

IN SEARCH OF 'BASMATISTHAN': AGRO-NATIONALISM AND GLOBALIZATION

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Every society has to decide on the degree of reforms it may accept by opening itself to others. It is a choice that is greeted with more or less optimism and anxiety depending on cultural and historical circumstances. When the balance is tilted in favour of anxiety, what might at other times have been considered an opportunity worth seizing begins to take on the character of threat or inescapable fate. And when it comes to discussions of globalization, however sophisticated they might appear, much of what is written is simply a reflection of the deepening sense of unease felt with this sort of dilemma.

There can be few other domains in which such anxiety is so palpable as the domain of agriculture; where what is presented as defence of tradition may be easily confused with the invention of new identities, new natural species and new definitions of place. This may be partly due to the curious fact that even the greatest enthusiasts of hybridity in other domains of culture seem considerably less willing to embrace this doctrine when it comes to the issue of what they eat. But it no doubt has even more to do with the actual inability to decide, in all sincerity, what is the most desirable path for developing countries: to stick to the policy of localism, the defence of traditional agricultural practices, and self-subsistence, or to recognize the limitations of such a strategy, concurring with Amartya Sen's view that 'food self-sufficiency is a peculiarly obtuse way of thinking about food security' (2002).

It is not my intention here, however, to enter into the intricacies of this debate but rather to try to broaden our perspective on it by exploring different elements of the globalization process in this area from a historical and comparative perspective. This I shall do by focusing in particular on a controversy which arose at the end of the 1990s when an American company owned by Hans-Adam II of

Liechtenstein – one of the last reigning merchant princes of Europe and one of its most important farmers – tried to patent basmati rice in the United States.

In recent years some American companies have tried to make use of some of the intrinsic ambiguities of American patent laws in order to appropriate commercial rights over various agricultural products and natural species that originate from developing countries. In particular, attempts have been made to patent turmeric, *neem* and basmati as 'novel' inventions in the United States, despite the fact that all of these products have long been known and consumed for all sorts of purposes in India. Needless to say such dubious practices have not gone unnoticed. According to Vandana Shiva, a well-known social and environmental activist in India, such activities are not just opportunistic – they signify a new form of colonialism (Shiva 1998; cf Shiva 2000; 2001):

This epidemic of piracy is very much like the epidemic of piracy which was named colonialism 500 years ago. I think we will soon need to name this round of piracy through patents as new colonization; as a colonization which differs from the old only in this – the old colonization only took over land; the new colonization is taking over life itself.

Many other people, even if they do not go quite so far as Shiva, insist on the necessity of doing something against this type of appropriation. For example, one of the main objectives of Indian representatives at the World Trade Organization is to obtain an extension of the application of 'geographic indication' to specific Indian products like basmati rice, Darjeeling tea and others. All of this helps to explain why it was considered such a dramatic 'victory' against the perils of globalization when the American company that seemed to threaten the traditional South Asian monopoly over basmati finally withdrew most of its patent claims because of the vocal public campaign and legal battle that had been conducted against it.

In this chapter I argue that the whole episode is better understood if one extends the analysis beyond the time-frame of the controversy itself, considering also what happened before and immediately after it. By adopting a more inclusive and also more comparative approach, one may acquire, I believe, not only different insights into the specificities of this case but also a more comprehensive understanding of what is actually going on under the overused label of 'globalization'.

Globalization and Delocalization

Plenty of myths, all over the world, assume the existence of some sort of exclusive relationship between a particular place and the people who are

supposed to have originated from it. But this does not prevent us from realizing, whether we like it or not, that migration and displacements of all sorts are the stuff of history. It would seem, however, that whenever it comes to the products of the soil, we seem to lose our sense of historicity. Instead we celebrate and rejoice in the exclusivity of the relationship between the appearance, consistency, colour, flavour, smell and taste of myriads of foods or beverages and the places from which they come – places for which they supposedly become the expression and emblem.

The Basmati Controversy (1997–2001)

The adaptation of rice varieties from India to the United States is not exactly a recent trend. If one believes the historians specialising in this question, we may argue that such a process began about 3,600 years ago, when Malaysian traders introduced rice from eastern India to Indonesia. A next step followed when, some time in the first millennium BC, Austronesian traders apparently took rice from Indonesia to Madagascar. A more decisive move took place around 1645 when Dutch or English traders (depending on different versions of the account) took rice with them from Madagascar to South Carolina (Dethloff 1988).

