

## A Millennium free from Hunger

Address on the occasion of celebration of World Food Day (*Organised by Food & Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations*) on Monday the 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2000 at The UN Conference Hall 55, Max Muller Marg New Delhi

It gives me immense pleasure to join you in the celebration of the World Food Day. Whatever criticism may be voiced of the United Nations in its efficacy, its specialised agencies like the ILO, the WHO and the FAO to name only a few, have always elicited applause from all parts of the globe – more particularly from the developing countries. The FAO takes the pride of place among them as there will be no life on earth without food. The Bhagavat Gita says: *Annad Bhavanti Bhutani*. All beings come from food. Thus adequate food for mankind is the foremost concern of the world. Therefore, agriculture became the principal occupation of early society all over the world. But the early agriculture, depending on the vagaries of monsoon, ploughing with the bulls, harvesting by hand, winnowing with the wind and depending on soil nutrients, appear to have always been an unviable operation frequent famines in India bear testimony to it.

In fact there is an old story about agriculture in India which is worth repeating. A farmer with ten acres of land dutifully carried on his operations year after year, yet he incurred the loss, which he made good from loans from the moneylender. The loans accumulated until at last the loans became higher than the value of his land assets. The moneylender enforced his debt and brought the lands, carts and cattle to auction. The farmer being an honest man abandoned all his belongings and wearing only a loincloth ran away. He ran for a whole day and the night.

In the dim light of the daybreak, he saw far off a huge figure and for solace the farmer ran to him. When he came near, he saw the statue of a Jain saint standing stark naked. The farmer was moved by the pitiable condition of the stranger, standing stark naked. He caught hold of the feet of the stranger and cried, 'Brother I farmed ten acres of land and have only a loincloth. How much more did you cultivate that you have come without it!' The inference - they did not have a FAO at that time.

Malthus the economist of doom postulated that the population increases at a geometric ratio while the food production increases at an arithmetic ratio and therefore wars, pestilence disease etc will have to decimate the population. Malthus has been proved wrong by Science. Application of Science to agriculture and the phenomenal yields of cereals, vegetables, fruits etc. have enabled agriculture to march ahead of population growth. India, which produced 50 million tons of food in 1950, now produces over 200 million tons and has enough food to feed her 1 billion population. The annual per capita availability of food grains which was 144 Kg in 1950-51 has increased to 185 Kg in 1998. It is noteworthy that it is higher than 182.5 Kg recommended by the Indian Council of Medical Research.

Likewise, the World food production is sufficient to meet the entire 4 billion population and yet there are about 800 million hungry people in the developing countries and about 34 million in developed countries in the World. Averages like the average depth of the river are deceptive. Quantitative figures are more revealing of the extent of food insecurity in the countries. Recent reports of the Food and Agriculture Organisation mention that nearly " 20 million people in Eastern Africa

face severe food shortage”, “3 million people are facing hunger and undernourishment in Tajikistan” and so on.

The world Food Summit in 1996 decided to reduce the number of hungry and malnourished people from 800 to 400 millions by 2015 i.e. in two decades. But in a new report published by the FAO on 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2000 it is stated as follows:

“The World population of around 8 billion people by 2030 will be better fed and more people will have adequate access to food *but the number of hungry and undernourished people will remain stubbornly high*”. They estimate that by 2015 it could be as high as 580 million.

Thus the problem appears to be insurmountable and unless tackled on an emergency footing, the aim of “a millennium free from hunger” will remain a distant cry.

Despite adequate supplies, millions remain without access to food because they lack the purchasing power. Food, employment and price level are the greatest concerns of the rural folk. And if rural employment is fostered in India, the number of the hungry can be drastically reduced. Ancient rural economy rested on rural self-sufficiency in respect of the needs of day – to – day life. Cheap metal vessels have replaced pottery and thrown the potters out of employment, mill made textiles have substituted hand spun and hand woven clothes and deprived the weavers of their sustenance, cottage soap industry based on the more hygienic vegetable tallow has been superseded by mutton tallow based soap by high pressure salesmanship of the multinationals.

These people have had no alternative employment and therefore have swelled the ranks of the hungry. I am not against mechanization of rural crafts. A half horse power motor for driving the potter’s wheel, a blower for replacing the smithy’s archaic bellows or a power driven Amber Charka for spinning yarn and a host of others that help the rural artisan without displacing him from employment, would surely be welcome.

In this background a great deal of thought needs to be bestowed at the grass root level for achieving “a millennium free from hunger.”

The Tele food projects launched by the FAO in 1997 are the best endeavour towards rural employment. Schemes for raising cereals, fruits, vegetables, rearing goats poultry and rabbits and small fisheries will go a long way, not only to meet their food needs but also to provide some purchasing power. I am aware of similar programmes for helping patients, cured of leprosy are working successfully in Tamil Nadu. Any contribution to the fund will be an act of great service to the hungry and undernourished.

On the happy Birth Day of the FAO I offer my greetings to the organisation.

May the efforts of ***Food and Agriculture Organisation*** to provide food security to the deprived millions meet with ever growing success.