

Breaking the Backbone of Indian Society: The Small Farmer

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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Despite what many people might think, [small farms actually produce most of the world's food](#): a lower estimate is 53% for the world as a whole, but others have put the figure at 75%.

The UN Environment Programme, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, UN FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food all estimate that small farmers produce up to 80% of the food in non-industrialised countries.

The importance of smallholder/family farms can also be viewed from the perspective that they meet between [34% and 114%](#) of domestic calorific requirements across the globe.

These figures are all the more impressive when we consider that existing policy frameworks are often not supportive of small farms and are even outright hostile towards them (for example, see [this](#) by the Oakland Institute). Facilitated by an appropriate policy framework, it is therefore reasonable to assume that smallholders could feed the global population.

Throughout the world, however, there is a concerted effort to remove smallholder farmers from the land. They are being squeezed onto less and less land (25 percent, according to [GRAIN](#), but 53 percent, according to [this](#) paper), and the world is fast losing farms and farmers through the [concentration of land](#) into the hands of big agribusiness, institutional investors and the powerful moneyed classes. If nothing is done to reverse this trend, the world could lose its capacity to feed itself.

In India, small farms account for around 92% of all farms and occupy around 40% of all agricultural land (see [this report](#) by GRAIN). They form the bedrock of food production. Yet, as in many other places, the policy framework within which they operate is making farming financially non-viable for them to carry on.

Hundreds of thousands of farmers have taken their lives since 1997, and many more are experiencing economic distress or have left farming as a result of debt, a shift to (GM) [cash crops and economic 'liberalisation'](#). Facilitated by the WTO and the US-India Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, there is a [deliberate strategy](#) to make agriculture financially non-viable for India's small farms, to get most farmers out of farming and to impose a World Bank sanctioned model of agriculture.

The aim is to displace the current model and replace it with a system of chemical-intensive industrial (GMO) agriculture suited to the needs of Western agribusiness, food processing and retail concerns. That system will determine what is grown, who grows it, how it is grown, who processes it, how it is processed and who sells it.

From seed to plate, transnational agribusiness and retailers will determine everything. This is the pay-off for India's nuclear agreement with the US and is the impetus behind the [Knowledge Agreement on Agriculture](#).

If you want to see the kind of impact this could have, look no further than what has happened in Mexico on the back of NAFTA, in terms of rising [food insecurity, bad food and health and poisoned agriculture](#) (not to mention a devastated economy with former workers driven into [the arms of drug cartels](#) to make a living).

It's not difficult to see where policy makers' priorities lie in India, as trade and food policy analyst [Devinder Sharma](#) highlights:

"Agriculture has been systematically killed over the last few decades... because the World Bank and big business have given the message that this is the only way to grow economically... 60 percent of the population lives in the villages or in the rural areas and is involved in agriculture, and less than two percent of the annual budget goes to agriculture... When you are not investing in agriculture... You are not wanting it to perform..."

The great Indian con-trick

There is a huge con-trick taking place in India: support given to agriculture is portrayed as a drain on the economy and is reduced, while the genuinely massive drain of tax breaks, bail outs, sops, tax avoidance and evasion that benefit industry and the rich are afforded scant attention. Despite these advantages, industry has failed to deliver. And yet regardless of the gross under-investment in agriculture, it still manages to deliver bumper harvests year after year.

Devinder Sharma continues:

"In the last 10 years, we had 36 lakh crore going to the corporates by way of tax exemptions. Where are the jobs? They just created 1.5 crore (15 million) jobs in the last ten years. Where are the exports? ... The only sector that has performed very well in this country is agriculture. Year after year we are having a bumper harvest. Why can't we strengthen that sector and stop the population shift from the villages...?" (36 lakh crore is 36 trillion rupees: 68 rupees = 1 USD)

What we are witnessing is an illogical, ongoing attack on the smallholder farmer.

It is illogical not least because there is consistent evidence from peer-reviewed papers that small-scale farms are often [more productive per unit area, generate more jobs and money within local economies](#) than large-scale industrialised farms and contain [more agrobiodiversity and are more resilient and contribute better to dietary diversity](#). Dietary diversity is a [key indicator](#) of overall food security.