All of this would suggest that contrary to what Vandana Shiva implies in her discussion of biopiracy, there is nothing very new in appropriating 'forms of life' rather than 'land' in the history of international trade and colonialism. Moreover, one could even argue that one of the most spectacular examples of this sort of behaviour has been precisely the way in which Americans appropriated not only rice of Asiatic origin during the second half of the seventeenth century, but also African slaves, who represented not only a free source of labour but also an equally precious source of expertise in the practice and know-how of rice cultivation (Littlefield 1981).

Viewed from this long-term perspective, when Hans Adam II of Liechtenstein decided, through his American company, to adapt and patent basmati varieties of rice in the United States, it seemed little more than an extension of a long-established historical trend – something Norbert Elias might describe as a slow continuation of the same civilization process. Similarly, retaining the native name of a plant in this sort of case may not be seen as necessarily worse or more amoral than giving it an alternative name. Retaining names has moreover always been a common habit, as we see from the Inca (Nahuatl) origin of the term *tomato* and the Afghan origin of the term *carrot*.

However, as one might imagine, the basmati controversy has not been perceived and interpreted so leniently in India. One has only to consult a

fragment of the extensive literature on the topic to get a sense of the outrage that prevailed when it was announced in Indian newspapers in 1997 that an American-based company had been granted a patent for 'Basmati' in the United States. Most commentators in India seemed to interpret this as the selling-off of exclusive rights to basmati rice in the United States, even if the claims included in this patent seemed to be, in reality, slightly less outrageous.

I do not intend here to enter into the raging polemic which has taken place in recent years to try to determine more exactly the extent of the exclusivity and commercial privileges that the applicant could gain by a patent.¹ Rather, I would simply like to recall two essential elements of the case. First, it appeared that RiceTec, the American company that had asked for the patent, had tried effectively to appropriate and commercialise in the United States varieties of rice that originated from South Asia and were close replicas of the ones previously developed by farmers as well as by agronomists in South Asia. Second, it appeared that the company had also tried to legalize the right to retain the term 'basmati' to define in a general manner these varieties as grown on American soil, whereas the term had until then been informally but exclusively associated with the superior varieties of basmati rice grown in South Asia itself.

Such attempts have rightly been considered scandalous, both in India and abroad. And in 2001, three years after the patent had been granted, a legal challenge and a particularly vigorous public campaign by various personalities and non-governmental organizations in India and abroad, as well as by institutions directly associated with the Indian government, left RiceTec little choice other than to withdraw nearly all its claims in order to avoid losing the case.

A New Form of Colonialism?

Viewed retrospectively, perhaps the most striking thing about this campaign, and to a large extent the key to its success, was the unexpected alliances it succeeded in creating between the most unlikely partners. Thus, for example, although the relationship between India and Pakistan had probably never been so tense in recent times as during the period of the basmati controversy, this was one of the few instances when the two countries showed a certain amount of solidarity and cooperated against the common threat. This is still more surprising when one realizes that until this time, India and Pakistan had in fact been the two main competitors in the basmati rice market. Furthermore, agronomists who had promoted the green revolution now allied themselves with those who had most vehemently opposed it. And in the same vein, personalities and organizations which had formerly systematically

denounced the globalization and liberalization of the economy now allied themselves with governmental organizations and the lobby of Indian exporters, whose main function was precisely to promote globalization.

What was particularly interesting about this case was the way in which it was formulated not so much in terms of a neo-liberal policy versus a socially and ecologically conscious one, but rather as some sort of national affront to India, or even a wider regional affront to the whole of South Asia. In India, people were asked to rally behind the defence of basmati as they might be asked to rally behind the defence of the flag. Comments like 'India is basmati, and basmati is India' were heard in the Indian parliament. People who might under normal circumstances be at loggerheads seemed suddenly to unite against this common threat, and, as I mentioned before, this seemed to promote not just a surge of nationalism but also the development of something akin to a form of pan-South-Asian patriotism.

Until recently basmati was, in fact, traditionally associated with very specific regions of India and Pakistan. Because of such associations, it would have been difficult to imagine that basmati – even if one takes into account the Sanskrit origins of a term said to be associated with ideas of 'earth' and 'fragrance of the earth' – could suddenly acquire the status of a national and quasi-religious icon in India. And it is still more surprising to notice that it was not only Indian or Hindu nationalists who were involved, but also well-known personalities who would not normally be associated with such nationalistic rhetoric. As already mentioned, there is a certain irony in the fact that the very people who celebrate all forms of hybridity in culture seem largely unwilling to contemplate it with the same enthusiasm in agriculture.

