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Foreign Capital Dictates India's Development Agenda: Cultural Imperialism and the Seeds of Catastrophe, Ripping Up India's Social Fabric

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Foreign capital is dictating the prevailing development agenda in India. The aim is to replace current structures with a system of industrial agriculture suited to the needs of Western agribusiness, food processing and retail concerns (see this). The plan is for a fraction of the population left in farming working on contracts for large suppliers and large chain supermarkets offering a diet of highly processed, denutrified, genetically altered food based on crops soaked with chemicals and grown in increasingly degraded soils according to an unsustainable model of agriculture that is less climate/drought resistant, less diverse and unable to achieve food security.

Unfortunately, India's political elites seem to be hellbent on capitulating to the needs of foreign players and their mindset that implies 'poorer' nations must be helped out of their awful 'backwardness' by the West and its powerful corporations and billionaire 'philanthropists'. As with Monsanto and the Gates Foundation in Africa and the 'helping' of Africans by imposing a controlling system of agriculture, there is more than a hint of ethnocentricity and the old colonialist mentality at work.

The type of 'development' or 'globalisation' being rolled out by Washington and the World Bank is based on a need to homogenise cultures, production and consumption across the world because powerful transnational corporations' business models rely on fast profits and global uniformity.

We need look no further than farming to see this at work. To understand what has happened to agriculture, whether in the West or in India, we must begin with the most basic element: how seeds have become increasingly uniform, less genetically diverse and subject to the control of corporate interests.

Eradicating seed diversity

In his report for The Ecologist, Oliver Tickell notes that for millennia, cereals were grown as 'landraces'. Every field would include maybe half a dozen separate cereal species, divisible into as many as 200 varieties. Each would embody considerable genetic diversity. During the 19th century, however, farmers began to pick out specific lines that yielded higher returns under ideal agronomic conditions. Then, in search of greater stability and uniformity, crop breeders selected single seeds from these lines, bulked them up over successive

plantings, then named and marketed them as distinct varieties.

Shortly before the first world war, these named varieties were hybridised in search of the ideal combination of agronomic qualities, putting together, for example, traits for large seed heads and short straw to increase yields yet further (under ideal conditions) and increase profitability for 'efficient' farmers.

As a result, plant breeders eradicated genetic diversity. As crops are genetically uniform, they can no longer evolve in the field to withstand insects and fungi and have to be constantly sprayed with pesticides. Moreover, the short straw length means that more of the plants' energy goes into the grain – but then they can't grow up above the weeds, so the system relies on repeated use of herbicides.

The use of these proprietary seeds and synthetic chemical inputs used to make them develop is a huge money-spinner for agribusiness companies. While in certain cases, yields have increased, there have been massive environmental, social and economic costs for the type of Green Revolution agriculture that has been rolled out, not least in terms of bad food and diets, degraded soils, water pollution and scarcity, poor health and the destruction of formerly largely self-sufficient rural communities and an increasing dependence on fossil fuels (transportation of food across greater distances, reliance on oil/hydrocarbon-based inputs) with all the implications that entails for climate change.

And as for climate change, genetically diverse crops are now needed more than ever; crops that have evolved to meet changing conditions, producing reliable yields all the time, rather than maximum yield when everything is just right but with the risk of total crop failure when you get flood, or drought, or some new insect or fungus or virus.

The eradication of seed diversity went much further than merely prioritising corporate seeds: it deliberately sidelined traditional seeds kept by farmers that were actually higher yielding. For example, the scientist R.H. Richharia was the director of the Central Rice Research Institute in Cuttack at the time of the Green Revolution in India.

Richharia's research showed that several indigenous rice varieties gave high yields without the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Unfortunately, these traditional varieties were ignored in favour of the newer corporate seeds. These traditional different varieties are ideal needed for different conditions. Richharia documented the existence of indigenous high-yielding varieties, early-maturing varieties, drought-resistant varieties, scented varieties, special flavour varieties and the like.

Once we began to see genetic diversity being eradicated in the field, what we also saw was a change in farming practices towards chemical-intensive monocropping, often for export or for far away cities rather than local communities, and ultimately the undermining or eradication of self-contained rural economies, traditions and cultures.

Cultural imperialism and the eradication of indigenous culture

Green Revolution technology and ideology imported from the West has merely served to undermine an indigenous farming sector that once catered for the diverse dietary needs and climatic conditions of India and it has actually produced and fuelled drought, degraded soils, illnesses and malnutrition, farmer distress and many other issues.

Environmental scientist Viva Kermani locates India's traditional farming practices within the

framework of deep-seated cultural and spiritual meaning. She notes that centuries before the appearance of the modern-day environmental movement, the shruti (Vedas, Upanishads) and smruti (Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, other scriptures) instructed people that the animals and plants found in India are sacred; that like humans, our fellow creatures, including plants have consciousness; and, therefore, all aspects of nature are to be revered.

