

F.E.S

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**I**N A world obsessed with issues like terrorism and intolerance, somebody somewhere writes a book and delivers a far graver warning on an issue as primordial as the human civilisation. He says our existence is at stake and unless we act quickly and decisively, we will all walk, nay, sprint into oblivion. Turns out, he is talking about the need to feed a growing population with limited and ever-dwindling resources. What the heck? Don't we already know it? Well, perhaps hunger is all too familiar and commonplace (and unglamorous) a subject to be taken more seriously, or to be inducted more frequently in our public discourse. Or perhaps, many of those supposed to deal with the issue are already too well-fed to feel the absence of food in somebody else's life. Either way, it's extremely ironical that in a country of over a billion people—that houses the largest population of the world's poor and the second-highest number of malnourished people—the space for food and agriculture in public debate is getting squeezed by the day.

Joel K Bourne Jr's *The End of Plenty* doesn't advance a grand theory that would require massive intellectual cerebrations to fathom, nor does it offer a perfect solution to the world's food woes. But it does well on what it set out to do: make the right noises to flag the devastating impact of our limited action, or the lack of it, to address hunger, and coax us out of inaction. What it also does is remind the haves of their role in ensuring that the lesser mortals remain fed too. Because, in a world of the dying and the malnourished, there is hardly any applause for the obese.

The precise message of Bourne's work is well brought out in its blurb by Charles C Mann, the author of *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* and *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*. Around 50 years ago, Mann says, one out of every three people lived in hunger. Today, the figure is one in eight, marking history's biggest and fastest increase in human well-being. But this achievement is at risk, as many believe the world's agricultural system might not be able to provide food for the nine-10 billion people who will be alive in 2050. As per a 2015 Food and Agriculture Organization report, about 793 million people are still undernourished globally, even though

# Food for thought

## A clarion call to policymakers around the world on the entire spectrum of challenges facing the food and agriculture sector



Women carry bundles of wheat through fields in Haryana. As per a 2015 Food and Agriculture Organization report, as many as 12.9% people are malnourished in developing nations. In India, the record is even worse at 15.2%

the number is down 167 million over the last decade. As many as 12.9% people are malnourished in developing nations and, in India, the record is even worse at 15.2%.

And therein lies the scale of the danger. Bourne's book seems to have taken a leaf out of 18th-century English scholar Thomas Malthus' theory on the relationship between food and population. Malthus believed nature permits only limited increase in food production, while population might rise at a faster pace. So when population growth will exceed the food supply, a large portion of mankind might be affected. Bourne's book contains enough evidence to suggest that Malthus' assessment may have been largely correct through a broad range of human history. But that doesn't mean it will always be, for Malthus



**THE END OF PLENTY**  
Joel K Bourne Jr  
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perhaps didn't foresee the success of modern agriculture and the promise of science. And the change was mostly brought about by one segment of society—farmers—a fact Bourne duly acknowledges.

Between 1960 and 2000, the global population rose from three billion to six billion, the fastest doubling in human

history. But annual grain production rose at an even faster pace, nearly tripling during the period. "Unlike previous centuries when more food was grown by cutting more forests and ploughing more plains to create more farmland, this time the increase came mostly from steadily increasing yields on land already in production," Bourne writes. "Farmers grew so much extra food during the 1960s that they actually helped alleviate global poverty by making food cheaper in most places around the world. The change was so dramatic, it was dubbed the 'green revolution'."

But then, as any agronomist knows, there were more resources to exploit in the 1960s and greater opportunities to improve yield from a very low level, as there were many mouths to feed. Between then and now, while the mouths to feed keep increasing, the resources

seem to be shrinking. Moreover, with growing fortune, people tend to shift to more protein-based foods like animal meat, for which fodder is required to be produced from the same farmland. Also, there is a growing danger of a different kind as well. Bourne says: "We are not simply feeding more food to ourselves and our farm animals. We are now feeding it to our cars as well. Ethanol distilleries currently consume more than a third of US corn crop; land devoted to bio-fuel crops is projected to increase four fold by 2030, rising to 10% of all arable land in the US and 15% of farmland in Europe." The author also brings to light the damaging after-effects of the green revolution (the excessive use of water, pesticides and fertilisers to produce more) on ecological balance and human lives in Punjab.

Here lies the danger, which can only be addressed through massive innovation that will also be in sync with nature, a fact that is getting increasingly lost on policymakers in most parts of the world.

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What is remarkable about Bourne's book is the exhaustive research and extensive travels he has undertaken to present the entire spectrum of challenges facing the food and agriculture sector, and the potential silver lining. The fruit of the research can be well utilised by other researchers and policymakers for the betterment of agriculture. Still, one can argue that the book should have focused more on possible solutions to the problems rather than concentrating too much on the woes themselves. That's where the book might disappoint a few. But since solutions are still a work in progress and the fact that Bourne is a journalist, and not a scientist despite his training as an agronomist, one can understand his limitations.

Richly researched and passionately presented, Bourne's book serves as a call to action, as the fear of the apocalypse has never looked more real.

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