The unusual alliances that the basmati controversy evoked were made possible because the whole episode was seen not only as an act of commercial piracy but, more fundamentally, as the expression of a new form of colonialism. There is little doubt that such rhetoric had a powerful impact. However, it is important to remember that such historical parallels can be misleading. I will argue that one cannot effectively understand the issues at stake in controversies like the one concerning basmati by analysing it solely through the prism of the asymmetrical relationship between developed and developing countries, or even that between the interests of the small farmers of the South and the multinationals of the North.

One Trend May Hide Another One

The rapid delocalization of production undoubtedly constitutes one of the most important and explicit dimensions of globalization. This is as true for agriculture as for any other domain. When the delocalized products are ones

that were previously associated with a particular part of the world and a specific culture, the visibility of the process becomes especially apparent. The basmati case was so spectacular because until recently this rice had been so obviously identified with South Asia. It was also significant that the basmati controversy appeared to present a perfect demonstration of the point that globalization is the latest device for exploiting post-colonial countries. But while the exploitation of the South by the North should be taken into consideration in analysing globalization, one should not forget that the delocalization of production is a much larger, multi-directional process in which all sorts of strategies are simultaneously implemented. This is best demonstrated by moving away from basmati altogether for a moment to consider the delocalization and relocalization of products elsewhere in the world. How, then, might an understanding of French wines and Himalayan apples aid our comprehension of the basmati case?

The Case of French Wines

At least four elements are supposed to determine the quality of French wine: *le terroir* (the terrain with all its specificities where grapes grow), the year of production, *le cepage* (the variety of grape used for making the wine) and the process of wine-making itself. It is certainly admitted by connoisseurs that each of these elements should be considered equally important for defining the quality of a wine. In the French tradition, however, with the exception of a few regions like Alsace or Champagne, it is usually only the place of origin of a wine, and to a lesser degree its age, that are taken into consideration explicitly by consumers when selecting wine to buy or drink. For example, until recently, most French people ignored the fact that Burgundy wines are made with only one variety of grape (Pinot Noir) while Bordeaux wines combine a variety of them in diverse proportions (Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, in particular).

The exclusive importance given to place of origin and age helps to explain why a strict correlation can be made in France between the reputation and price of a particular wine, and the ability to pinpoint as precisely as possible the exact location of the grapes used to make it. Such an emphasis is not necessarily ancient or particularly representative of French culture. It is true that the place of production has never been ignored, especially in the case of the most prestigious vintages, but the systematic importance given to geographic indication throughout the twentieth century has been a relatively recent development, linked on the one hand to the history of the French vineyard, and on the other to the evolution of legislation in this domain from the end of nineteenth century. More recently, however, another paradoxical consequence of this 'tradition' has emerged.

Many of the relatively new wine-producing countries all over the world are now adopting – as a deliberate strategy – different criteria from the French ones for defining and classifying wines. They put commercial emphasis not so much on the place of origin or age but on the grape, the company brand or the wine-making process. The advantage of this strategy is that it undermines the hierarchy that benefits the countries with a long-established reputation for wine-making. If such a strategy can be successfully imposed globally – in the way that it has been imposed in the British market, for example – then France may lose much of its comparative advantage in the wine-making industry and will have to try to reconstruct its primacy (Berthomeau 2001). Traditionally less renowned wine-producing regions like the Languedoc have already begun to follow these trends, thus shaking up the wine hierarchy and suggesting that the new fashion may take off even in France. We are witnessing here the delocalization of wine from its former territorial strongholds.

The case of French wines is relevant here not simply because I am French, but also because the example of French wines and Champagne have constantly been advanced in India during the basmati controversy. The French case was cited regularly to demonstrate the different levels of legal protection granted to exclusive agricultural products in developed and developing countries. The idea behind this comparison was to demonstrate that if the Indian government had given more effective legal protection to Indian agricultural products, like the French government did, no American company would have dared to appropriate such products as basmati and turmeric.

The comparison seems fair enough. It is indisputable that because of the insistence of successive French governments, alcoholic drinks now benefit from a unique level of legal protection in the international trade. It is only in more recent times that legal and institutional processes have begun at the international level for extending to other specific agricultural and food products the sort of legal protection which had formerly been exclusively granted to wines and spirits.

However, the conclusions that may be drawn from the basmati-wine comparison are not as clear as they may at first appear.

