



AMID PLENTY

Photo: Bailey House



ANURADHA MITTAL

ON THE TRUE CAUSE OF WORLD HUNGER

an interview by DERRICK JENSEN

As I write this, as many as 7.5 million Afghans are facing starvation this winter. An estimated fifty thousand tons of food a month is needed to feed them. Meanwhile, the U.S. war against Afghanistan's Taliban regime continues to interfere with relief efforts. Every day the war goes on increases the risk of humanitarian disaster.

But is it fair to blame the U.S.? Don't we send food to hungry people all over the world, saving millions from starvation? Not according to Anuradha Mittal, codirector of the Institute for Food and Development Policy — better known as Food First. She claims the U.S. contributes far more to world hunger than it does to feeding the world.

Food First (www.foodfirst.org) was started more than twenty-five years ago by Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappé, author of *Diet for a Small Planet*. Designed to be a people's think tank — more than half of its funding comes from individual donors — the organization seeks to establish access to food as a basic human right.

By now, we're all familiar with the images of hungry people in Ethiopia, Somalia, India, Bangladesh. But how has it come to pass that so many people are without food? Is it because there

simply is not enough food to go around? Food First works to answer these questions, educating the public about the root causes of hunger and debunking the myths put forward by corporations and the governments that serve them.

Mittal, a native of India, once believed those myths. "When I was a little girl," she says, "I was taught in school that India had become independent through a long struggle, and that if we wanted to maintain our independence, the country had to move forward with development: building dams, investing in high technology. I remember how, before movies, we'd see a newsreel about the prime minister christening a new dam, after which they'd play the national anthem. I would get tears in my eyes."

When she went to college at the University of Delhi and became involved in student activism, she realized that she hadn't been taught the whole truth: "The dams were actually death centers that displaced millions from their land with no restitution, and those in power didn't care about the thousands of people they dispossessed or killed. I suddenly realized that human beings have a great capacity for making decisions that intentionally starve others. I wanted to know why." Mittal set out to reeducate herself.

As Mittal is quick to point out, the problem of hunger is not

restricted to India and other Third World nations. “The forces that are oppressing and colonizing people overseas,” she says, “are the same forces that are oppressing working Americans in this country.”

Trained as a political scientist, Mittal has extensive experience in food-related activism here in the U.S. and in the Third World. She’s editor of two books, America Needs Human Rights and The Future in the Balance: Essays on Globalization and Resistance (both Food First Books), and has written numerous articles on global trade and human rights for the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other publications. Prior to coming to the U.S. in 1994, she worked with the Society for Participatory Research in Asia on issues of people’s access to land and natural resources.

I spoke with Mittal on a warm day in January at the offices of Food First, in Oakland, California. She was remarkably gracious, articulate, and passionate. When I thanked her for her extraordinary work, she insisted that she merely plays a small part in a growing community of resistance.

Jensen: What is the scope of world hunger?

Mittal: The United Nations estimates that around 830 million people in the world do not have adequate access to food. Numbers, though, distance us from the real pain felt by the hungry. Hunger is a form of torture that takes away your ability to think, to perform normal physical actions, to be a rational human being. There are people in my own country, India, who for months have not had a full stomach, who have never had adequate nutrition. This sort of hunger causes some to resort to eating anything to numb the pain: cats, monkeys, even poisonous roots.

When we think about hunger, we often picture dark brown faces, black faces, naked children with thin legs and bloated stomachs. This is the image of hunger the media have given us, but it is crucial to remember that hunger exists not only in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but right here in the United States, the richest nation on earth. Thirty-six million Americans do not have enough to eat, and that number is growing. Nearly half of those lining up outside soup kitchens have one or more family members employed, but most of them are simply too poor to buy food. They are the people who scavenge in dumpsters outside restaurants. They’re the schoolchildren who cannot pay attention in class because they did not have dinner or breakfast. They’re people like Katherine Engels, a grandmother who testified at a Congressional hearing on hunger that she often drinks a cup of tea for dinner, then rolls up some white bread and eats it, because that gives her the sense that her stomach is full.

Hunger is a social disease linked to poverty, and thus any discussion of hunger is incomplete without a discussion of economics. Often, when we see a person asking for money for food, we think, *Why don’t you get a job?* How many of us realize that, of the people removed from the welfare rolls by welfare reform in 1996, only one out of ninety-seven will ever get a job that pays a living wage? At the minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour, even if you work fifty hours a week, you earn

little more than thirteen thousand dollars per year. There’s no way a family living in a city could survive on that. They couldn’t pay rent and put food on the table, to say nothing of clothes and other necessities.

If we’re going to speak meaningfully about hunger, we need to understand the true causes of hunger. For example, hunger is not caused by shortage of food. According to our research over the last twenty-six years at Food First, the world’s farmers produce 4.3 pounds of food per person, per day. This includes vegetables, cereals, fish, meat, and grains.

Jensen: If there is enough food, then why is there hunger?

Mittal: People are hungry because they are too poor to buy food. There is a shortage of purchasing power, not a shortage of food.

Of the 830 million hungry people worldwide, a third of them live in India. Yet in 1999, the Indian government had 10 million tons of surplus food grains: rice, wheat, and so on. In the year 2000, that surplus increased to almost 60 million tons — most of it left in the granaries to rot. Instead of giving the surplus food to the hungry, the Indian government was hoping to export the grain to make money. It also stopped buying grain from its own farmers, leaving them destitute. The farmers, who had gone into debt to purchase expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides on the advice of the government, were now forced to burn their crops in their fields.

