
The Suicide Economy Of Corporate Globalisation

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By **Vandana Shiva**

The Indian peasantry, the largest body of surviving small farmers in the world, today faces a crisis of extinction.

Two thirds of India makes its living from the land. The earth is the most generous employer in this country of a billion, that has farmed this land for more than 5000 years.

However, as farming is delinked from the earth, the soil, the biodiversity, and the climate, and linked to global corporations and global markets, and the generosity of the earth is replaced by the greed of corporations, the viability of small farmers and small farms is destroyed. Farmers suicides are the most tragic and dramatic symptom of the crisis of survival faced by Indian peasants.

1997 witnessed the first emergence of farm suicides in India. A rapid increase in indebtedness, was at the root of farmers taking their lives. Debt is a reflection of a negative economy, a loosing economy. Two factors have transformed the positive economy of agriculture into a negative economy for peasants - the rising costs of production and the falling prices of farm commodities. Both these factors are rooted in the policies of trade liberalization and corporate globalisation.

In 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporations like Cargill, Monsanto, and Syngenta. The global corporations changed the input economy overnight. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds which needed fertilizers and pesticides and could not be saved.

As seed saving is prevented by patents as well as by the engineering of seeds with non-renewable traits, seed has to be bought for every planting season by poor peasants. A free resource available on farms became a commodity which farmers were forced to buy every year. This increases poverty and leads to indebtedness.

As debts increase and become unpayable, farmers are compelled to sell kidneys or even commit suicide. More than 25,000 peasants in India have taken their lives since 1997 when the practice of seed saving was transformed under globalisation pressures and multinational seed corporations started to take control of the seed supply. Seed saving gives farmers life. Seed monopolies rob farmers of life.

The shift from farm saved seed to corporate monopolies of the seed supply is also a shift from biodiversity to monocultures in agriculture. The District of Warangal in Andhra Pradesh used to grow diverse legumes, millets, and oilseeds. Seed monopolies created crop monocultures of cotton, leading to disappearance of millions of products of nature's evolution and farmer's breeding.

Monocultures and uniformity increase the risks of crop failure as diverse seeds adapted to diverse ecosystems are replaced by rushed introduction of unadapted and often untested seeds into the market. When Monsanto first introduced Bt Cotton in India in 2002, the farmers lost Rs. 1 billion due to crop failure. Instead of 1,500 Kg / acre as promised by the company, the harvest was as low as

200 kg. Instead of increased incomes of Rs. 10,000 / acre, farmers ran into losses of Rs. 6400 / acre.

In the state of Bihar, when farm saved corn seed was displaced by Monsanto's hybrid corn, the entire crop failed creating Rs. 4 billion losses and increased poverty for already desperately poor farmers. Poor peasants of the South cannot survive seed monopolies.

And the crisis of suicides shows how the survival of small farmers is incompatible with the seed monopolies of global corporations.

The second pressure Indian farmers are facing is the dramatic fall in prices of farm produce as a result of free trade policies of the W.T.O. The WTO rules for trade in agriculture are essentially rules for dumping. They have allowed an increase in agribusiness subsidies while preventing countries from protecting their farmers from the dumping of artificially cheap produce.

High subsidies of \$ 400 billion combined with forced removal of import restrictions is a ready-made recipe for farmer suicides. Global prices have dropped from \$ 216 / ton in 1995 to \$ 133 / ton in 2001 for wheat, \$ 98.2 / ton in 1995 to \$ 49.1 / ton in 2001 for cotton, \$ 273 / ton in 1995 to \$ 178 / ton for soyabean. This reduction to half the price is not due to a doubling in productivity but due to an increase in subsidies and an increase in market monopolies controlled by a handful of agribusiness corporations.

Thus the U.S government pays \$ 193 per ton to US Soya farmers, which artificially lowers the price of soya. Due to removal of Quantitative Restrictions and lowering of tariffs, cheap soya has destroyed the livelihoods of coconut growers, mustard farmers, producers of sesame, groundnut and soya.