The first point is that in order for such a comparison to be effective, varieties of rice should be compared, at least until recently, with the varieties of grape used for making wine rather than with wines as such. It then becomes clear that the new focus on varieties of grape rather than place of origin is in fact a strategy for overcoming the advantages that countries like France have had in the wine market. One may also notice, then, that the French names of the best-known varieties of grapes (Sauvignon, Pinot, Cabernet, Chardonnay, Merlot, Gamay, etc.) have been imported and retained by the new wine-producing countries which compete with them.

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international market, and this may parallel the Americans' desire to retain the term 'basmati' for the rice grown in the United States. Furthermore, not only are most of these names of varieties of grape actually French words, but in some cases they are also geographical place references in France. Moreover, just as in the basmati case, wine producers in other countries do not hesitate to claim, quite openly, that their Merlot, Sauvignon and Chardonnay wines are better and often less expensive than the French equivalents.

This comparison therefore demonstrates not only that there is a difference in how products of the North and the South are protected, but also that such legal protection is less effective than many would like to believe. In today's global economy we therefore find systematic attempts, in both the North and the South, to dissociate the previously exclusive links between certain products and places, and to adapt the production process elsewhere for commercial purposes. While in the basmati case it is a product of the South that is being transplanted and produced in the North, in the wine case it is a product of the North (France, Italy, etc.) being transplanted and developed by countries of the South (Argentina, Chile, etc.), as well as other areas of the North (United States, Australia, etc.).

Now that we have 'delocalized' the debate surrounding basmati, let us move on to examine another case of relocalization of an agricultural product, into a region very close to the place where basmati is traditionally grown. I shall consider the transplantation of apple production to Himachal Pradesh in India – a case which seems to exemplify the reverse trajectory of basmati.

The Case of Himachali Apples

Before introducing the Himachali apple, I return briefly to the comparison made earlier between biopiracy and colonialism. One point on which the multiple critiques of colonialism during recent decades agree is that the phenomenon of colonialism cannot be explained by a simplistic dichotomy between colonisers and colonised people (Bayly 1983). Rather, we must understand not only how colonialism has been imposed upon diverse societies but also how these societies, or certain sections of their populations, identified at least in part with it. It is in this context that I introduce the case of apples in Himachal Pradesh.

Himachal Pradesh has long been known for the richness of its flora and fauna (or what would be more commonly described today as the extent of its biodiversity). Nowadays, however, Himachal Pradesh is most renowned for its apples, the production of which has considerably increased the prosperity of the state and of its inhabitants. It is significant that these apples bear

rather 'exotic' names – such as 'Delicious', 'Golden Delicious' or 'Royal Delicious' – and that nearly all the production is intended for export (mainly to the Middle East), just as in the case of basmati. Hence it is worth briefly explaining here how Himachal Pradesh developed as an apple-growing state.

It began in 1904 when Samuel Evan Stokes, a missionary from a wealthy American Quaker family, came to Himachal in order to preach the Gospel. After a few years in the region, however, it was he who became the convert. Not only did he convert to Hinduism, he also married locally, had several children, took an Indian name and became an Indian citizen. Nevertheless, he retained the enterprising spirit that every American is supposed to possess. With the aim of encouraging local development in the region, in the 1920s he decided to import a few apple trees from the United States to see if they would grow in the part of Himachal where he lived (Sharma 1999). After a few years, his economic success was so marked that many people followed his example, and gained incomes beyond their dreams.

In the early 1980s, I was doing fieldwork in Himachal, where I was impressed by the high levels of self-subsistence people managed to secure with small plots of land. I can also attest to the contrast between the pride and appreciation felt for the best qualities of rice growing on their land and their contempt for apples, which they refused to consider as real fruit. Their only personal use of the apple was to plaster it in salt as a snack to accompany drinks, or to offer generous box-loads to officials and civil servants in the hope of buying their favours cheaply. Yet none of that deterred the people from considering that there was no greater fortune in life than to dispose of a plot of land for profitable conversion into an apple orchard. The farmers I met in Himachal who contemplated the possibility of transforming their small plots into orchards did not appear to ignore the risks and initial costs it would involve. But if the opportunity to convert to an orchard carried the potential of future profit, they complied for the sake of their families and their future.

In Himachal Pradesh, then, following older trends that began in the later phases of colonisation, we find apple varieties originating in the West imported to India and marketed under their western names without anyone appearing to complain about it. The irony, however, is that the structural consequences have not been so different from those in the basmati case when one reconsiders that controversy in its proper context.

