

EARTHSCAPES MAY 20, 2001

THE HINDU

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*Cover: The Kingfisher.
Apart from housing almost the entire
colour spectrum within its feathers, it
links the three realms on earth: land,
water and sky.*

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WTO: A right denied

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WTO: a right denied

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Farmers shout anti-government slogans in Chandigarh demanding that the government withdraw from its WTO agreement. Some hold portraits of freedom fighter Bhagat Singh – also a farmer – hanged during British rule.



Remember the Dunkel draft, or GATT? In the early 1990s, these words were at the centre of an explosive national debate. It denoted the emerging face of the international trade system, and the thrust of industrial countries to promote one legally binding regime that would apply to all countries. In 1995, over 100 countries entered into such a regime, meant to remove trade barriers and, in theory, promote economic development across the globe. Several different agreements – on agriculture, on tariffs, on subsidies, on sanitary measures, and on intellectual property rights – came under one roof, the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Initially resistant, the Indian government finally gave in and joined the regime.

Just over half a decade later, the widespread controversy that preceded the coming into force of the WTO, the debates that made "Uncle Dunkel" a

favourite whipping boy, are back again. On April 1, the Indian government lifted "quantitative restrictions" (QRs) on over 700 items of industrial, agricultural and domestic products. In 2000, it had already lifted such barriers on several hundred other items. Suddenly, the economy, sheltered by customs duties and restrictions of various kinds, has been opened up to a flood of cheap goods that will be the delight of the urban elite consumer class, but the despair of tens of millions of farmers, fisherfolk, tribals and small manufacturers. Promises of continued protection, simultaneously made by the government, appear to be more a cruel All-Fools Day joke than a long-term measure of security.

What does the WTO do? It forces countries to open up their economy to a virtually free flow of imports and exports, controls on which are increasingly removed. It denies countries the right to protect their fledgling or weak industrial and agricultural sectors. And in the context of this issue, it compels countries to ignore, or weaken as deliberate policy, the controls that are so essential to protect natural environment and people's lives that are dependent on this environment.

International trade has conventionally been destructive of biodiversity and people's livelihoods, by encouraging over-exploitation of natural resources, creating pollution through increasing transportation, habitat loss by infrastructure development, and so on. WTO did not create such impacts, but it will greatly enhance them. This it will do by forcing countries to:

- ✦ relax export rules that to date prohibit or restrict the exploitation of forests, fisheries and minerals, encouraging, for instance, destructive shrimp aquaculture along coasts or the unrestricted export of medicinal plants;

- ✦ encourage export policies that spread monocultures (single-species plantations), e.g. of flowers, export-oriented cash crops, and a handful of market-favoured crop varieties;

- ✦ relax import rules that control the unhindered dumping of all kinds of products, including polluting and

hazardous wastes and exotic species/varieties of plants and animals that could wipe out indigenous species;

- ✦ adapt intellectual property rights regimes (through the Trade Related IPR agreement or TRIPs), including compulsory patents on micro-organisms, that are inappropriate to local conditions, increase the piracy of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge, and will relegate farmers to second-class citizenship by providing huge sops to seed corporations;

- ✦ accept with few conditionalities, investment in several sectors by foreign industrialists and firms, with little regard for its ecological and social impacts.

The WTO does have some "safety" clauses which allow countries to impose restrictions and conditions based on public health, environment, or ethical reasons. However, these are generally lost under the sheer weight of the free trade verbiage, and it has proved rather difficult for countries to deny liberalisation using such reasons. The Indian Government has promised to use these and other discretionary powers to safeguard the country's interests . . . but all indications are to the contrary and indeed, it seems that the country is in a hurry to abide by most of the WTO conditions well before we even need to. Since the early 1990s, a combination of the IMF-World Bank influenced "globalisation" process and the WTO-dictated measures on import-export, have increasingly driven India's natural environment and the people who live on this environment, to the edge of a precipice. The only hope is the widespread resistance, in India and across the world, from farmers groups, NGOs, fisherfolk associations, and many sensitive governments, to the imposition of the WTO.

In the final analysis, the WTO juggernaut can only be defeated through such resistance, coupled with the use of other international agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, and initiatives towards more self-reliant production systems based on biodiversity, ecological sustainability, and social justice.