



Indian farmers rise up against the corporate hijack of the world

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"We do not want Western money, technologies or 'experts' to impose their development model on us. We refuse to be used as political tools to ask the elites for reforms that we never demanded. We only want to organize our strength and combine it with the strength of other movements in the world to regain control over our lives. We are not working for a place on the global table of negotiations, nor for a bloody revolution; we are just working on the long-term process of construction of a different world, a world which will come about from the local to the global, from a shift in the values and everyday choices of millions of persons." The Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), or Karnataka State Farmers' Association, 18 June 1999.

An enormous peasant movement is building across the world to fight the global agrarian crisis. This crisis is existential and is faced by people of the land. It affects more than 70% of India's population including peasants, landless workers, fisher-folk, pastoralists and indigenous people. These people depend on the commons - water, forests and land - both for their own livelihoods and to help keep the rest of humanity alive by providing food. However they have been traded in for a development model that has caused immense social, ecological and health problems, and has turned the culture of peasant food production into an unviable life. Seeing no other option, half a million farmers have committed suicide in India in the last decade, in the biggest wave of suicides in human history. Many died ingesting the very pesticide that indebted them, and addressed their suicide notes not to their families but to the prime minister, in a clear denunciation of the political establishment which they blame for their misery.¹ This distressing phenomenon is not random, but a result of neo-liberal policies.

The impact of liberalization on India's agriculture

Liberalization came to India as a Pandora's Box in 1991. During a fiscal crisis, India had to approach the IMF for a loan that was conditionally tied to the promotion of privatization. The loan opened up the Indian economy to the world. Trade barriers were removed, and quantitative restrictions and import tariffs were brought down. Foreign investment was strongly encouraged in the Indian business sector, including through the privatization of key sectors and services. The country also experienced a new flood of consumer goods of global brands, such as Coca-Cola, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), and McDonald's. Liberalization has led to a concentration of wealth and power in the corporate business sector and among local elites, as well as to unprecedented levels of corruption. The consequences have been borne by local producers, small farmers, small industry and small retailers, who are being dispossessed as a result. The poor have become poorer and hungrier.

The natural result of liberalization was a dramatic increase in the investments in Indian agriculture made by multinational companies, including in seeds, fertilizers, research, technology, retail and processing. In the process the Indian government doled out benefits to corporations while cutting support to small farmers, who were left wholly dependent on the market to make a living.

Farmers were forced to compete with global mass-producing agribusiness players who drag down market prices. In order to survive, many started to adapt to market-friendly crops – cash crops for industries - and focus only on increasing yields to make an income. They began relying on expensive agribusiness inputs that promised to maximize yields, such as hybrid seeds and pesticides, whose prices are tied to global oil prices.

This has changed the very way in which farmers relate to the land. It has led to an erosion of the diversity of local farming systems and promoted instead a homogenous, chemically intensive, ecologically degrading, mono-culture based model. This industrial model is geared toward killing diversity in order to achieve economies of scale. Industries have control over not only input and technologies, but also governments, public research, markets and prices.

Peasants, who bear all the risks, become a mere recipient of orders from the market on what and how to grow. Agriculture has become agribusiness and the food-producing small peasant (a majority of the world's population) has been labeled "market inefficient". The small-peasant farm, however, is based on local knowledge developed over thousands of years, with a diversity of crops that provide food, medicine, fodder and clothing, and fulfill many other local needs. Here peasants have full control over their seeds, inputs and technologies. This type of farm is based on natural principles of diversity and symbiosis between living beings.

The chemical intensive model was introduced in India with the first green revolution of the 1960's. At the time it was a quick fix for India's dependence on food aid and chronic famine. The pursued policy package was a technological fix that did not address fundamental political issues such as land reform and the self-reliance of Indian farmers. It was coercively forced onto India by the US government which refused to provide much needed food aid unless its agribusiness interests were promoted in India.

Through such blackmailing they imposed hybrid seeds often mischaracterized as "high yielding", while they were in fact varieties that cannot be grown without the intense application of fertilizers, pesticides, water and other inputs. The benefits of this model accrued mainly to larger, elite farmers who were able to afford such technologies in the already fertile and irrigated zones of India, rather than to the majority of Indian farmers, who are small, dry land, and rain dependent.

Today there is no doubt that the green revolution has caused massive environmental and health problems, a depletion of biodiversity, lower ground water tables and stagnating or lower yields. Until 1970 India had 110,000 varieties of rice, today only 6,000 survive, explains Meet Debal Deb, a full-time rice conservationist, in an interview in *The Hindu* (6 April 2012). Moreover, industrial agriculture accounts for 40% of greenhouse gases, making it one of the main global contributors to climate change.

50 years of green revolution and 20 years of liberalization have contributed to rising levels of hunger. India routinely exports food crops, while millions starve at home. It also routinely imports produce, directly undercutting local farmers. For example the dumping of soya and palm oil has destroyed the diverse local Indian oil industry based on dry land farmers who produced oilseeds, coconuts, groundnut, linseed, sunflower and sesame. India has gone from being totally self-sufficient for edible oil, to the world's biggest importer.ⁱⁱ Today half of Indian children are malnourished and hunger levels are higher than in sub-Saharan Africa. Ironically half of India's hungry are themselves farmers, as food costs rise and farm prices fall.ⁱⁱⁱ

Experiments in liberalization were first carried out on cotton crops. Cotton is also infamous for involving the highest number of farmer suicides in India. Monsanto's genetically modified *Bacillus thuringiensis* cotton, in short Bt cotton, was pushed through aggressive and false advertising campaigns claiming to increase farmers profits and environmental benefits. However, even the central government has since admitted that it is contributing to farmer suicides.^{iv} The privatization of farming inputs has led to a jump in the cost of cultivation. Hybrids and GM seeds cannot be saved for resowing, as their offspring are not true to their parent plants, which means that farmers are forced to keep on buying new seeds from the companies. However, to date, most of Indian agriculture still relies on farm saved seed.

