

Bayer's 'Backward' Claim: A Bid to Reap Control of Indian Agriculture

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For some critics, if one firm tops a league table for [anti-people, anti-nature](#) business practices, it is Bayer (although there are many other worthy candidates). Nevertheless, the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) signed a memorandum of understanding with Bayer in September 2023.

Bayer's approach to agricultural development involves promoting a model of industrial agriculture dependent on corporate products, including its toxic chemicals and genetically modified crops, and advocating for precision, data-driven agriculture that relies heavily on its proprietary technologies and software.

Simon Wiebusch, Country Divisional Head of Crop Science for Bayer South Asia, [recently stated](#) that India cannot become a 'developed nation' with 'backward' agriculture. He believes India's agriculture sector must modernise for the country to achieve developed nation status by 2047.

Bayer's vision for agriculture in India includes prioritising and fast-tracking approvals for its new products, introducing genetically modified (GM) food crops, addressing labour shortages (for weeding) by increasingly focusing on herbicides and developing herbicides for specific crops like paddy, wheat, sugarcane and maize.

Government institutions like the ICAR seem likely to allow Bayer to leverage the agency's infrastructure and networks to pursue its commercial plans.

Wiebusch's comments have received much media coverage. There is a tendency for journalists and media outlets to accept statements made by people in top corporate jobs as pearls of wisdom never to be critically questioned, especially in India when there is talk of the country achieving 'developed status'. But people like Wiebusch are hardly objective. They are not soothsayers who have an unbiased view of the world and its future.

Bayer has a view of what agriculture [should look like](#) and is gaining increasing control of farmers in various countries in terms of having a direct influence on how they farm and what inputs they use. Its digital platforms are intended to be one-stop shops for carbon credits, seeds, pesticides and fertilisers and agronomic advice, all supplied by the company, which gets the added benefit of control over the agronomic and financial data harvested from farms.

As for carbon credits, [the non-profit GRAIN](#) argues that, like digital platforms per se, carbon trading is about consolidating control within the food system and is certainly [not about sequestering carbon](#).

So, what does Wiebusch mean when he talks about modernisation of a backward agriculture in India? All of what is set out above and more.

Like Wiebusch, corporate lobbyists often refer to 'modern agriculture'. Instead, we should say: a system that produces healthy food for all while sustaining farming communities and livelihoods. Because the term 'modern agriculture' is deliberately deceptive: it means a system dependent on proprietary inputs and integrated with corporate supply chains. Anything other is defined as 'backward'.

According to Bayer, Wiebusch is a star player who can drive market share and create business value for the company. On the [Bayer India](#) website it says: Simon's key strengths include unlocking business growth, redefining distribution strategies, driving change management and building diverse teams that drive market share and create business value.

Stripped of the corporate jargon and any talk of 'helping' India, the goal is to secure control of the sector and ensure corporate dependency.

India has achieved self-sufficiency in food grains and has ensured there is enough food (in terms of calories) available to feed its entire population. It is [the world's largest producer of](#) milk, pulses and millets and the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, groundnuts, vegetables, fruit and cotton.

So, we might ask: who needs Bayer?

Bhaskar Save certainly did not on his impressively bountiful organic farm in Gujarat. In 2006, he described in an [eight-page open letter](#) (along with six annexures) to M S Swaminathan (widely regarded as the father of the Green Revolution in India) how the type of chemical-intensive agriculture that Bayer promotes and the urban-centric model of development favoured by the government has had devastating environmental economic and social consequences for India.

Save offered agroecological alternatives to address the problems, including solutions to boost farmer incomes and rural communities, cultivate a wider range of nutrient-dense crops, build soil fertility, improve water management, enhance on-farm ecology and increase biodiversity.

Vandana Shiva recently posted on X:

"India's agriculture was sustained over 10,000 years because it was based on nature's laws of diversity, recycling, regeneration & circularity. Albert Howard spread organic farming worldwide learning from Indian peasants. Working with nature is sophistication, not backwardness.

"Bayer calling India's agriculture backward is a new toxic colonisation. Bayer/Monsanto, the poison cartel whose roots are in war, has driven biodiversity to extinction with monocultures, spread cancers with glyphosate & herbicides, destroyed democracy."

India's agriculture sustained was over 10000 years because it was based on nature's laws of diversity , recycling, regeneration & circularity. Albert Howard spread organic farming worldwide learning from Indian peasants

Working with nature is sophistication , not backwardness
<https://t.co/JpkG1djBrE>

— Dr. Vandana Shiva (@drvandanashiva) [October 11, 2024](#)

Bayer promotes a corporate expansionist ‘development’ agenda that is self-sustaining and can be described as anything but development (see the online article [Resisting Genetically Mutilated Food and the Eco-Modern Nightmare](#)).

