting the destruction of the natural environment to create new cities that emulate the modern concrete and asphalt paradises of the developed nations. These protests in cities from Delhi to Bengaluru include challenges to roadway expansion and the destruction of public space, the displacement of older neighborhoods, and the damage to the environment wrought by new urban infrastructure. In the larger cities, the middle class appears to dominate the most prominent activist organizations, and the Gandhian spirit contends with Victorian and Western notions of environmental sanitation and planning (Harriss, 2006).

Perhaps one of the most widely publicized rural struggles that also had strong links to urban movements and issues was the successful defeat, in 2008, of a proposal to build an automobile factory in a fertile rice-producing area of West Bengal. The Tata factory was to have produced the Nano, heralded as a popular mass-produced economy car. The proposed factory spurred fears among villagers that the industrialization of the region would threaten small-scale agricultural production (itself a product of a relatively successful agrarian reform) and food security (Sengupta, 2008). It highlighted growing conflicts within the popular movements and the declining hegemony of the traditional Left in West Bengal.

One of the most notable of many support organizations for the local movements is the People's Science Movement (Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad [KSSP]), which started in 1962 and now has some 40,000 members, and is a central element in the All-India People's Science Network. This grassroots network brings together scientists, educators, and activists and provides information about the environment, energy, and public health. Its activists have contributed to the movements to save the forests and bring to environmental issues an approach that incorporates social justice. They produce and disseminate environmental information through workshops, publications, and other media that are accessible to a wide audience. They are one among many local movements that have

alternately criticized and allied with the political parties and government agencies supporting independent development.

One of the most powerful insurgent movements spanning both urban and rural areas emerged in the struggle for food security – the struggles against GMOs (the most recent addition to the menu of the Green Revolution). Here again, Vandana Shiva has played an important role in spreading awareness of the way the introduction of GMOs in India threatens food security (Shiva, 2000). Shiva demonstrates how genetically modified mustard seeds were threatening public health and gives examples of local, sustainable alternatives promoted by organized farmers and consumers.

GMOs are reinforcing the monocultures of global agribusiness – soy and corn in particular – and undermining the diversity of local species. A small number of multinational food conglomerates have introduced genetically modified seeds to which they own the patents. This creates an even greater degree of economic dependency as farmers give up the traditional practice of saving their own seeds and must buy seeds after every harvest. This leads to greater reliance on credit, which itself is a major cause of bankruptcy, despair, and suicides in the countryside. Anti-GMO activists have spearheaded legal efforts to prevent global corporations from appropriating and monopolizing native seeds, and thus colonizing the very building blocks of life and local culture (Randeria, 2007). The Indian government was forced to establish a committee that must approve new genetically modified products before they are introduced in the market (the committee recently postponed a decision to approve BT brinjal, or eggplant, which would likely force out of the market the scores of local eggplant varieties). But the government allows imported packaged products and many local processed foods that contain GMOs since there are no labeling requirements.

In the end, food security is a land issue. Land reform in India after independence was far from complete and the agenda for genuine reform is still a long one (Sethi, 2006). The fundamental question remains: What is the relationship of people with land in urban and rural areas? Who controls the land – the people who live on it and depend on it for sustenance or those who alienate it as property? In postcolonial societies, this is critical to the struggle for national independence, but it is also central to the survival and independence of each individual and household and, in India, to *Hind Swaraj*.

In India, as elsewhere, the neoliberal agenda may not be quite so new (Randeria, 2007). Instead, it appears to reflect a resurgence of classical

liberalism after the hiatus of Keynesian capitalism. In India, the new public–private partnerships that undermine local self-reliance recall similar arrangements that were hallmarks of the British colonial period. According to Randeria (2007, p. 71):

Like the transnational corporations of the contemporary world, the British East India Company, which began the process of introducing British law into India prior to its becoming a Crown colony, was a private trading company. The relationship between the state and private trading companies in European countries has been unclearly delineated in the past and present. Powerful, partly autonomous from the state and seeking to escape from government control and metropolitan law, private trading companies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like their transnational counterparts today, always relied on their respective governments to further their interests abroad.

As Arundhati Roy (2006, pp. 281–282) points out, the legacy of British imperialism remains:

...India's freedom struggle, though magnificent, was by no means revolutionary. The Indian elite stepped easily and elegantly into the shoes of the British imperialists. A deeply impoverished essentially feudal society became a modern, independent nation state. Even today, fifty-seven years on to the day, the truly vanquished still look upon the government as *mai-baap*, the parent and provider. The somewhat more radical, those who still have fire in their bellies, see it as *chor*, the thief, the snatcher-away of things.

In sum, orientalist theory and practice continue to dominate rural and urban areas, private and public life. But Gandhi's call for self-reliance should not be interpreted as nostalgia for village life. It might instead help inform the search for new ways forward as global climate change and widening inequalities force more of us to understand the past while seeking answers for the future. The majority of the world's population already lives in metropolitan areas and India is the largest rural nation. Can India chart a new course that integrates urban and rural, achieves independence, and establishes food sovereignty?

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NOTES

1. These two cities are now the first and third-largest cities in India. In 2010, Kolkata had an estimated population of 15.5 million, Mumbai had 20 million, and Delhi had 22 million (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2011).
2. Between 1991 and 2001, growth rates in the 10 largest metropolitan regions ranged from 20 to 85 percent, with the highest rates in medium-sized metros near the largest metropolitan regions. Delhi and Bengaluru also had high rates of growth, mostly at their peripheries (and at the expense of working farms), and all of the large metros had relatively low growth rates in the central cores (Pani, 2009; Sengupta, 2008).
3. The economic plans are holdovers from an earlier period in which India formally promoted a socialist orientation, but they are also one of many instruments in which the powerful and highly diverse state bureaucracy protects its access to funding and power.
4. The latest official census data available at the time this manuscript was completed was the 2001 census.
5. At the extreme end of the rural–urban policy continuum was the Khmer Rouge’s Kampuchea, which turned into a brutal, virulently anti-urban regime with disastrous consequences.
6. This includes, for example, Himachal Pradesh (65.3 percent), Nagaland (64.7 percent), Arunachal Pradesh (57.8 percent), and Rajasthan (55.3 percent). In Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa, a relatively large proportion of all those working in agriculture own no land – 48 percent, 40 percent, and 35 percent, respectively. Agriculture in Bihar is particularly precarious given the large proportion of small plots. Some of India’s more prosperous regions rely less on agriculture: Kerala (7 percent), Tamil Nadu (18.4 percent), and West Bengal (19.2 percent). In the middle of the distribution, we find two states that include relatively prosperous agricultural sectors, Maharashtra (28.7 percent) and Karnataka (29.2 percent), and one of the poorest, Bihar, which has many small plots (29.3 percent). Thus, the relationship between dependence on agriculture and levels of poverty is not necessarily systematic or uniform.
7. While Kerala is rightfully noted for some innovative and progressive social policies, especially in education and health care, rhetoric often obscures some

hard realities. The decentralized participatory process has not yet become hegemonic and the major political parties do not always respect it. Historical violence against *adivasi* peoples and social movements persists (see Bijoy & Raman, 2003; Mukundan & Bray, 2004).

8. Parallels to Gandhi's philosophy may be found in the *Ujamaa* philosophy of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (Nyerere, 1974).
9. It is impossible to describe and analyze here all the social movements in India. Instead, I will only suggest how they might help answer Gandhi's challenge. Clearly, most of the popular movements arise in opposition to government policies, since the state remains a powerful intermediary for private investors and an advocate of neoliberalism.

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