

Ignoramus Charles Rants in Delhi

by Ramtanu Maitra

One would expect that Charles Mountbatten (also known as Prince Charles), scion of the British monarchy that ruled India and brought about the death by starvation of more than 30 million Indians under its rule, would be booted off the podium when he delivered the Albert Howard Memorial Lecture in Delhi, in early October. To the shame of the socialites and the environmentalist NGO that organized this event, that didn't happen.

Instead, Charles, who never did an honest day's work in his highly unproductive life, told the anti-farming urbanites that India should substitute less-productive organic farming for modern agriculture, and ranted against the genetically mutated (GM) crops in use in India and elsewhere. He blamed GM crops as the prime reason why thousands of Indian farmers have committed suicide in recent years.

Charles the Ignoramus, told the Delhites that worldwide organic farming has proved to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the extent of 35%, both directly and indirectly. Not only would emissions from farm fields be reduced, but the energy used in production of chemical fertilizers and pesticides would also be saved to a considerable extent, he said. Energy would also be conserved if excessive farm mechanization were replaced by improved local sustainable technologies, he said.

This rant of Charles is nothing new, but what is disturbing, is that it was allowed to be carried out in India after what the British ruling class did to Indian agriculture throughout the first half of the 20th Century. Besides looting India's resources, its land was used by the British Raj to grow opium and indigo, destroying soil nutrition and starving millions to death, in order to fill British coffers and subvert other nations. Moreover, during the two World Wars, India's grain was shipped out to feed the British troops in distant lands, while starving the Indian farmers at home.

It is widely known in India that the British colonial rulers did not pursue an active policy of agricultural de-

velopment, despite making modest efforts to formulate a policy. One such effort was the appointment in 1926 of the Royal Commission on Agriculture, which made some recommendations for improving agriculture and promoting the welfare of the rural population. Most of the commission's recommendations were deferred, ostensibly because of the Great Depression of the 1930s. But the fact remains that at least 30 million Indians died of starvation under British rule, and at the time the British left, Indian agriculture was in shambles. Despite the delusion of India's Anglophiles, a flock large enough to fill another large nation, the failure of British policy was in fact a conscious policy, and what Charles is pushing now is the continuation of the same old policy, this time, under the pretext of global warming.

Fat Lies

In this new venture, Charles has hooked up with the American hoaxster, "Fat Albert" Gore. The *Sunday Telegraph* (Dec. 2, 2006) revealed that Charles held a private meeting at Highgrove, his country home, with Gore, the former U.S. Vice President, to discuss their shared passion for saving the environment. Charles is said by aides to be "totally committed" to the scheme in which companies will be urged to assess and reverse the damage they are doing to the environment. This duo is campaigning to bring down food production through the non-usage of modern agriculture, which will result in death by starvation of hundreds of millions in the coming years. This all is being done for the sake of "protecting" the environment and preventing "man-created global warming." In other words, what Charles promoted in Delhi that day was the old British Raj starvation policy under a different cloak.

Besides the perpetual habit of outright lying, Charles also suffers from humongous ignorance. He told the captive audience in Delhi that "worldwide experiences have shown that [organic farming] has led to increased production and productivity." Now, here is a case of outright lying to the generation of Indians whose ancestors had served the British well.

In fact, a British study, which was undertaken by the University of Aberystwyth in association with Elm Farm Research Center, came to a different conclusion. The study said output of cereals, oil seed rape, and sugar beet would be significantly reduced (30% and around 60% respectively), whereas vegetable production would increase, and legumes, in particular grain legumes, would have to increase by around 175%. Which



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His Royal Highness Prince Charles (right foreground) speaks with members of the British upper crust of environmentalist moneybags, in 2007. He is now peddling in India the same thing his ancestors forced on the country in the last century: starvation. But now it's in the guise of protecting "the environment."

raises the question: What on Earth does one do with all these beans?

Charles also criticized genetically modified crops as incapable of resolving the food security issue. "There are reports of GM crops causing health and environmental hazards. We want the world to be GM-free," he said. However, a study of the global impact of GM recently published by Graham Brookes and Peter Barfoot of the U.K. consultancy PG Economics, concluded that, globally, in 2006, the technology reduced pesticide spraying by 286 million kilograms, decreasing the environmental impact of herbicides and pesticides by 15%.

In 2004, a task force, under the chairmanship of the Indian agricultural scientist Dr. M.S. Swaminathan (who played a crucial role along with the American agronomist, Norman Borlaug, in the "Green Revolution" in India that changed the country from a food-short to a food-surplus nation in the late 1970s, within a decade) presented a report to the Union Agriculture Ministry. The task force was to examine the potential and problems of biotechnology applications, particularly genetically modified crops. The thrust was on evolving a long-term policy on the use of agricultural

biotechnology and setting up an independent and professional watchdog, the National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority (NBRA), to generate public confidence in the use of genetically modified organisms (GMO). The panel emphasized the vital role of the regulatory mechanism in generating public, political, professional, and commercial confidence.

