

Sez and Dwindling Farmland

Subrata Sinha

Figuratively, Special Economic Zones are akin to illegal offspring from the union of global vested interests with third world consorts! With the ever widening gap between the affluent urban minority and overwhelming rural majority, India provides an ideal breeding ground. Under these circumstances, such zones permit urban 'haves' to exploit national resources, at the cost of the rural 'have-nots'. Sarcasm apart, these Special zones provide a license to both foreign and national groups of affluence to maximise profits, by bypassing most national regulations and duties.

Basically, Indian Special Economic Zones 'offer zones within India to operate on a global paradigm of business practices, with a framework to perform business and trade without government restrictions! The developers will have the additional advantages of Indian workforce, supplier base, ports and logistical infrastructure needed for global trade, apart from substantial incentives from government. The package includes very low tariffs and barriers, tax exemption, and hardly any imposition of Indian laws and regulatory codes. The developers, therefore, transact business on globally accepted norms. The developers, even non-Indian, are permitted to acquire property and real estate to set-up operations, and getting foreign nationals on deputation.'

As a matter of record, there are eight Indian working SEZs (previously known as Export Processing Zones): Gujarat (Kandla, Surat); Kerala (Kochi) Maharashtra (Santa Cruz); West Bengal (Falta) Tamilnadu (Chennai); Andhra Pradesh (Visha-khapatnam); and Uttar Pradesh (Noida). A scrutiny of these locations would show that they are located mainly in coastal areas or alluvial deltaic zones. Only Noida is located near the capital region to avail of international and national Governmental contacts and air transportation facilities. Even this is located in the arid tracts which form part of the main dairying zone. A very large list of special zones are awaiting final approval. Significantly, Environmental Clearance is not required for them.

Besides the loss of farmlands in the demarcated zone, extensive tracts shall inevitably be lost due to parasitical proliferation of non-farming activities outside its periphery! This also gives scope for Multinational Agribusiness Corporations to use India as a market for supplementing the growing national food deficit situation. Special Economic Zones, created to fulfil the irrational demands of certain transnational vested interests, therefore, cannot be justified. Undeniably, special zones are symptoms of a virtually terminal malady!

Indian agriculture is in total disarray! As an agricultural country, with more than two thirds of its teeming population in some way or other agro-dependent, the natural diversity of its land endowments was a matter of national pride. Unfortunately, more than two thirds of Indian land resources (for food grains, pasturages or dairying), have been irretrievably degraded by a combination of various anthropocentric malpractices. This has even been admitted by National Government Departments and Commissions. The factors include excessive irrigation from major projects, introduction of exotic Hybrid and High Yielding cultivars that need toxic and non biodegradable agro-chemicals and fertilisers for

sustenance, and improper farming practices. Obviously, India's entire water resources are also being polluted by non-biodegradable toxicity.

Rampant, and unplanned, industrial and urban proliferation into farmlands during the last twenty five years has been considerable. An additional aggravating factor is the migration from rural areas into urban zones primarily due to loss of agricultural livelihood or the lure of urban avocations. Exposure to consumerism, promoted by the global market forces, has left many families with their younger generation having migrated to urban areas or even abroad. This exposure is primarily due to proliferation of planted 'urban goodies' in rural market places and a planned electronic media blitz targeting rural areas.

It is often forgotten that 'food' encompasses staple grains, proteins (both vegetable and animal), fish, and an array of milk products. To meet this prolific demand not only prime farmlands, but even lands of lesser capability and irrigability classes, need to be productively utilised. Permutations and combinations of these food items provide nutrition for the extremely diverse Indian population. In the pre-budget Economic Survey, the Indian Finance Minister confessed that the growth rate of agriculture has been declining. Despite land reforms, agricultural productivity in West Bengal (till recently self-sufficient) has been declining—according to the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) and also others. These are portentous indications. If the malignant SEZs are added to this scenario, it would amount to a socio-economic metastasis for rural India. It is but a devious design to make India dependent on food imports and lose its sovereignty.

Significantly positive is the growing resistance of rural communities against 'land grabbing' not only for development of new Special Zones, but even for industrialisation. The level of such resistance has even caused bloodshed due to repressive state measures. Orissa (POSCO case) and Goa are a few amongst proliferating instances. The proposal for setting up a 'Nano' car factory in Singur—a prime multi-cropped zone in the Hugli basin did trigger off an orchestrated protest by intellectuals and various sectors of civil society. Undeterred, the Tatas with the State's connivance tried to build factory amid sporadic, but violent protests and finally left the place.

However, the dogged resistance with blood-shedding due to the highhanded oppressive measures by the State at Nandigram in the virtually coastal Haldia region of West Bengal—where a petrochemical hub by the infamous Indonesian Salim Group was in the offing—is a Benchmark of sorts. An unprecedented revolt by all sectors of civil society compelled the Government to backtrack. The State has now cited Nayachar—an unconsolidated island emerged from the sea a few decades ago as the alternative. It is palpably a 'Mission Impossible'.

In conclusion, it is a compulsive urge to quote the celebrated agricultural scientist, M S Swaminathan from his lecture : *Food for All : Pathway to Sustainable Development* delivered in 2002 at the Trivandrum Centre for Earth Science Studies:

"...The indicators used in measuring sustainability of food security are: land degradation and salinisation, extent of forest cover, ground water depletion, and the nature of crop rotation. In all these parameters, the Punjab and Haryana occupy a low position. The rice-wheat rotation has led to the displacement of

grain and fodder legumes capable of enriching soil fertility. What is now happening is best described as a trend towards land and water mining and not sustainable farming. Forewarned is forearmed. What can we do to launch global agriculture on the pathway of an ever-green revolution, where advances in crop are not accompanied by either ecological or social harm?....”

The million dollar question is whether it will be possible for those in the seat of national governance to escape from the ‘Globalisation Trap’ for the benefit of the overwhelming rural population and accept the other development paradigm? The success of sporadic efforts in Alwar, Ralegaon Siddhhi, Sukhomajari, and many other places have demonstrated the feasibility. □□□