Similarly, 25000 cotton producers in the U.S are given a subsidy of \$ 4 billion annually. This has brought cotton prices down artificially, allowing the U.S to capture world markets which were earlier accessible to poor African countries such as Burkina, Faso, Benin, Mali. The subsidy of \$ 230 per acre in the U.S is genocidal for the African farmers. African cotton farmers are losing \$ 250 million every year. That is why small African countries walked out of the Cancun negotiations, leading to the collapse of the W.T.O ministerial.

The rigged prices of globally traded agriculture commodities are stealing incomes from poor peasants of the south. Analysis carried out by the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology shows that due to falling farm prices, Indian peasants are losing \$ 26 billion or Rs. 1.2 trillion annually. This is a burden their poverty does not allow them to bear. Hence the epidemic of farmer suicides.

India was among the countries that questioned the unfair rules of W.T.O in agriculture and led the G-22 alliance along with with Brazil and China. India with other southern countries addressed the need to safeguard the livelihoods of small farmers from the injustice of free trade based on high subsidies and dumping. Yet at the domestic level, official agencies in India are in deep denial of any links between free trade and farmers survival.

An example of this denial is a Government of Karnataka report on "Farmers suicide in Karnataka - A scientific analysis". The report while claiming to be "scientific", makes unscientific reductionist claims that the farm suicides have only psychological causes, not economic ones, and identifies alcoholism as the root cause of suicides. Therefore, instead of proposing changes in agricultural policy, the report recommends that farmers be required to boost up their self respect (swabhiman) and self-reliance (swavalambam).

And ironically, its recommendations for farmer self-reliance are changes in the Karnataka Land Reforms Act to allow larger land holdings and leasing. These are steps towards the further decimation of small farmers who have been protected by land "ceilings" (an upper limit on land ownership) and policies that only allow peasants and agriculturalists to own agricultural land (part of the land to the tiller policies of the Devraj Urs government).

While the "expert committee" report identified "alcoholism" as the main cause for suicides, the figures of this "scientific" claim are inconsistent and do not reflect the survey. On page 10, the report states in one place that 68 percent of the suicide victims were alcoholics. Five lines later it states

that 17 percent were "alcohol and illicit drinkers".

It also states that the majority of suicide victims were small and marginal farmers and the majority had high levels of indebtedness. Yet debt is not identified as a factor leading to suicide. On page 32 of the report it is stated that of the 105 cases studied among the 3544 suicides which had occurred in five districts during 2000 - 2001, 93 had debts, 54 percent had borrowed from private sources and money lenders.

More than 90% of suicide victims were in debt. Yet a table on page 63 has mysteriously reduced debt as a reason for suicide to 2.6%, and equally mysteriously, "suicide victims having a bad habit" has emerged as the primary cause of farmers suicides.

The government is desperate to delink farm suicides from economic processes linked to globalisation such as rise in indebtedness and increased frequency of crop failure due to higher ecologic vulnerability arising from climate change and drought and higher economic risks due to introduction of untested, unadopted seeds.

This is evident in recommendation no. 4.3.24.3 "The government should launch prosecution on the responsible persons involved in misleading the public and government by providing false information about farmers suicide as crop failure or indebtedness" (page 113 of expert committee report).

However, farmers suicides cannot be delinked from indebtedness and the economic distress small farmers are facing. Indebtedness is not new. Farmers have always organised for freedom from debt.

In the nineteenth century the so call "Deccan Riots" were farmers protests against the debt trap into which they had been pushed to supply cheap cotton to the textile mills in Britain. In the eighties they formed peasant organisations to fight for debt relief from public debt linked to Green Revolution inputs.

However, under globalisation, the farmer is loosing her / his social, cultural, economic identity as a producer. A farmer is now a "consumer" of costly seeds and costly chemicals sold by powerful global corporations through powerful landlords and money lenders locally.

This combination is leading to corporate feudalism, the most inhumane, brutal and exploitative convergence of global corporate capitalism and local feudalism, in the face of which the farmer as an individual victim feels helpless. The bureaucratic and technocratic systems of the state are coming to the rescue of the dominant economic interests by blaming the victim.

It is necessary to stop this war against small farmers. It is necessary to re-write the rules of trade in agriculture. It is necessary to change our paradigms of food production. Feeding humanity should not depend on the extinction of farmers and extinction of species. Another agriculture is possible and necessary - an agriculture that protects farmers livelihoods, the earth and its biodiversity and public health.

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