

Combating Corporate Hegemony

Dipankar Dey

The 'miracle seed' of 1950s has failed to solve hunger. Rather it has made the poor more dependent and vulnerable to the market forces controlled by the transnational corporations of the North. Now more than 1.02 billion people remain hungry everyday and in every six second, a child dies of malnutrition. More than 265 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa and 42 million in near East and North Africa are malnourished. The corresponding figure for the Asia and Pacific region is 642 million. People remain hungry not due to poor harvest but because of soaring food prices, lower income and increasing unemployment.

In late sixties, the American policy makers thought that their extensive role in the agricultural revolution would be considered as the 'most successful involvement abroad since the Marshall Plan'. Later, evaluating the 'serious mistakes' of the revolution L R Brown who, as the head of USDA's International Agricultural Development Service, was one of the architects of the policies that permitted the United States to play a key role in launching the green revolution, commented 'Mistakes have been made, some times serious ones. But lessons have been learned too.... One important lesson learned is that we Americans, with our great wealth and energy, can stifle initiatives in others and discourage the very acts of self help that are needed most... India is not the only country in which we made this mistake. This is a good example of how we can do positive harm abroad if we base our policies on a narrow, short-run interpretation of our own economic interests'.

After four decades the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in her visit to India during October, 2009, has spoken about learning from the past 'experience with development'. She said, 'The US approach to food security will be informed by our experience with development. The truth is, we have spent too many years and too much money on development projects that have not yielded lasting results. But we have learned from these efforts'. The previous experiment was with the miracle seeds, now is the turn for GM seeds. Millions of poor citizens of the South are being treated, repeatedly, as helpless guinea pigs.

The first green revolution was spearheaded by the USA with the active support of the Rockefeller Foundation. The same model is being followed in the 2nd green revolution also. Now, along with Rockefellers, Monsanto and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations are playing more active roles.

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian socialist, in his theory of 'hegemony', argued that any political system, such as democratic capitalism, is maintained in two ways. The political realm or the 'state' exercises its control through force and laws. The private realm or 'civil society' complements the state by maintaining the system by producing consent without resorting to force.

Highly influential US 'foundations', created by large corporations, had owned assets of about \$450 billion in the year 2000. These foundations have created the much needed consent for introduction of new technology/process suited for the vested interest of their funders.

However, these corporate sponsored 'foundations' are not the only components of the civil society. A more apolitical definition of Civil Society is used here. It is defined as an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state. It excludes individual and family life, in-ward looking group activities like recreation; spirituality et al, profit making business enterprises, political activities aiming to take control of the 'state'. This 'civil society' involves its citizens to act 'collectively in a public sphere to express their interest, passions and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold state officials accountable.'

During the last two decades, the number of NGOs exhibiting concerns with global issues had quadrupled and in ten years, between 1993 and 2003, the mention of NGOs in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*, had increased by over twenty folds which indicates the growing influence of Civil Society Organization (CSOs) in shaping business policies.

In the absence of any effective intervention by the states and multilateral regulatory bodies to safeguard the interest of citizens from the clutches of powerful global corporations and foundations managed by them, an alternative global network of Civil Society Organizations of concerned citizens are taking the responsibility to hold the corporate leaders accountable for their misdeeds. Historically, the political parties have flourished within the framework of the 'nation states'. As the sovereign powers of the states are on the decline, political parties are also losing their relevance. Moreover, national level political parties, when not in power, face many constraints in voicing their protest against aggressive global capital. This may also be true for many CSOs operating on a global scale.

The political vacuum created during this 'transition phase' is increasingly filled by the CSOs. The active participation of CSOs in influencing major decision-making process, including stringent prohibitions on GM foods in most of the countries in Europe, is a case in point. Formation of a multilateral body like European Union has already eroded the sovereign power of the member states. The national political parties have also lost their past glory and power. Instead hundreds of CSOs have filled that political space in Europe.