Globalization and Relocalization

The basmati controversy has been presented as a dramatic confrontation not only between two opposing ways of practising agriculture but also between

two different modes of reasoning in relation to the product. In India, for example, it is often argued that it is reductionist to consider basmati as a mere commodity. Rather, it should be seen as a depository of religious and social values. At another level, the characteristics of basmati have been repeatedly attributed to the particular qualities of the sub-Himalayan soil where it has traditionally been grown. Finally, during the controversy, basmati rice was often described as the collective creation of generations of small farmers who cultivated it. According to opponents of the patent, it was only because of the anonymous labour of poor farmers that the rice had slowly evolved, not only as a rice variety ideally suited for its own part of the world but also into one of the best varieties of aromatic rice existing anywhere. No other rice variety grown in another environment could share the same characteristics as authentic basmati, and to describe pale foreign imitations as 'basmati' not only despoiled Indian cultivators but was also a fraud and a misnomer.

For the American company which tried to patent it, however, the term 'basmati' was simply a generic term, which basically referred to the specific characteristics defining this particular variety of aromatic rice that differentiated it from hundreds of other varieties whose samples were equally available in the World Collection of Germplasm in Aberdeen, Idaho, in the United States. The company's argument was that if it could be shown, preferably with the help of 'scientific' tests, that newly-created varieties of rice shared most of the same characteristic as basmati, there was no reason why it could not legitimately define them as basmati, independently of where they were cultivated.

According to this reasoning, the South Asian origin of basmati was merely circumstantial, and if it could be used to prove anything, it was precisely the opposite of what opponents of the patent intended. If one admitted that basmati only corresponded, until now, to a purely South Asian variety of rice the qualities of which were supposed to be linked solely to a specific South Asian environment, then this was surely the best proof that a new rice variety, which shared the same formal characteristics as basmati but was cultivated in the United States, could be legitimately considered as a 'novel' invention in that country. The irony is that in spite of being diametrically opposed, the two definitions of 'basmati' proposed by the defendants and opponents of the patent shared one thing in common, and that was a disdain for serious empirical evidence.

As far as the RiceTec patent was concerned, it soon became clear that their claims had little empirical basis. Most of the claims seemed very notional and the judges who had to consider them in the court case that followed were not impressed by their content. Some of the claims, however, referred more specifically to the hybrid varieties that RiceTec had effectively adapted in the

United States. It was not the company's ability to produce these varieties, nor its right to patent them as 'novel', that was contested, but rather its right to call these varieties 'basmati'. It might be true that some basmati of Asian origin had been used in their development, and that some of their characteristics were close to those of known varieties of Asian basmati, but these had been combined with other varieties of rice of different origins, so that they had many other characteristics that had very little to do with Asian basmati. Even if one ignored the fact that RiceTec's new varieties had been cultivated in the United States and even if one recognized 'basmati' as a generic term, it still therefore seemed a serious misnomer to characterize this American rice as 'basmati'. Once it became evident that it would be legally challenged, RiceTec preferred to withdraw most of its claims, perhaps aware that the evidence on which its claims were based was too shaky to win the case.

Although the dubious nature of this patent had been largely exposed during the controversy, what did not appear so clearly was the equally unconvincing representation of basmati advanced by opponents of the patent. In criticising RiceTec's claim that 'basmati' is a generic term, opponents of the patent preferred to ignore discreetly the contemporary uses of the term in India itself, because an investigation of the commercial practices associated with basmati in the years immediately preceding the controversy yields a slightly confusing picture.

Before the Controversy

Basmati may have a very ancient and distinguished past in India, but only since the 1980s has its mass production really taken off. Its relatively low production until then was because, in India as in China but in contrast to Pakistan or the United States, most rice cultivation is and was oriented principally towards the domestic market.

Basmati is characterised not only by its taste and quality but also by its relatively low yield compared with other rice varieties; it also matures more slowly than most other sorts of rice. This explains why the production of basmati – always perceived as a luxury food in India – was not considered a priority in the agricultural policies of successive Indian governments. Until the last decade, the main priority of every Indian government has been to ensure the country's self-reliance in terms of agricultural production. This also conversely explains why basmati has long been the only segment of the rice market to escape state control and remain entirely in private hands. Moreover, what really distinguishes the basmati market from the main rice market today is that for many years it has been oriented almost entirely towards export. Far from being threatened by the privatization and liberalization of trade, like

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many other agricultural sectors in India, the fortune of this particular market has been therefore directly linked from the start to the progressive opening of Indian agriculture to the outside world and, more generally, to trade liberalisation. The basmati market has not only benefited from the development of the world market, it is the export market that has been its key *raison d'être*, at the levels of both production and consumption.

