

The Empire Strikes Back: Leaving Indian Farmers in the Dirt

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By 2050, if current policies continue, India could have numerous mega-cities with [up to 30-40 million inhabitants](#) and just two to three hundred million people (perhaps 15-20% of the population) left in an [emptied-out countryside](#). Given current trends in the job market, it could mean [tens of millions](#) of city-based rural migrants without much work: victims of the ill thought out policies we currently see being pushed through.

In the book '[The Invention of Capitalism](#)', **Michael Perelman** lays bare the [iron fist](#) which whipped the English peasantry into a workforce willing to accept factory wage labour. English peasants didn't want to give up their rural communal lifestyle, leave their land and go work for below-subsistence wages in dangerous factories being set up by a new class of industrial capitalists. A series of laws and measures served to force peasants off the land and deprive them of their productive means.

In India, what we are currently witnessing is a headlong rush to facilitate (foreign) capital and the running down of the existing system of agriculture. While India's farmers suffer as the sector is [deliberately being made financially non-viable](#) for them, we see state-of-the-art airports, IT parks and highways being built to allow the corporate world to spread its tentacles everywhere to the point that every aspect of culture, infrastructure and economic activity is commodified for corporate profit.

GDP growth – the holy grail of 'development' which stems from an outmoded thinking and has done so much damage to the environment – has been fuelled on the back of cheap food and the subsequent impoverishment of farmers. The gap between their income and the rest of the population, including public sector workers, has widened enormously to the point where rural India consumes less calories than it did 40 years ago. Meanwhile, corporations receive massive handouts and interest-free loans but have failed to spur job creation; yet any proposed financial injections (or loan waivers) for agriculture (which would pale into insignificance compared to corporate subsidies/written off loans) are depicted as a drain on the economy.

Let them eat dirt

Although farmers continue to produce bumper harvests, they are being put out of business by underinvestment, the lack of a secure income and support prices, exposure to artificially cheap imports, neoliberal reforms, profiteering companies which supply seeds and proprietary inputs and the overall impacts of the corporate-backed Indo-US [Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture](#).

For all the talk of ‘helping’ farmers, the plan is to displace the existing system of livelihood-sustaining smallholder agriculture with one dominated from seed to plate by transnational agribusiness and retail concerns. To facilitate this, independent cultivators are being bankrupted, land is to be amalgamated to facilitate large-scale industrial cultivation and those farmers that are left will be absorbed into corporate supply chains and squeezed as they work on contracts, the terms of which will be dictated by large agribusiness and chain retailers.

Some like to call this adopting a market-based approach: a system in the ‘market-driven’ US that receives a taxpayer five-year farm bill subsidy of around \$500 billion.

This clearly a con-trick and not the way forward:

“If government can be convinced or forced by the power of the global grassroots to reduce and eventually cut off these \$500 billion in annual subsidies to industrial agriculture and Big Food, and instead encourage and reward family farmers and ranchers who improve soil health, biodiversity, animal health and food quality, we can simultaneously reduce global poverty, improve public health, and restore climate stability.” [Ronnie Cummins](#), director of the Organic Consumers Association

Well over 300,000 Indian farmers have taken their lives since 1997 and millions more are experiencing economic distress. Over 6,000 are leaving the sector each day. And yet the corporate-controlled type of agriculture being imposed and/or envisaged only leads to degraded soil, less diverse and nutrient-deficient diets, polluted water, water shortages and poor health.



Although various high-level reports (as I outlined [previously](#)) have concluded that policies need to support more resilient, diverse, sustainable (smallholder) agroecological methods of farming and develop decentralised, locally-based food economies, the trend continues to move in the opposite direction towards industrial-scale agriculture and centralised chains for the benefit of Monsanto, Cargill, Bayer and other transnational players.

The plan is to shift hundreds of millions from the countryside and into the cities to serve as a cheap army of labour for offshored foreign companies, mirroring what China has become: a US colonial outpost for manufacturing that has boosted corporate profits at the expense of US jobs. In India, rural migrants are to become the new ‘serfs’ of the informal services and construction sectors or to be trained for low-level industrial jobs.

Even here, however, India might have missed the boat as jobless ‘growth’ seems to be on the horizon and the effects of automation and artificial intelligence are eradicating the need

for human labour across many sectors.

If we look at the various western powers, to whom many of India's top politicians look to for inspiration, their paths to economic prosperity occurred on the back of colonialism and imperialist intent. Do India's politicians think this mindset has disappeared? The same mentality now lurks behind the neoliberal globalisation agenda hidden behind terms and policies like 'foreign direct investment', 'ease of doing business', making India 'business friendly' or 'enabling the business of agriculture'.

Behind the World Bank/corporate-inspired rhetoric that is driving the overhaul of Indian agriculture is a brand of corporate imperialism which is turning out to be no less brutal for Indian farmers than early industrial capitalism was in England for its peasantry. The East India company might have gone, but today the bidding of elite interests (private capital) is being carried out by compliant politicians, the World Bank, the WTO and lop-sided, egregious back-room trade deals.

And all for a future of what – vast swathes of chemically-drenched monocrop fields containing genetically modified plants or [soils rapidly turning](#) into a chemical cocktail of proprietary biocides, dirt and dust?

Thanks to the [model of agriculture](#) being supported and advocated, India will edge nearer to having more [drought vulnerable](#) regions, even more degraded soils (which is already a [major problem](#)) as well as [spiralling rates of illness](#) throughout the population due to bad diets, denutritified food, agrochemical poisoning and processed food laced with toxic ingredients.