At the same time, the government of India was buying grain from Cargill and other American corporations, because the aid India receives from the World Bank stipulates that the government must do so. This means that today India is the largest importer of the same grain it exports. It doesn’t make sense — economic or otherwise.

This situation is not unique to India. In 1985, Indonesia received the gold medal from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization for achieving food self-sufficiency. Yet by 1998, it had become the largest recipient of food aid in the world. I participated in a fact-finding mission to investigate Indonesia’s reversal of fortune. Had the rains stopped? Were there no more crops in Indonesia? No, the cause of the food insecurity in Indonesia was the Asian financial crisis. Banks and industries were closing down. In the capital of Jakarta alone, fifteen thousand people lost their jobs in just one day. Then, as I traveled to rural areas, I saw rice plants dancing in field after field, and I saw casava and all kinds of fruits. There was no shortage of food, but the people were too poor to buy it. So what did the U.S. and other countries, like Australia, do? Smelling an opportunity to unload their own surplus wheat in the name of “food aid,” they gave loans to Indonesia upon the condition that it buy wheat from them. And Indonesians don’t even eat wheat.

Jensen: In some South American countries, the governments grow and export coffee while their citizens starve. Have India and Indonesia begun converting agricultural lands to growing cash crops for export?

Mittal: Yes, as in other developing countries, we have seen

an emphasis on export agriculture. Around three-quarters of the countries that report child malnutrition are *exporting* food. Remember the much-publicized famine in Ethiopia during the 1980s? Many of us don't realize that, during that famine, Ethiopia was exporting green beans to Europe.

In 1999, a UN Population Fund report predicted that India would soon become one of the world's largest recipients of food aid. The report went on to blame the increasing population for the problem. What it did not mention is that the state of Punjab, also known as "the granary of India," grows abundant food even today, but most of it is being converted into dog and cat food for Europe. Nor did the report mention that the neighboring state of Haryana, also traditionally a fertile agricultural state, is today one of the world leaders in growing tulips for export. Increasingly, countries like India are polluting their air, earth, and water to grow products for the Western market instead of growing food to feed their own people. Prime agricultural lands are being poisoned to meet the needs of the consumers in the West, and the money the consumers spend does not reach the majority of the working poor in the Third World.

Jensen: I'm not sure it's Westerners' *needs* that are being met. More like their desires.

Mittal: Yes, luxuries are being construed as necessities, and freedom has come to mean the ability to choose from twenty different brands of toothpaste.

Jensen: You've mentioned U.S. aid a few times. What's wrong with U.S. aid? I mean, isn't it commendable that we're willing to help out?

Mittal: I hear that a lot. I've been on radio talk shows where people have called in to accuse me of being arrogant and ungrateful: "Here we are, sending your people food aid, and you just complain!" I wish it were true that U.S. aid came from a generosity of spirit, but it has always been a political tool used to control the behavior of Third World countries, to forge dubious alliances, and to buy cooperation during the Cold War. With the end of the Cold War, aid turned into a scheme for finding new markets for U.S. agribusiness, and now for dumping foods containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which are being rejected by consumers in the West because we know so little about their long-term effects on humans and the environment.

But the deeper issue here has to do with the fact that food aid is not usually free. It is often loaned, albeit at a low interest rate. When the U.S. sent wheat to Indonesia during the 1999 crisis, it was a loan to be paid back over a twenty-five-year period. In this manner, food aid has helped the U.S. take over grain markets in India, Nigeria, Korea, and elsewhere.

I don't entirely reject the notion of food aid. Although I think that most countries can be food self-sufficient, there might be a few that need assistance. But aid has to follow certain principles. First, the food should be delivered when the people need it: i.e., right away. Second, it should not be used as a political tool, as in North Korea, where famine was allowed to bring the country to its knees before food

assistance was provided. Third, the food should be procured locally or regionally, insofar as possible. And fourth, it should be culturally sensitive: the aid should consist of food that the people actually eat, and not just what a donor country wants to dump.

Having said this, let's look at the case of Somalia and Ethiopia in the 1980s. In this case, the food aid arrived very late, after the rains had already settled in and crops were ready in the fields. And the food was procured from big transnational agribusinesses in Canada and America. Local Ethiopian farmers were deprived of their livelihoods as cheap food was dumped onto the market at prices far below what the farmers could afford to match. In this instance, the food aid should have been sent earlier, and it should have been procured from neighboring countries, thereby supporting regional economies. That would have been *real* assistance.

I don't think it's too much to say that destroying local agricultural infrastructures is a central function of food aid. Once these local farmers have been driven out of business, the people of the region are dependent on the West for survival.

Jensen: You mentioned GMOs. How does biotechnology fit into all of this?

Mittal: The big chemical companies want to increase their control over the world food supply by marketing genetically engineered crops, but consumers in the West are leery of GMOs. So, in 2000, the U.S. Congress approved a budget that included an estimated \$30 million to promote biotechnology in the Third World. Seven million dollars of this was part of a deal between the U.S. and the Philippines to promote biotechnology as a means to achieve "food security." Money has also gone to support biotech research at American universities, and some of it went to help Third World and Eastern European governments encourage their regulatory agencies to approve the use of genetically modified food products. So regulatory agencies in the U.S., which have been asleep at the wheel on the issue of GMOs, will now train the regulatory agencies of the developing world.

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