

Embassy of India Washington is commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Nobel Laureate Norman Borlaug's visit to India on Aug 7. I thought it was most appropriate to recall this titan's contribution to the subcontinent at a time India and Pakistan are guns drawn. Here is the obit/tribute I wrote about this great man.

Norman Borlaug, India's annadaata, dies at 95

New Delhi: Long before Mr. Bush and Dr. Rice came by to leapfrog U.S-India ties to a new level, it was Prof. Wheat who jump-started and nourished the relationship. Norman Borlaug, the genial scientist-pacifist who died of cancer in Dallas on Saturday, was as much India's 'annadaata' as he was the Father of India's Green Revolution.

Around the time Dr. Borlaug arrived on the scene in the mid-1960s, the specter of famine, shortages and starvation hung over the sub-continent. India was importing huge quantities of food grains from the U.S – much of it dole – to feed its growing millions in a manner that was described as “ship-to-mouth.”

Enter Norman Borlaug, a strapping, self-made, sun-burnt American from the farmlands of Iowa. He had spent a decade by then in Mexico after hard-earned doctorate in the U.S. What he had pulled off in Mexico was a miracle that if successfully applied in India would fill its granaries to overflow -- as it eventually did.

By cranking up a wheat strain containing an unusual gene, Borlaug created the so-called “semi-dwarf” plant variety -- a shorter, stubbier, compact stalk that supported an enormous head of grain without falling over. This curious principle of shrinking the plant to increase the output on the head resulted in Indian farmers quadrupling their wheat, and later, rice production --- on the same acreage. It heralded the Green Revolution.

A Bharat Ratna should have been his for the taking, but he was not one to ask. He disdained all awards and honors, even making light of the Nobel (Peace) Prize when his Swedish forbears recognized his enormous contribution to mankind (Pakistan, China, and eventually the whole world benefited from his work in Mexico). When his wife ran to the fields to tell him about the recognition, the story goes, he shooed her away saying someone was pulling her leg. “More than any other person of this age,” the Nobel citation read, “he helped provide bread for a hungry world. We have made this choice in the hope that providing bread will also give the world peace.”

In several conversations and interviews with this correspondent, the last one in 2008 at the height of the food vs. fuel debate, Dr. Borlaug recalled his days and association with India with delight. In one conversation in 2006 during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit, he asked for good wishes to be conveyed to his economist friend from Punjab. When the message was relayed through the PM's then media advisor Sanjaya Baru, the Prime Minister gracefully recalled Dr. Borlaug's immense contribution to India's security in his address to the joint session of Congress the next day.

Borlaug has his critics for sure, most notably “organic” evangelists such as Dr. Vandana Shiva. After initially dismissing them as elitists, he acknowledged they did have a point about the dangers of excessive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, although he never once gave up his fundamental point that the world’s exploding population could not be fed without scientific intervention -- for which reason he also supported GM crops.

Last week, as this correspondent happened to drive through the lush grain fields of Punjab, it was another occasion to reflect on this titan’s contribution to India. Dr. Borlaug was fond of saying he could hear the hum of wheat heads swaying in the fields. If so, they would be playing a soulful dirge to the man who put food on our table.