The Vedic deities have deep symbolism and many layers of existence. One such association is with ecology. Surya is associated with the sun, the source of heat and light that nourishes everyone; Indra is associated with rain, crops, and abundance; and Agni is the deity of fire and transformation and controls all changes. There was also Vrikshayurveda – an ancient Sanskrit text on the science of plants and trees. It contains details about soil conservation, planting, sowing, treatment, propagating, how to deal with pests and diseases and a lot more.

On the other hand, Kermani notes that the Western religions, especially Christianity, viewed this nature worship as paganism, failing to recognise the scientific and spiritual basis of the relationship between man and nature and how this is the only way to sustain ecological balance.

Similarly, Vandana Shiva outlines the traditional knowledge of women and the biodiversity that protects the earth are threatened by the monocultures, intensive chemical input, and large processing factories that come with GM Mustard – the next push in the treadmill of Green Revolution technology. Women's caretaking of the seed, food and sacredness of mustard is to be stripped away, while local oil mills are shut down and corporations take over the value chain from seed-to-oil.

In trying to displace a traditional pre-existing system of production with one that is controlled by Western corporations (which, as Kermani implies, regards nature as something to be dominated and subjugated by corporations in a quest for power and profit), there is an underlying assumption that the Indian farmer is backward, ignorant and in need of 'help'. This type of cultural hegemony helps legitimise the increasing economic domination of Indian food and agriculture by foreign interests.

But nothing could be further from the truth. As described in this paper in the Journal of South Asian Studies, for thousands of years farmers experimented with different plant and animal specimens acquired through migration, trading networks, gift exchanges or accidental diffusion. By learning and doing, trial and error, new knowledge was blended with older, traditional knowledge systems. The farmer possesses acute observation, good memory for detail and transmission through teaching and story-telling.

Moreover, the papers's authors Marika Vicziany and Jagjit Plahe argue that smallholder farmers (the backbone of Indian agriculture) have traditionally engaged in risk minimising strategies. They took measures to manage drought, grow cereals with long stalks that can be used as fodder, engage in cropping practices that promote biodiversity, ethno-engineer soil and water conservation, use self-provisioning systems on farm recycling and use collective sharing systems such as managing common resource properties.

Farmers know their micro-environment, so they can plant crops that mature at different times, thereby facilitating more rapid crop rotation without exhausting the soil. By contrast, the authors argue that large-scale industrially-based agricultural production erodes

biodiversity by depleting the organisms that live in soil, and making adverse changes to the structure of the soil and the kind of plants that can be grown in such artificially-created environments.

Vicziany and Plahe note that many of the practices of small farmers which were once regarded as primitive or misguided are now recognised as sophisticated and appropriate. For instance, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that globally just 20 cultivated plant species account for 90 percent of all the plant-based food consumed by humans. This narrow genetic base of the global food system has put food security at serious risk.

It is no surprise that various high-level reports have thus called for agroecology and smallholder farmers to be prioritised and invested in order to achieve global sustainable food security. Instead, what we see is (despite progress in Sikkim and Andhra Pradesh) the marginalisation of organic agriculture by corporate interests, not least in India by the powerful agrochemical lobby.

The authors conclude that traditional food production systems depend on using the knowledge and expertise of village communities and cultures in contrast to prioritising imported, industrial–commercial inputs. The widespread but artificial conditions created by the latter work against the survival of traditional knowledge, which creates and sustains unique indigenous farming practices and food culture.

Given that India is still very much an agrarian-based economy with the majority still employed in agriculture or agriculture-related activities, what we continue to see in India is an attack by foreign capital on the social, economic and cultural fabric of the nation.

Whether it is fuelled by Bill Gates, the World Bank's neoliberal-based rhetoric about 'enabling the business of agriculture', or The World Economic Forum's 'Grow' strategy, the implication is that the world's farmers must capitulate to the West and its powerful corporations and a globalised, corrupt system of capitalism that will funnel profits to these companies while hooking farmers on a chemical treadmill.

What we currently see is the capturing of markets and global supply chains for the benefit of transnational corporations involved in food production. We see the destruction of natural habitat in Indonesia to produce palm oil. We see the use of cynical lies (linked to palm oil production) to corrupt India's food system with genetically modified seeds. We witness the devastating impact on farmers and rural communities. We see the degradation of soils, health and water resources.

And, in places like India, we also see the transnational corporate commercialisation and displacement of localised productive systems: systems centred on smallholder/family farms that are more productive and sustainable, produce a healthier and more diverse diet, are better for securing local and regional food security and are the life-blood of communities.

Farms worked by farmers who Viva Kermani says have

> "legitimate claims to being scientists, innovators, natural resource stewards, seed savers and hybridisation experts are being reduced to becoming recipients of technical fixes and consumers of the poisonous products of a

growing agricultural inputs industry."

The same farmers whose seeds and knowledge was stolen by corporations to be bred for proprietary chemical-dependent hybrids, now to be genetically engineered.

We also see the ripping up of India's social fabric all for the bottom line of corporate profit.

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