More generally, what characterizes the international demand for basmati, by contrast with the demand for lesser varieties of rice, is the fact that this is a market that is expanding rapidly but is not threatened by overproduction. The growing demand for basmati today is fuelled not only by the increasing number and prosperity of the South Asian diaspora communities in different countries, but also by a more general rise in the appetite for high-quality foods among middle-class populations all over the world (Krissoff *et al.* 2002). Thus, in spite of the harsh competition from Pakistan, the real problem faced by Indian exporters of basmati has little to do with either problems of demand or pricing. According to Indian basmati traders, their real limitation is insufficient production, for Indian basmati is in short supply, in terms of both quantity and quality. This may explain some of the recent problems that traders have had to confront.

While I was doing fieldwork in the wholesale grain market of Delhi in 1997, Indian exporters were concerned that the basmati export trade would suffer because of the dubious quality of some of the shipments sold abroad the previous year.² If the numerous reports and comments made public since by Indian exporters are to be believed, the situation does not seem to have improved. One main reason for this is that there have until now been very few controls in India to ensure the consistent quality of the rice labelled 'basmati' when it is sold for export. This has meant that any variety of aromatic rice that more or less fitted the appropriate criteria could be easily labelled 'basmati', and also that less scrupulous exporters were mixing real basmati with cheaper varieties of rice in order to boost their profits.

In the domestic market it is more difficult to get away with such practices in the long term, because the quality of rice is rarely taken for granted and is carefully checked at different stages of the marketing chain by intermediaries and traders as well as by the final buyers. This type of informal control is less effective in the case of exports, however, because huge quantities of rice are sold to distant customers (Vidal 2000). In the absence of more institutionalized quality checks and precise rules of labelling, the general reputation of Indian rice exporters is at stake and the Indian rice trade as a whole may suffer in consequence.

There is, however, another reason which has played an equally important role in changing the definition of basmati in recent decades. It is not only in

the wicked world of American companies that one finds the term 'basmati' being used in a more or less generic manner. There is little doubt, for example, that both Indian and Pakistani agronomists had a very similar perspective in mind when they sought to develop new varieties of basmati by cross-hybridising basmati with other rice varieties. As in the American case, their aim was to create new varieties of rice which would retain the qualities of earlier varieties but would also be more resilient, quicker to mature and higher-yielding than the ones which had slowly evolved under the care of small cultivators. Moreover, another potential 'asset' of such hybrid varieties of basmati resided in their adaptability to different soils and climates so that their cultivation could more easily be delocalized, whether in India or, indeed, elsewhere.

As one might imagine, real connoisseurs have been quick to argue that even the best hybrids can only superficially compete with more traditional varieties of basmati. In spite of their similar appearance and more or less similar characteristics, the former are dismissed for their 'blandness' by comparison with the 'real thing'. However, possibly owing to their greater availability and their lower price of production, it has become common practice in India to identify hybrid varieties as 'real' basmati, and they have commonly been sold abroad under this prestigious label. The irony, of course, is that one could argue that the American company RiceTec was simply pushing to an extreme a tendency that began in India itself.

Reinventing Basmati

Largely because of this controversy, there is now a consensus in India that there may be only one way to prevent the term 'basmati' from being used as a generic term abroad in the future, and that is to get basmati officially acknowledged as 'a geographic indication' and recognized as such by the WTO. As the comparison with French wines demonstrated, such a legal status would not prevent all forms of international competition, but at least it would prevent the sort of dubious practices that had been at the heart of the basmati controversy.

Independently of this former point, however, as well as of the many difficulties that such a move might imply in terms of trade negotiations, a prior condition is to make sure that the production of basmati in India fits the official criteria of geographical indication. According to the WTO definition, 'geographical indication' applies to names 'which identify a good as originating in the territory ... or a region or a locality in this territory, where a given quality, reputation, or other characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographic origin'.³ But paradoxically enough, to prove that basmati corresponds to such a definition is by no means a straightforward

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During the controversy it became clear that although India is known for all sorts of surveys and gazetteers, there were no reliable inventories of the precise details and distribution of the rice varieties commonly termed 'basmati'. These problems were not caused exclusively by the lack of reliable official information but also because hybrids had always played a significant role, in India itself, in blurring the frontier between what should and should not be labelled as basmati.