It therefore comes as little surprise that the [International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge and Science for Development Report](#) stated that smallholder, traditional farming can deliver food security in low-income countries through sustainable agri-ecological systems.

So why eradicate this model of farming?

This is an issue that the FAO raises.

In 2013, the FAO's High Level Panel of Experts (2013) stated:

“the fact that smallholder agriculture is able in some cases to outperform large-scale agriculture in terms of yield should be reason enough to concentrate on the question of overcoming the problem of limited or restricted access to factors and inputs to production, rather than to focus on the change of model/scale.”

Yet, regardless of the clear advantages of small-scale farms, India's policy makers are intent on changing the model. There seems to be a blind rush towards displacing farmers and a belief that the corporate-industrial sector can pave the way to a brighter future.

Corporate-industrial India has failed to deliver in terms of boosting exports or creating jobs, despite the massive hand outs and tax exemptions given to it [see [this](#) and [this](#)]. The number of jobs created in India between 2005 and 2010 was 2.7 million (the years of high GDP growth). According to [International Business Times](#), 15 million enter the workforce every year.

With GDP growth slowing and automation replacing human labour the world over in order to decrease labour costs and boost profit, there are no jobs to cater for the hundreds of millions of agricultural workers who are to be displaced from the land or those whose livelihoods will be destroyed as transnational corporations move in and seek to capitalise food-related sectors that currently employ tens of millions.

While there is no logic to what is taking place, it is clear to many why it is happening. India's development is being hijacked by the country's wealthy ruling elite and multinational corporations. Farmers are being sold out to corporate interests whose only concern is to how secure profits: Monsanto has appropriated hundreds of millions of dollars from small farmers in India, who live on a knife edge.

Thanks to its political and commercial influence, Monsanto has already captured the cotton industry in India with its GMOs. It is increasingly shaping agri-policy and the knowledge paradigm by funding agricultural research in public universities and institutes. Its practices and colonisation of institutions have led to it being called the '[contemporary East India Company](#)', and regulatory bodies are now severely [compromised and riddled with conflicts of interest](#) where decision-making over GMOs are concerned.

The Monsanto enterprise in India is a corrupt one, something that the pro-GMO lobby conveniently ignores. Just like it chooses to ignore the [fraudulent way](#) by which GMOs were placed onto the commercial market in the US. [Vandana Shiva](#) notes that on a global level Monsanto imposed the false idea of 'manufacturing' and 'inventing' seeds in order to slap patents on them or in India's case extract massive royalties. Its collection of these royalties

as 'trait value' or as a 'fee for technology traits' is an intellectual property rights category that does not exist in any legal framework. It was concocted by Monsanto lawyers to work outside of the laws of the land and is thus illegal. Furthermore, the introduction of GMOs without approvals, and thus Monsanto's original entry into India, was a violation and subversion of India's biosafety regulations.

To compound the deceptions, transnational agribusiness forwards the myth that GM food is necessary to feed the world's burgeoning population. Its claims are always hidden behind a flimsy and cynical veil of humanitarian intent (helping the poor and hungry), which is [easily torn away](#) to expose the hypocrisy and self-interest that lies beneath. The world does not need GM to feed itself. These humanitarian sentiments are little more than a Trojan horse aimed at securing greater control of food and agriculture.

The roots of hunger and food poverty result from structural factors, including trade, distribution problems, lack of personal income and the increasingly [globalised system of industrialised agriculture and food production](#) (for instance, see [this](#) and [this](#)). The companies behind the GM project are part of that system: they [fuel it and profit from it](#). Through patents and royalties, GM is little more than a strategy to secure greater profits and greater control over food and agriculture.

India's Standing Committee on Agriculture unequivocally concluded that GM seeds and foods are dangerous to human, animal and environmental health and directed the former Government of Manmohan Singh to ban GMOs. Despite this and the recommendations to put a hold on open field GM trials by the Supreme Court-appointed Technical Expert Committee, such trials have been green-lighted.

The GM biotech sector should not be trusted. As the sector's largest player, Monsanto is responsible for knowingly damaging people's health and polluting the environment and is [guilty of a catalogue of decades-long deceptive, duplicitous and criminal practices](#).

