

# **“WTO Kills Farmers”: India Free Market Reforms Trigger Farmers’ Suicides**

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Global Research, August 12, 2007  
12 August 2007

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Global Economy](#)

Many of us remember the crucial failure of the WTO’s Fifth Ministerial Conference in Cancun, Mexico in 2003. It was on this day that Lee Kyung Hae, leader of the Korean Federation of Advanced Farmers, discovered that his loudest voice was in death.

Wearing a sandwich board that read, “The WTO kills farmers!”- Lee took a knife and stabbed himself in the chest. His death was ignored by the WTO and the mainstream media. Given the lack of attention, many argue that his violent end was in vain. Sadly, his dishonored death is one of thousands being ignored by corporate mainstream media.

In 2003, 17,107 farmers committed suicide. In the last few years, the number of documented suicides in India’s rural areas has skyrocketed. These suicides have become so commonplace that they are mystifying a nation and polarizing the debate over biotechnology.

On the surface, the massive numbers of farmer suicides lack the social unity and revolutionary opposition other revolutions employ. In fact, the local Indian government refuses to address the correlation between agrarian suicides and economic exploitation, making it difficult for the international public to apply real social forces to these farmers’ actions.

However, research shows the massive numbers of farmer suicides are linked not only with economic disparity, but with corporate exploitation by multinational agribusinesses.

Whether addressed as “agrarian martyrs” or merely desperate peasantry, exploited Indian farmers, like Lee Kyung Hae, have found that their loudest voice is in death.

In a religiously and ethnically segmented nation, their actions have founded a cultural unity that confronts the evils of globalization. Thus, the insanely high volume of farmer suicides serves as a shockingly unique medium of proletarian outcry.

The Republic of India is one of the top twelve nations in the world in terms of biodiversity. Featuring nearly 8% of all recorded species on Earth, this subcontinent is home to 47,000 plant species and 81,000 animal species. Simultaneously, India is home to the largest network of indigenous farmers in the world. Yet biotechnology has led to extreme environmental degradation in the region, threatening to replace its diverse ecology with corporate hybrid monoculture. The original Green Revolution was supposed to save 58 million Indian hectares. Today, 120 million of the 142 million cultivable hectares is degraded- over twice the magnitude that the Green Revolution attempted to save! In the Indian state of Punjab, 84 of the 138 developmental blocks are recorded as having 98%

ground water exploitation. The critical limit is 80%. The result has had devastating impacts on the agricultural community, leaving exploited farmers with little choice of action. In the past six years, more than three thousand farmers have committed suicide in Andhra Pradesh, that is six to ten farmers everyday! When did this start? Why is this occurring?

And why have such little media attention been given to this crisis?

There are three potential causes for the onset of these self-inflicted massacres:

- 1) exploitation by multinational agribusinesses
- 2) severe economic disparity and
- 3) a means of resistance by exposing the abuse of the agrarian sphere.

In 1998, around the inception of mass farmer suicides, the World Bank imposed regulations that opened up India's seed market to corporate multinationals like Monsanto. Non-renewable GM crops now replaced a self-sustainable farming system that had been perfected over thousands of years.

While corporate agribusinesses impose their hybrid monoculture on peasant farmers, they refuse to consider the biodiversity that is desired to maintain traditional practices.

For example, 75% of cultivable Indian land exists in dry zones. Non GM rice utilizes 3,000 liters of water in order to produce one kilo, while non-renewable hybrid rice requires 5,000 liters per kilo! Cotton, largely considered the "pesticide treadmill," makes India the third largest cotton grower in the world, accounting for 1/3 of its export earnings.

Continuous GM cotton crop failures resulted in the state of Andhra Pradesh, the seed capital of India, prohibiting the sales of Bt cotton varieties by Monsanto. This perpetual poverty is sustained by the bourgeois pursuit of maximizing production at the lowest possible expense!!!!

Last year the Indian government forced Monsanto to cut the royalties they receive from the patented seeds in India- but Monsanto has appealed to the Indian Supreme Court. The economic disparity of Indian farmers only increases as they try to keep up with the lowest import prices. It is estimated that they are losing \$26 billion annually.

In fact, non Indian farmers receive six times the amount of GDP that Indian farmers get, requiring an exorbitant amount of loans to be taken out. While 90% of farm loans come from money lenders, they are charged anywhere from 36-50% interest, placing them in a cyclical mode of poverty. Surely poverty alone cannot be responsible for such massive amounts of bloodshed! After all, poverty has always existed, so what is it about current conditions that have led to all this bloodshed? The fact is that mass suicides have transformed these farmers into agrarian martyrs for peasants everywhere. Their deaths are inspiring significant social forces both by the government and among its citizens. In response to the crisis, the government has implemented compensation laws in which the victim's family receives free electricity and \$3,500. In response to economic disparity, the Indian government imposed a one year suspension for all agriculture loans while waiving interest.

However, monetary compensation laws only provide more economic incentive for suicide,

thus the citizens of India are forced to devise alternative solutions to the problem. Arguably, the mass suicides can be seen as a revolutionary tactic... Dr. R. Raghuarami, an Indian psychologist, argues that many of the farmers are taking their lives with direct intent of addressing attention to the agrarian struggle. He argues that "suicide by one farmer is inviting others to do the same." The All India

Kisan Sabha (AIKS), or peasants front of the Communist Party in India view this agrarian crisis as a direct result of proletarian exploitation. S. Ramachandran Pillai, AIKS president, "called for a united movement of the peasantry to fight the neo-liberal imperialist offensive looming large all over the country." AIKS has formed allies with other social groups like the Agricultural Workers Union, Adivasi Kshema Samithi, Center for Indian Trade Unions and the Democratic Youth Federation of India to combat neoliberalism and to voice demands for proletarian justice.

The nation is calling upon cultural unification to combat the imperialist offensive and the corrupt bourgeois government. The debate on the true reasons for the uproar of suicides and the effects of GM crops remains heated... but, unfortunately, it is very likely that the rest of the world would not have been aware of this current crisis if it were not for these intense disputes. With each passing day, an estimated seven more farmers die.... the question remains, are you listening?

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