Breaking this ancient practice is key to the seed companies' quest to increase their profits. In the absence of institutional credit, farmers have to turn to predatory private money lenders who often charge exorbitant interest rates. Often the moneylenders are also seed and pesticide agents.

Agribusiness has been raking in profits thanks to the dependence of farmers. In the seed sector, prices have increased dramatically. Following the introduction of Bt cotton, the price of cotton seed jumped from Rs 5 per kg to Rs 1,600 per 450 gm (an increase of 5520 %), of which Monsanto's royalty was Rs 725, explains Vandana Shiva (Deccan Chronicle, 25 May 2005). Such high royalties have in the past led to court battles between state governments and seed companies – the state of Andhra Pradesh was taken to court by Monsanto when its high cotton prices were regulated.

On the technology front, controversial GM technology is being aggressively pushed at the cost of agroecological technologies of local farming that rely on local inputs and the knowledge of farmers. GM technology belongs to large multinational companies which use patents to control markets. Big multinationals have taken over smaller companies, and mergers have also occurred, increasing even further the concentration in the hands of a few large companies.^v Cotton is also a case in point for the concentration of the input market in the hands of private players. 90% of all the cotton area under cultivation involves Monsanto's Bt cotton, while 60 Indian seed companies are indirectly or directly controlled by Monsanto.^{vi}

Corporate technologies are pushed through the quelling of democratic debate and draconian measures. The highly controversial Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India bill (BRAI), to be passed by Parliament, aims to promote GMOs by centralizing decision making under this authority. The measure blocks participation from state governments, the traditional decision makers on agricultural issues, as well as from the environment and health ministries. In fact one clause threatens with imprisonment anyone spreading "false information" on GMOs. Under this clause, activists, farmers or citizens who raise concerns about GMOs could easily be put behind bars.

On the ground there is vociferous opposition by farmers. This was particularly evident when Monsanto lost the battle to legalize Bt Brinjal (aubergine). The Indian government put an indefinite moratorium on Bt Brinjal following nationwide protests by farmers, activists and consumers. Brinjal differed from cotton in that it was a food crop, one of India's most important staple crops, and a basis for the country's food sovereignty. As with Bt Cotton, Monsanto had claimed that Bt Brinjal was essential to feeding the growing population of India. Farmers argued that there was no need to increase brinjal production, in fact there was such an overproduction of brinjal that farmers were throwing their produce away on the streets. Clearly hunger in India today is not caused by low production or poor technology but by an abysmal distribution system and a lack of political will to help India's small farmers feed the country.

India's public research system has not been spared either. Monsanto has launched a nationwide campaign doling out millions in scholarships and grants at top public universities, in order to attract research talent for the development of its own hybrids. What is disturbing is that these public institutions are supposed to be run by taxpayers in order to carry out research for the common good. Instead these direct links between public universities and private corporations steer universities towards working for companies instead of small farmers. Farmer organizations have been demanding that scientific research be geared towards diverse agroecological farming systems developed in collaboration with farmers.

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously said: "Control food and you control the people." This pretty much sums up the main strategy of agribusiness. Monsanto's reported objective is "No Food Shall Be Grown That We Don't Own". People movements such as La Via Campesina have confronted this agenda with the alternative paradigm of food sovereignty, i.e. people control over the food system. They stress that feeding a nation is an issue of sovereignty and that profit-making entities cannot be allowed to take over the food system. Food sovereignty argues that people have a right to produce and consume culturally appropriate, affordable, nutritious and poison-free food. To fulfill this right they must have control over and access to the means of food production and distribution, including seeds, land, technologies, prices and markets. Under food sovereignty, food policy is not based on long-distance imports, or on the patenting of seeds and alien technologies that damage the environment, or on diverting land to unproductive uses, or putting small farmers out of business. Rather, food sovereignty is based on providing autonomy and a dignified life to rural populations while respecting their vital role in feeding the nation. It is in direct contradiction to the corporate food system.

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ⁱ Center for Human Rights and Global Justice & International Human Rights Clinic, "Every thirty minutes: Farmers Suicides, Human Rights, and the Agrarian Crisis in India", New York, New York University School of Law, 2011: <http://www.chrgj.org/publications/docs/every30min.pdf>:

ⁱⁱ South Indian Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements (SICCFM): <http://siccfm.blogspot.de/2012/01/trade-liberalization-and-impact-on.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ [Vandana Shiva](#), "Hunger, by design", The Asian Age, 25 May 2012, <http://www.asianage.com/columnists/hunger-design-917>

^{iv} [Zia Haq](#), "Ministry blames Bt cotton for farmer suicides", Hindustan Times, 26 March 2012: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/Business/Ministry-blames-Bt-cotton-for-farmer-suicides/Article1-830798.aspx>

^v These companies include Monsanto, Bayer CropScience, Syngenta, Advanta, Hicks-Muse-Tate, Emergent Genetics, Dow Agro, BioSeed Genetics International Inc., Tokita Seed Co., Nunhems Zaden BV and others.

^{vi} La Via Campesina, Friends of the Earth International, Combat Monsanto, "Combatting Monsanto: Grassroots resistance to the corporate power of agribusiness in the era of the 'green economy' and a changing climate", March 2012: <http://viacampesina.org/downloads/pdf/en/Monsanto-Publication-EN-Final-Version.pdf>