Companies like Bayer present their technologies and products as fixes for the problems created by the model of ‘growth’ and ‘development’ they promote. ‘Scientific innovation’ is touted as the answer. The proposed solutions often create new problems or worsen existing ones. This leads to a cycle of dependency on corporate products and technologies. Monsanto’s [failed](#) Bt cotton in India being a case in point.

Problems created by corporate-led development become opportunities for further corporate inputs and the commodification of knowledge and further ‘expert’ interventions. The primary motivation is financial gain rather than genuine societal improvement.

Corporate-driven ‘development’ is a misnomer, especially in agriculture, as it often leads to regression in terms of health, environmental sustainability and rural community resilience, while perpetuating a cycle of problems and ‘solutions’ that primarily benefit large corporations.

But the type of agroecological solutions presented by the likes of Bhaskar Save run counter to Bayer’s aims of more pesticides, more GMOs, more control and corporate consolidation. For example, the industry seeks to derail the EU’s farm to fork strategy (which involves a dramatic reduction in agrochemical use), and Bayer spends [record amounts](#) to shape policies to its advantage, courtesy of its entrenched lobbying networks.

Of course, Bayer presents its neocolonial aspirations in terms of helping backward Indian farmers. A good old dose of Western saviourism.

To promote its model, Bayer must appear to offer practical solutions. It uses the narrative of climate emergency to promote a Ponzi carbon trading scheme that is resulting in [land displacement](#) across the world. And Bayer says that labour shortages for manual weeding in Indian agriculture are a significant challenge, so the rollout of toxic herbicides like glyphosate are a necessity.

But there are several approaches to address this issue beyond relying on herbicides like glyphosate (it will kill all plants that do not have the herbicide tolerant trait), which is wholly unsuitable for a nation comprising so many small farms cultivating a diverse range of crops.

Mechanical weeding using animal-drawn or tractor-powered implements for larger farms is one solution, and there are several agronomic techniques that can help suppress weeds and reduce labour needs: crop rotation disrupts weed lifecycles, higher planting densities shade out weeds, proper fertilisation gives crops a competitive advantage and use of cover crops and mulches can suppress weed growth. _

Even here, however, there are cynical attempts to get farmers to change their cultivation

methods (with no tangible financial benefits) and move away from traditional systems.

In the article [The Ox Fall Down: Path Breaking and Treadmills in Indian Cotton Agriculture](#), for instance, we see farmers being nudged away from traditional planting methods and pushed towards a method conducive to oxen ploughing but very conducive for herbicide-dependent weed management. That article notes the huge growth potential for herbicides in India, something companies like Bayer are keen to capitalise on.

Wiebusch talks of India reaching 'developed status'. But what does the type of 'development' he proposes entail?

We need only look around us for the answer: decision-making centralised in the hands of government and corporate entities, traditional local governance structures weakened and standardised, top-down policies and corporate consolidation through mergers and acquisitions with local independent enterprises struggling to compete.

Consolidated corporations have greater lobbying power to shape regulations in their favour, further entrenching their market position. In other words, political centralisation and corporate consolidation are often intertwined. Centralised political structures tend to align with the interests of large, consolidated corporations, and both centralised governments and large corporations exert greater control over resources.

This dual process has led to reduced economic diversity and resilience, weakened local communities and traditions, increased vulnerability to systemic shocks and diminished democratic participation.

'Developed status' also means accelerated urbanisation, land amalgamations for industrial-scale farming and depopulation of the countryside.

It has been estimated that between 2016 and 2030, globally, [urban areas will have tripled in size](#), expanding into cropland and undermining the productivity of agricultural systems. Around 60% of the world's cropland lies on the outskirts of cities. This land is, on average, twice as productive as land elsewhere on the globe.

As cities expand, millions of small-scale farmers are displaced. These farmers produce the [majority of food in the Global South](#) and are key to global food security.

A combination of urbanisation and policies [deliberately designed](#) to displace the food-producing peasantry will serve to boost the corporate takeover of India's agrifood sector.

But none of this is inevitable. Many of us know what the response should be: prioritising sustainable, locally appropriate solutions and restoring food sovereignty and the economic vibrancy of rural communities; focusing on holistic human well-being rather than narrow economic metrics of 'growth'; preserving traditional knowledge that underpins highly productive [farming practices](#) for the benefit of farmers, consumer health and the environment; and empowering communities through localism and decentralisation rather than creating state-corporate dependency.

Such solutions are markedly different from those characterised by rural population displacement, the subjugation of peoples and nature, nutrient-poor diets, degraded on-farm and off-farm ecosystems and corporate consolidation.

There are [alternative visions](#) for the future, alternative visions of human development. But these do not boost corporate margins or control and do not fit the hegemonic narrative of what passes for 'development'.

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