[Monsanto-Bayer, Cargill and other transnational corporations](#) will decide on what is to be eaten and how it is to be produced and processed. A corporate takeover spearheaded by companies whose character is clear for all to see:

“The Indo-US Knowledge Initiative in Agriculture with agribusinesses like Monsanto, WalMart, Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill and ITC in its Board made efforts to turn the direction of agricultural research and policy in such a manner as to cater their demands for profit maximisation. Companies like Monsanto during the Vietnam War produced tonnes and tonnes of 'Agent Orange' unmindful of its consequences for Vietnamese people as it raked in super profits and that character remains.” – [Communist Party of India \(Marxist\)](#)

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) could accelerate this process. A trade deal now being negotiated by 16 countries across Asia-Pacific, the RCEP would cover half the world's population, including [420 million small family farms](#) that produce [80%](#) of the region's food.

RCEP is expected [to create powerful rights and lucrative business opportunities](#) for food and agriculture corporations under the guise of boosting trade and investment. It could allow foreign corporations to buy up land, thereby driving up land prices, fuelling speculation and pushing small farmers out. If RCEP is adopted, it could intensify [the great land grab](#) that has been taking place in India. It could also lead to further corporate control over seeds.

The dairy trade could be opened up to unfair competition from subsidised imports under RCEP. [According to RS Sodhi](#), managing director of the country's largest milk cooperative, Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation, the type of deals being pushed under the banner of 'free trade' will rob the vibrant domestic dairy industry and the millions of farmers that are connected to it from access to a growing market in India.

India's dairy sector is mostly self-sufficient and employs about 100 million people, the majority of whom are women. The sector is a lifeline for small and marginal farmers, landless poor and a significant source of income for millions of families. Up until now they have been the backbone of India's dairy sector. New Zealand's dairy giant Fonterra (the world's biggest dairy exporter) is looking to RCEP as a way in to India's massive dairy market. RCEP would give the company important leverage to open up India's protected market. Many fear that Indian dairy farmers will either have to work for Fonterra or go out of business.

In effect, RCEP would dovetail with [existing trends](#) that are facilitating the growth of chemical-intensive farming and corporate-controlled supply chains, whereby farmers can easily [become enslaved](#) or small farmers simply get by-passed by powerful corporations demanding industrial-scale production.

RCEP also demands the liberalisation of the retail sector and is attempting to facilitate the entry of foreign agroprocessing and retail giants, which could threaten the livelihoods of small retailers and street vendors. The entry of retail giants would be bad for farmers because they may eventually monopolise the whole food chain from procurement to distribution. In effect, farmers will be at the mercy of such large companies as they will have the power to set prices and will not be interested in buying small quantities from small producers.

Corporate concentration will deprive hundreds of millions of their livelihoods. RCEP is a recipe for undermining biodiverse food production, food sovereignty and food security for the mass of the population. It will also massive job losses in a country like India, which has [no capacity](#) for absorbing such losses into its workforce.

Current policies seek to tie agriculture to an environmentally destructive, moribund system of capitalism. RCEP would represent a further shift away from real, [practical solutions](#) to India's agrarian crisis based on sustainable agriculture and which place the small farmer at the centre of the development paradigm. Once you begin to consolidate land, displace the small-scale farm and amalgamate land into larger parcels for industrial-scale agriculture, you [implement a more inefficient model of agriculture and undermine food security](#).

In a future India, people might eventually ask, why did India let this happen when far-sighted and sustained policy initiatives based on self-sufficiency, food sovereignty, smallholder-based [regenerative agriculture](#) and [agroecology](#) could have been implemented?

They might also ask why was the countryside emptied out and more effort not put into developing rural infrastructure and investing in village-based industries and smallholder farmers?

And not least of all, they might ask why did policy makers buy into [neoliberal dogma](#), the only role of which is to seek to justify a corporate takeover?

Ultimately, it is a case of asking does India want – does any country want – industrial-scale agriculture and all it entails: denutritified food, increasingly monolithic diets, the massive use of agrochemicals, food contaminated by hormones, steroids, antibiotics and a range of chemical additives, spiralling rates of ill health, degraded soil, contaminated and depleted water supplies and a cartel of seed, chemical and food processing companies that seek to secure control over the global food production and supply chain to provide people with low-grade but highly profitable food products.

Solutions to India's agrarian crisis (and indeed the worlds) are available, not least the [scaling up](#) of agroecological approaches which would be a lynchpin of [rural development](#). However, in India (as elsewhere) successive administrations have bowed to and continue to acquiesce to grip of global capitalism and have demonstrated an unflinching allegiance to corporate power. It is unlikely that either the Congress or BJP, wedded as they are to neoliberalism, will ever undertake initiatives for seriously developing agroecological alternatives:

“But even if for argument's sake... the present governance structure were to embrace agroecological alternatives, the problem of extreme inequality that results from the structural logic of capitalism... would require mitigation. Without tempering the ravages of the market, hunger will continue, as will the disempowerment of small producers. Indeed, an agroecological alternative would simply be co-opted by capitalist relations of production and distribution, with community-based initiatives becoming mere decentralised production points within a supply-chain logic that centralises power and profits in the hands of seed corporations.” – [Milind Wani](#).

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Colin Todhunter is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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