It is also interesting, additionally, that it is Indian exporters who in recent times have become the most vocal in their insistence that hybrid varieties should not be labelled as 'basmati' any more, however close their resemblance to the real thing. But the irony is that once this decision seemed to be accepted, traders (in the eternal style of traders) insisted that one should be able still to mix hybrid varieties *with basmati*, on condition that the quantity of hybrids does not exceed 30 per cent of the whole. This is not the sort of concession that helps to restore the reputation of Indian basmati abroad.

Another difficult decision that had to be taken in order to make sense of the notion of a 'geographical indication' was to limit much more precisely the area from which varieties of aromatic rice could legitimately be labelled as basmati. This too was not such an easy task, for it involved a certain degree of controversy and politicking at the border zones, such as parts of Bihar and Rajasthan, where nobody had ever challenged the labelling of the rice produced there as basmati. Finally, another step was taken recently by Indian exporters when they lobbied the government to ban Indian agronomists from interfering with basmati by manipulating it genetically. Genetic modification is of course one of the most important, but also most controversial, trends in contemporary agriculture. As one would expect, a section of the Indian scientific community is keen to play a part in its evolution. Nevertheless, Indian traders, as well as Pakistani ones, have argued to the contrary that for the time being it would certainly be a mistake to play this game in the case of basmati, because of the risk of jeopardizing the demand for basmati abroad.⁴ It is rightly recognized that alienating the sort of middle-class clientele willing to pay a premium price for the best varieties of rice is not a wise strategy for successful expansion in the food industry.

That Indian agronomists and Indian traders fought shoulder to shoulder in the battle to prevent the American threat to the South Asian monopoly over basmati did not prevent them from rapidly diverging afterwards. In India as elsewhere, many agronomists cannot ultimately resist the temptation to reinvent nature, and it is this that distinguishes them from the traders who obey a more flexible commercial logic. If there were any economic advantage in completely reinventing what was previously defined as basmati, most traders would accept the logic of doing so. On the other hand, if they identified their commercial interest with maintaining the integrity of the product, then this

would be the path to follow. Ideally, of course, they would prefer to benefit from the combination of both commercial logics, as indeed some are already doing when they simultaneously advertise both organic and genetically manipulated rice, but it is not always possible to do this.

In the case of basmati in India we are witnessing a curious shift of alliances among exporters, agronomists and militants. While for decades the interests of agronomists and Indian traders have seemed close, in the recent controversy Indian exporters continued to find common ground for a longer time with ecologists and anti-globalization militants. However, such an alliance might also be only temporary.

Creating a 'Basmatisthan'

For many years now, both Indian traders and the Indian government have been conscious that the main impediment to basmati exportation is not so much the competition but the insufficient supply of quality basmati for sale in the global market (Jasol 1987). Everyone involved in the trade is also painfully conscious that such dubious palliatives as the adulteration of pure basmati or the naming of new hybrid varieties developed by agronomists as basmati are not the best ways of dealing with the problem in the long term.

For several decades both rice exporters and the government have realized that the only real way of increasing basmati production in India is completely to transform the way in which it is cultivated. Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, when Indian traders objected to the labelling of hybrid varieties and genetically modified rice varieties as basmati, it was not for political or ideological reasons but for economic and commercial ones. Similarly, their willingness to define clearly the geographical area of the basmati label has little to do with a wish to defend biodiversity or the patrimony of local farmers. Yet the specific interests of traders seemed to coincide, for a while, not only with the general policy of the government which is progressively choosing to favour export over self-reliance in agriculture, but also with the objectives of alternative ecological movements. This is obviously no longer the case.

One of the most important state initiatives in this matter has been the administrative effort made in recent years to establish specific areas, known in bureaucratic jargon as *agri-export-zones* (AEZs), where everything should in theory be organized in order to encourage the production and commercialisation of particular agricultural products that may have a real appeal on the international market. The apple-growing valleys of Himachal Pradesh would constitute one of these zones, as would the region of northern Punjab where basmati has traditionally been cultivated but where its production has virtually ceased for simple economic reasons. Now there is little to be done

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to make sense of the rice more precisely the rice lately be labelled as basmati, have a certain degree of basmati in parts of Bihar and West Bengal. The marketing of the rice promoted recently by Indian exporters and Indian agronomists from genetic modification is controversial, trends in the opinion of the Indian scientists. Nevertheless, Indian exporters rarely that for the time being, in the case of basmati, basmati abroad.⁴ It is a class clientele willing to pay for a wise strategy for

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such a state policy, welcomed by big Indian exporters and agricultural firms in the region, completely contradicts the aims which have been systematically pursued by ecological militants and anti-globalization activists like Vandana Shiva during the basmati patent controversy.