The sector attempts to control the 'science' around its product, places restrictions on any independent research into its products, censors findings that indicate the deleterious impacts of its products and attacks scientists who reach conclusions not to its liking.

It cannot demonstrate that yields are better, nutritional values are improved, health is not damaged or that harm to the environment does not occur with the adoption of GMOs. Independent studies and evidence, not inadequate industry funded or back ones, have indicated yields are often worse and pesticide use has increased, health is negatively impacted, soil is damaged and biodiversity is undermined, among other things ([this report](#) with links to numerous official reports and peer-reviewed papers supports these claims).

Transnational Agribusiness and US strategy

The US has for many decades used agriculture as a means of subjugating other nations. The oil-rich Rockefeller family set out to control and profit from global agriculture via the petrochemical-dependent 'green revolution'. Along with other players, such as Cargill Grain Company, Rockefeller interests set out to destroy family farms in the US and the indigenous agriculture and food security of other countries. This hegemonic export-oriented, dollar strengthening strategy was actively supported by their stooges in the US government (for a brief summary of what occurred, see [this](#)) and facilitated globally through 'free' trade

agreements, the IMF, World Bank and WTO. Thanks to the agritech corporations, GMOs now represent the ultimate stranglehold of US interests over food via seed patenting and intellectual property rights.

Of course, GM is phase two of the green revolution. The mainstream narrative about the green revolution is that it was a hugely successful humanitarian venture that saves tens of millions of lives. We are now hearing the same rhetoric to promote GM. Recently deceased farmer and campaigner Bhaskar Save outlines [here](#) why the green revolution was a disaster for India and any speculative assessments or rhetoric about its successes must be placed within a [suitable context](#) and [contested](#).

Despite compliant politicians and officials in high places in India who seem hell-bent on capitulating to transnational agribusiness interests, many recognise the dangers and are actively campaigning in favour of traditional agriculture. However, they are attacked and accused of slowing down growth. Certain activists and civil organisations are also [accused of working against the national interest by colluding with foreign interests to undermine development](#). The hypocrisy is obvious: the state itself has for a long time been colluding with foreign interests to undermine the basis of traditional agriculture.

This is similar to the [type of cynical attack](#) we see all over the world. Taking the case of GMOs, any resistance to their introduction is portrayed as robbing food from the bellies of the poor and as 'anti-human'. While espousing [fake concern](#) for the poor in order to help line the pockets of big agribusiness, the pro-GMO lobby says nothing about the [structural violence](#) waged on rural communities thanks to agri-business-backed IMF/World Bank/WTO policies or the [devastating effects](#) of GMOs in places like South America.

While dodging these issues, that lobby sets out to denigrate opponents and to portray the real solutions (as opposed to the bogus GM solution) its critics offer for hunger and poverty as being ideologically driven. This lobby has been unable to win the debate on GM, so slick PR, dirty tricks and smears have become the order of the day. Its twisted logic effectively attempts to side-line reality. For example, GM is being [cynically offered as a solution to reduce edible oil imports](#), which India was virtually self-sufficient in prior to trade rules decimating indigenous production: a case of running down a sector and then offering a bogus solution as the remedy to reduce the reliance on imports.

The [political backing](#) for GMOs by the US State Department, the strategic position of the US GM biotech sector in international trade agreements (from TTIP to the US-India Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture) and at the WTO and the push to get GMOs into India does not bode well.

The GMO onslaught in India is ultimately part of a [US-led neoliberal invasion](#) (and part of a [global war on working people](#) – whether they are smallholders in India or workers in Greece or the US), resulting in the selling off to private concerns of seeds, retail, water, airports, land, industry, energy, telecommunications, etc.

If the beneficiaries are not always India's ruling elite, then they are its senior associates in the [interlocking directorate](#) of state-corporate interests in the West who have plundered their own economies and are now plundering the rest of the planet under the guise of 'globalisation'. Those behind this project regard the folk whose lands are taken, wealth appropriated and livelihoods stripped away as 'collateral damage'.

Part of the strategy is a massive PR campaign that involves trying to convince the public that all of this is necessary and represents progress.

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Articles by: [Colin Todhunter](#)

About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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