The policy on biotechnology, the report pointed out, should provide the direction for research and development based on social, economic, ecological, ethical, and gender equity issues; devise a system for commercialization of transgenic or genetically modified organ-

isms; and formulate a clear policy on GM food. Swaminathan said: "The bottom line of the policy should be the economic well-being of farm families, food security of the nation and the health security of consumers." According to him, protection of the environment and security of national and international trade in farm commodities are equally important.

Royal Lies

On the suicide of thousands of farmers, for which the lying Charles blamed GM crops, the facts, as pointed out by the agricultural correspondent of the Indian news daily, *The Hindu*, P. Sainath, are the following:

1. The central and state governments have drastically cut back investments in rural agriculture. The government does not provide water, seeds, or other inputs necessary for farming. Because the state has withdrawn support for farmers, prices of some basic materials like ammonium dihydrogen phosphate (fertilizer) have quadrupled.

2. As the government has withdrawn support for farmers, prices of farming inputs have skyrocketed. "Ten years ago, a farmer could purchase a bag of seeds for 300 rupees. Now the bag costs 1800 rupees with

1200 rupees as a royalty to Monsanto,” Sainath added.

3. Due to agricultural deregulation (or capitulation to multinational agro-conglomerates), the quality of seeds is worse than ever before. In the past, the Indian government stated that the minimum germination rate for seeds has to be at least 85%. At the behest of corporate demands, the minimum germination rate was reduced to 60%.

Those who listened intently to Charles the Ignoramus on Oct. 2 would do well to remember that, just short of four decades ago, some Western agro-experts believed that India was a “hopeless case.” Back in the early 1960s, India was struggling with food shortfalls, unable to feed its 440 million people. Hunger and malnutrition loomed. Today, there is surplus foodstock available for the world’s largest democracy and its billion-plus population. And, yet, in spite of supporting the biggest food assistance program amongst developing nations, 35% of the world’s malnourished children live in India.

What Sainath pointed out reflects the realities on the ground in India. For a decade now, the Indian leadership’s priorities were in generating foreign exchange through the optimum utilization of India’s educated manpower, a small segment of India’s productive workforce. That foreign exchange reserve, however, is now leaving India’s shores fast, in the wake of the burgeoning financial collapse across the world. Meanwhile, India’s agricultural sector, the mainstay of the survival of the people, has been badly weakened, and India’s vast farmlands are becoming increasingly less productive, threatening a dire food shortage in the future.

The Green Revolution

But, it is a shame. It is a shame because of what has been done to India’s farmers, who were the principal reason that the country became self-sufficient in food, and could keep its sovereignty intact in the difficult decades of the 1970s and 1980s. But it is a shame also because the present crop of Congress Party high-flyers are the so-called flag-bearers of the old Congress Party of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who fought the odds internationally to usher in the Green Revolution that lifted India from being a “basket case” to a food-self-sufficient nation. Despite the devastation caused to the agricultural sector by India’s current leaders, it is still the effects of the Green Revolution that allow India’s people to be fed with minimal food im-

ports. It is evident that Charles came to Delhi to subvert that.

The success of the Green Revolution not only prevented large-scale hunger in India, but enabled the world to see that such a seemingly impossible objective can be reached within a few years if the leadership remains committed, focussed, and dedicated to the purpose. It also provided India the legs to stand on before the world, and project itself as a nation capable of handling difficult odds. Dr. Swaminathan said that Mrs. Gandhi’s efforts to make India self-sufficient in food grains were “more remarkable than even the man walking on the Moon.” Dr. Swaminathan reports that Mrs. Gandhi herself used to say, “The discovery of a new seed variety stirs rural people as much as a spacewalk or a transplanted heart does the more literate classes.”

It is a disgrace that this tradition no longer exists among today’s Indian leaders. What can be found instead is the tolerance among them to let things move backwards. According to Abhijit Sen, economist and Planning Commission member, “our per capita food grain production was back to the 1970s level.”

The figures tell a stark story. In 1979, at the height of the Green Revolution euphoria, per capita availability of cereals and pulses had gone up to 476.5 grams per day.” The corresponding figure in 2006 was 444.5 grams per day, according to provisional government statistics. On one occasion, Sainath had pointed out that “the average rural family today is eating nearly 100 grams less of food grains than six or seven years ago, and the average per capita availability of food grains has declined sharply. In 1991, when reforms began, availability of food per person was 510 grams; today it has fallen to 437 grams.”

Quite simply, agriculture needs another revolution, experts point out. Increasing agricultural productivity should be at the center of this new approach. It is crucial that the sector’s productivity be improved through increased investment in research and development, human capital, extension services, irrigation, and rural infrastructure. Land tenure systems need to be revamped, where necessary.

The rural poor need to be better connected to cities and markets. Macroeconomic policies, credit instruments, and crop insurance need to be made farmer-friendly. In short, agriculture should be treated as a high-value-added, diversified, crucial sector—not a charity case.