

As the 2019 Indian General Election Takes Place, Are the Nation's Farmers Being Dealt a Knock-Out Blow?

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

In 1830, British colonial administrator Lord Metcalfe [said](#) India's villages were little republics that had nearly everything they could want for within themselves. India's ability to endure derived from these communities:

"Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down but the village community remains the same. It is in a high degree conducive to their happiness, and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence."

Metcalfe was acutely aware that to subjugate India, this capacity to 'endure' had to be broken. Since gaining independence from the British, India's rulers have only further served to undermine village India's vibrancy. But now a potential death knell for rural India and its villages is underway.

There is a plan for the future of India and most of its current farmers don't have a role in it. Successive administrations have been making farming financially unviable with the aim of moving farmers out of agriculture and into the cities to work in construction, manufacturing or the service sector, despite these sectors not creating anything like the number of jobs required.

The aim is to displace the existing labour-intensive system of food and agriculture with one dominated by a few transnational corporate agribusiness concerns which will then control the sector. Agriculture is to be wholly commercialised with large-scale, mechanised (monocrop) enterprises replacing family-run farms that help sustain hundreds of millions of rural livelihoods, while feeding the urban masses.

So why would anyone set out to deliberately run down what is effectively a productive system of agriculture that feeds people, sustains livelihoods and produces sufficient buffer stocks?

Part of the answer comes down to India being the [largest recipient](#) of World Bank loans in the history of that institution and [acting on its 'advice'](#). Part of it results from the neoliberal-driven [US-Indo Knowledge Agreement on Agriculture](#). Either way, it means India's rulers are facilitating the needs of (Western) capitalism and all it entails: a system based on endless profit growth, crises of overproduction and market saturation and a need to constantly seek out and expand into new, untapped (foreign) markets to maintain profitability.

And as a market for proprietary seeds, chemical inputs and agricultural technology and machinery, India is vast. The potential market for herbicide growth alone for instance is huge: sales [could reach USD 800 million](#) this year with scope for even greater expansion. And with restrictions on GMOs in place in Europe and elsewhere, India is again regarded as a massive potential market.

A few years ago, influential 'global communications, stakeholder engagement and business strategy' company [APCO Worldwide](#) stated that India's resilience in weathering the global downturn and financial crisis has made governments, policy-makers, economists, corporate houses and fund managers believe that the country can play a significant role in the recovery of the global economy in the years ahead.

Decoded, this means corporations moving into regions and nations and displacing indigenous systems of production and consumption. And where agriculture is concerned, this predatory capitalism hides behind emotive, seemingly altruistic rhetoric about 'helping farmers' and the need to 'feed a burgeoning population' (regardless of the fact this is exactly what India's farmers have been doing).

Prime Minister Modi is certainly on board. He has proudly stated that India is now one of the most 'business friendly' countries in the world. What he really means is that India is in compliance with World Bank directives on 'Ease of Doing Business' and '[Enabling the Business of Agriculture](#)': facilitating [environment-destroying policies](#) and forcing working people to take part in a [race to the bottom](#) based on '[free' market fundamentalism](#).

None of this is a recipe for national sovereignty, let alone food security. Renowned agronomist MS Swaminathan [recently stated](#):

"Independent foreign policy is only possible with food security. Therefore, food has more than just eating implications. It protects national sovereignty, national rights and national prestige."

Despite such warnings, India's agrarian base is being uprooted. In a [recent interview](#), Director of Food First Eric Holt-Giménez notes that when Cargill, Bayer or Syngenta say they need to expand the use of GMOs or the other latest technologies so they can feed the world, they're really talking about capturing the market that's still controlled by peasant agriculture. To get those markets they first must knock out the peasantry.

Looking at the Industrial Revolution in England, historian [Michael Perelman](#) has detailed the [processes](#) that whipped the English peasantry into a workforce 'willing' to accept factory wage labour. Peasants were forced to leave their land and go to work for below-subsistence wages in dangerous factories being set up by a new, rich class of industrial capitalists. Perelman describes the policies through which peasants were forced out of agriculture, not least by the barring of access to common land. A largely self-reliant population was starved of its productive means.

Today, we hear seemingly benign terms like 'foreign direct investment', 'ease of doing business', making India 'business friendly' or 'enabling the business of agriculture'. But behind the World Bank/corporate-inspired rhetoric lies the hard-nosed approach of modern-day capitalism that is no less brutal for Indian farmers than early industrial

capitalism was for English peasants.

GDP growth has been fuelled on the back of cheap food and the subsequent impoverishment of farmers: the gap between farmers' income and the rest of the population has widened enormously. While underperforming corporations receive [massive handouts and have loans written off](#), the lack of a secure income, exposure to international market prices and cheap imports contribute to farmers' misery.

Farmers must also contend with profiteering seed and chemical companies, corrupt middlemen, high interest loans and debt and the overall impacts of the corporate-inspired US-Indo Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture that flung open the sector to US agribusiness. Up to 400,000 farmers have taken their lives since 1997 and millions more are experiencing economic distress.

As independent cultivators are bankrupted, the aim is that land will eventually be amalgamated to facilitate large-scale industrial cultivation. Those who remain in farming will be absorbed into corporate supply chains and squeezed as they work on contracts dictated by large agribusiness and chain retailers.

Even the scaling up of Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) across Andhra Pradesh is a [cause for concern](#). For instance, the involvement of BNP Paribas Bank (which has funded numerous questionable projects, including in India), the Gates Foundation (with its staunch commitment to GMOs and gene editing technology and its cosy relationship with global agribusiness) and the potential illegal accessing of agrobiodiversity and traditional knowledge by foreign entities does not bode well.

There are also serious concerns about farmer' interests being ignored. In effect, ZBNF seems to be focused more on global export chains, the further commodification of agriculture, facilitating consumerism and the involvement of unethical international finance. Even here it seems Western interests are being handed the reins.

If British rule, the [impacts of the Green Revolution](#) and neglect and mismanagement of the countryside since independence all served to undermine rural India and its inhabitants, Western agricapital now seems intent on delivering a knock-out blow. The timely reminder as voting in the 2019 Indian General Election gets underway is that certain leading politicians have been all too willing to facilitate the process.

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