

Siegel, Benjamin Robert: *Hungry Nation. Food, Famine, and the Making of Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018. ISBN: 9781108441964; 290 S.

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The efforts of India's aspiring political elite to overcome the young nation's food crisis, avert future famine, and address the ubiquitous problem of malnutrition have for a long time received only scant scholarly attention, but as *Hungry Nation. Food, Famine and the Making of Modern India* illustrates, historical research on the topic is beginning to gain traction.¹ Benjamin Siegel's first book is a much-awaited full monograph to examine how plans of providing sustenance of India's 'teeming millions' became an arena for Indian politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and citizens to envision the contours and limits of the Indian nation in the making. Beginning at the eve of India's independence and examining three decades until the Green Revolution, the book offers a thick account of the multiple attempts, successes, and failures to provide food security for the Indian nation.

Benjamin Siegel begins his exploration in the aftermath of the Bengal famine of 1943 to use the length of one chapter to illustrate how this disastrous episode of colonial maladministration had rendered the conquest of famine and starvation „a nationalist imperative“ (p. 23). More importantly, he shows how the (not at all coincidental) temporal conflation of the food crisis in Bengal and the uproar that preceded India's political independence gave way to a broadening societal engagement through which solutions for India's food problem were sought and negotiated. Departing from this venture point, chapters two to six highlight a facet of the ensuing debate each.

In its second chapter, *Hungry Nation* illuminates the search of the Indian interim government for remedies of the imminent food crisis in the aftermath of the Second World War, while showing how Indian politicians positioned themselves vis-à-vis the descending colonial state, the nascent world food regime, and – more importantly for Siegel's

larger argument – Indian citizens. With the aim to sketch the vast contribution of citizens to charting out the nation's path to abundance, Siegel recovers formerly neglected voices from the archive and, with varying success, weaves them into his narration. As the book progresses, *Hungry Nation* distills the efforts of the Indian state to render food security a duty of its citizens which manifests in attempts to transform Indian diets and food habits to reduce the dependence on imported rice and wheat (chapter three). Providing a dense account of the unparalleled attempts of the late colonial and early post-colonial Indian state to regulate the market and control the food supply of its citizens, the fourth chapter closely examines the contestations of merchants, consumers, and state officials as the latter attempted to control the food market through rationing schemes and trade bans. In „The Disabilities Which Peasant and Land Can Suffer“, chapter five of the monograph, Siegel explores the complexities of schemes of land reform, claims that emerged in tandem with attempts to adjust diets and to regulate the market. He details how two paradigms of development – that of equity and that of productivity –, directed the state's responses, but were rarely pursued in conjunction. Instead of linking reform initiatives that aimed to decrease societal disparities and schemes to raise the level of agricultural production, the state eventually privileged technological solutions, hoping that the rise of agricultural productivity would eventually trickle-down to the poor. That the Green Revolution did not translate in abundance for all, however, is illustrated in the sixth chapter of the book. Before Benjamin Siegel takes up the inherent violence of the Green Revolution, he zooms in on the Indo-US exchange of expertise in the immediate aftermath of independence, reviewing how the preponderance of technocratic solutions for India's food procurement, prevalent in India long before, was nourished by American experts, now streaming in in

¹ Sunil Amrith, *Food and Welfare in India, c. 1900–1950*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50/4 (2008), pp. 1010–1035; Taylor C. Sherman, From 'Grow More Food' to 'Miss a Meal': Hunger, Development and the Limits of Post-Colonial Nationalism in India, 1947–1957, in: *South Asia. Journal of South Asian Studies* 36/4 (2013), S. 571–588.

greater numbers to reform India's agriculture. The book closes with linking its historical exploration to contemporary debates, arguing that current contradictions of India's food politics are rooted in the nation's history.

Hungry Nation beautifully and eloquently zooms in on India to make full use of its limited space to work out the richness of the discourses on food politics within the nation, thereby proving that despite other prophecies, not all history needs to be global history.² But as the transnational space imposes itself every now and then as the book progresses, it calls for greater attentiveness and a definition of scale and space. In lieu of the latter, the reader is kept in the dark about the geographical scope of Benjamin Siegel's analysis, as well as of the phenomenon he explores as such. That the discourse on India's food insecurity exceeds the boundaries of the subcontinent is acknowledged by him. His attempts to illuminate such connections remain tentative. For instance, the introduction begins with a brilliant example of „a nationalist firebrand“ (p. 1) in California that throws light on the importance of Indian diaspora groups, but this dynamic receives little contextualization. In a similar vein, the significant stimulus of Chinese and Soviet models on the formulation of visions of India's agricultural abundance are visible but would have deserved more space. The lack of a clearly defined spatial framework of analysis then translates into an insufficient mapping of networks and routes of knowledge exchange – most visible perhaps with regard to the book's aim to contribute to the historiography of „development expertise“ (p. 13). While nuancing the American experts' role with regard to „the ideological origins of the Green Revolution“ (title of chapter six), Siegel however neglects the more subtle ways in which Indians had already adopted and adapted American agricultural expertise since the turn of the twentieth century, and thereby fails to acknowledge how this played out in the time-period under review. American Protestant missionaries had taken up the 'call of the Indian village' long before Green Revolutionaries arrived in India and thereby entered into conversation with Indian planners and scientists.³ Although it is admittedly not within the scope of *Hungry*

Nation to fully explore earlier encounters, the book thereby replicates a common distortion in existing historiography on development.

While Siegel's meticulous archival work and the close reading of his sources are admirable, the choice of his protagonists, hence, at times remains elusive. On the one hand, *Hungry Nation's* insufficient engagement with Indian reform associations – whose role Siegel briefly acknowledges (p. 102), but only in the case of the All India Women's Conference, tentatively scrutinizes – is conspicuous. Associations such as the Servants of India Society or the Arya Samaj contributed to the articulation of the duties of India's citizenry and provided associational spaces where citizens engaged in social service (including the provision of food relief to the starving).⁴ This dynamic, however, receives little attention in *Hungry Nation*. On the other hand, the amount of voices recorded in an effort to „take these citizens and their ideas seriously“ (p. 20) at times aggregates to a sequence of anecdotes, and would have benefited from a greater effort in contextualization. Nevertheless, aside from these cautionary comments, *Hungry Nation* is an immense contribution to the current historiography on the intersection of nation-building and food politics, which offers valuable insights into the complexity of India's attempts to come to terms with its food crisis. As such, Benjamin Siegel's study addresses and at least partly fills an important research lacuna – an effort that has long been overdue.

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² Martine Van Ittersum / Jaap Jacobs, Are We All Global Historians Now? An Interview with David Armitage, in: *Itinerario* 36/2 (2012), pp. 7–28.

³ Rajsekhar Basu, Missionaries as Agricultural Pioneers: Protestant Missionaries and Agricultural Improvement in Twentieth-Century India, in: Deepak Kumar / Bipasha Raha (eds.), *Tilling the Land. Agricultural Knowledge and Practices in Colonial India*, Delhi 2016, pp. 99–121; Harald Fischer-Tiné, The YMCA and Low-modernist rural Development in South Asia, c. 1922–1957, in: *Past & Present* (2018), pp. 193–234.

⁴ Carey Anthony Watt, *Serving the nation: cultures of service, association, and citizenship*. Oxford 2005.