First of all, the idea that any Indian region should be principally dedicated to the monoculture of any agricultural product destined for export is anathema to those whose aim, on the contrary, is to promote ideals of self-subsistence and biodiversity. The situation is made worse because it is also strongly recommended that in such areas farmers should not only dedicate themselves to monoculture but should also cease to take any individual or collective initiative in how they select or cultivate seeds. They are expected to use exclusively the seeds recommended to them by agronomists and to strictly follow their recommendations concerning the cultivation process. It is proposed, for example, in government recommendations about AEZs that 'the government must ensure seed replacement at least once in three years by growers and breeders to identify and remove off-types to sustain seed quality.'⁵ In practice this means that the wide variety of seeds considered the common heritage of small cultivators would be wiped out in a few years, and traditional practices, like seed-sharing exchange, which are said to be at the heart of the collective practices of the local farmers, would also disappear.

The general philosophy behind such a government policy is, in reality, the same one that has been promoted for many years now all over the world and has been consistently denounced everywhere, owing to the very unequal relationships it creates between small farmers and agro-commercial firms. It is, quite simply, the logic of contract-farming. Agricultural areas where basmati is cultivated have now become some of the regions of India where contract-farming has developed most quickly, and it is not only Punjab, which has specifically chosen to encourage contract-farming, that is held up as an example for other Indian states to follow.⁶

Conclusion

For many eco-activists, the basmati controversy has become emblematic of successful resistance to globalization. Such an interpretation makes sense as far as biopiracy or the delocalization of indigenous products is concerned. There are, however, other aspects of this controversy which do not fit in so well with the ideology of ecological movements. Even if one rightly condemns the dubious attempt to substitute an American ersatz for real basmati, any attempt – on the part of the American market – to answer a local demand by a local supply would appear to go against the trend of globalization, while on the other hand an agricultural policy like India's that privileges the export of basmati abroad would appear to be promoting global trade. Another consequence

of the actual policy followed in India is to redefine the characteristics of basmati according to the expectation of international demand. Such a trend may of course meet with the temporary approval of social activists and ecologists in its intolerance of adulteration and eventual genetic manipulation of basmati, but activists will no doubt be less enthusiastic when they realize that in order to obtain the sort of basmati which satisfies the exacting requirements of Europeans and Americans, cultivation and decision-making are taken out of the hands of small scale local farmers. Traders and exporters are being given the power to ensure the supply of the right stuff on their own terms, even if this means that they control the entire process from the choice of seed to the final stage of marketing.

Finally, the game may now be over, because in 2003 it was agreed by the government that small cultivators can now be allowed to sell their basmati directly to whoever they want, including non-Indian firms.⁷ While such a decision may, in the short term, help cultivators to break the monopoly of the intermediary rice millers and Indian traders who exploited them, there remains a long-term danger in establishing, through contract-farming, new forms of unequal relationships between small farmers and Indian or foreign agricultural firms.

If this policy is allowed to prevail, it may not be long before the requirements for Indian basmati are totally defined abroad and its production is largely under the control of foreign firms. Of course Indian people may still find consolation in the fact that basmati will remain a product both of cheap Indian labour and of Indian soil, but can anyone really consider the containment of biopiracy a success if the alternative is to return to something even closer to an earlier form of colonialism? After all, wasn't it one of the main vocations of colonial countries to supply the West with raw delicacies?

Notes

- 1 For details of the case, see Jamil 1998.
- 2 On markets in India, see Vidal 2003.
- 3 Article 22 of TRIPS, July 1995: see Berkey 2000.
- 4 See 'Ban on genetically modified basmati rice sought', *Dawn*, 20 November 2002; 'Ban on tinkering with basmati', *Economic Times*, 3 June 2003.
- 5 *Tribune*, 30 September 2002.
- 6 'Focus Punjab: transforming agriculture', *Frontline*, 12–25 April, 2003.
- 7 'Basmati farmers allowed to sell abroad', *Economic Times*, 5 April 2003.

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