The same trend is also exhibited in USA. As of 1998, there were 1.6 million non-profit organizations in the United States of America. Of these, 1.23 million are considered 'independent sector organizations', consisting of religious organizations (0.35 million); charitable organizations (0.73 million) and 'social welfare organizations' (0.14 million). The 'other types' included social clubs,

cooperatives and fraternal organizations. In 1997, the independent sector had about 11 million paid employees.

In India also activities of CSOs are on the rise. They have been successful, among others, in putting pressure on the government to delay, till a proper regulatory mechanism is in force, the commercial introduction of *bt brinjal* and construction of a nuclear plant at Haripur (West Bengal). CSOs have also forced the government to reverse its decision to build a chemical hub at Nandigram. News on public resistance, organized by apolitical organizations, against land grabbing by powerful corporate houses, are reported everyday in national and local news papers. Resistance against Tata Motors' Nano project at Singur is one of such cases.

It is expected that the voluntary and 'not for profit' characters of the CSOs will play an increasingly larger role in steering the course of society especially in the allocation and distribution of basic human necessities like food and energy. They are likely to determine the outlook and future course of the energy utilities of the 21st century. They achieve a high level of social influence by exercising cultural leadership. In addition to cultural leadership, these organizations (also referred as non governmental organizations –NGOs) exhibit four other distinct strengths namely legitimacy, awareness of social forces, distinct networks, and specialized technical expertise.

In 21st century, to ensure supplies of food and energy to the citizens in a sustainable way, the CSOs are likely to act as a countervailing force against the monopolistic power of the transnational corporations. It may be expected that a global network of 'rationalist' civil society organizations (CSOs), which are not nudged into line with grants and assistance from 'foundations' managed by mega corporations with high stakes in food and energy management, will bring in corrective changes, through sustained campaign, in the consumption, production and distribution of these basic necessities.

Research in biotechnology has to continue but with a different perspective. Bio-scientists who are apprehensive and critical of this current trend will play important role in this shift. Continuous dissemination of information, among the consumers and scientists on the true nature and consequences of the new technology in question, will generate passive resistance against this ostentatious design of large scale destruction of nature by a few global firms.

According to the Greek mythology, God Zeus had created Pandora (meaning 'all gifted' as she was endowed with many gifts from the Gods), a beautiful woman, to avenge against Prometheus who had stolen 'fire' from the Gods. Pandora was given as a bride to Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus, and her dowry was a 'jar of box'. Unable to contain her curiosity over its contents, she opened the jar only to release all the evils that would plague earth from that moment on. Only 'hope', trapped in the bottom, remained in the box.

The transnational bio-firms –the new Gods of this century, have created the modern ‘Pandora’ in agricultural biotechnology. The box has been opened and the evils are spreading all over. The entire reproductive system is at stake as elaborate preparations are being made to kill the Eves by using the ‘terminator’ seeds and ‘reproductive cloning technology’. But ‘hope’ is still there, trapped inside the jar.

To save this earth from the clutches of few mega corporations, a mass movement led by the concerned scientists and social activists, has to be organized across the globe. It is high time that the CSOs initiate some affirmative actions to nurture the ‘hope’ and motivate the bio- scientists to bring it out of the Pandora’s Box so that the ‘fire’, Prometheus had stolen for the benefit of mankind, could be kept alive. Let the initiatives begin at the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ –in true sense.

References :

- Brown L R, 1970, *Seeds of Change : The Green Revolution and Development in the 1970's*, Praeger Publishers, New York
- Roelofs J (2003) *Foundations and Public Policy : The Mask of Pluralism*, State University of New York Press.
- Hillary Rodham Clinton, US Secretary of State, *World Without Hunger*, *The Times of India*, October 16, 2009
- But CSO activities are limited in France (a member of EU). Moreover, French nationals are very conscious about their heritage and national identity. These factors might have helped the nuclear lobby to retain their strong presence in France compared to other European states.
- For an elaborate discussion, please see, Dey Dipankar, *The Second Green Revolution in India : The Emerging Contradictions, Consequences and the Need for an Alternative Initiative* (August 12, 2009). Available at SSRN : <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1447795>