

Facebook's 'Free Basics' in India Will Take Away More Than Our Right to the Internet

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Global Research, December 31, 2015

[Common Dreams](#) 29 December 2015

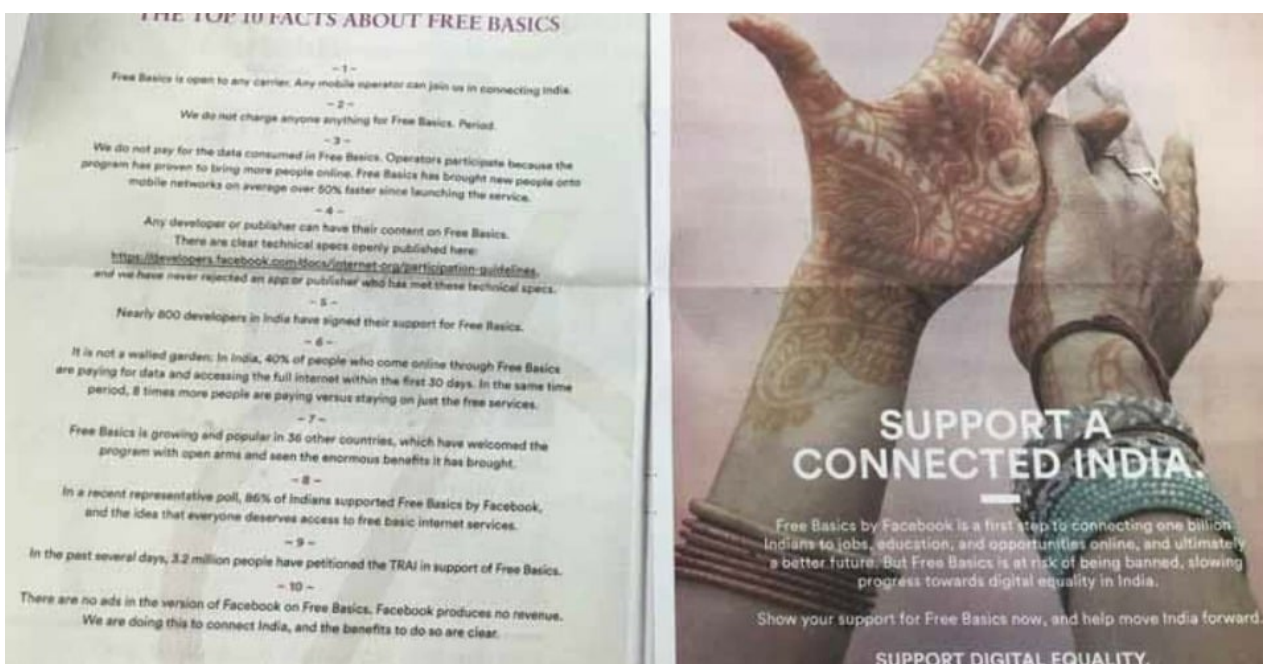
Region: [Asia](#)

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As the TRAI decides the fate of Free Basics, Mark Zuckerberg is in India with ₹100 crore, in pocket change, for advertising. Facebook's Free Basics is a repackaged internet.org, or in other words, a system where Facebook decides what parts of the internet are important to users.

Reliance, Facebook's Indian [partner](#) in the Free Basics venture, is an Indian mega-corporation with interests in telecom, energy, food, retail, infrastructure and, of course, land. Reliance obtained land for its rural cell phone towers from the government of India and [grabbed](#) land from farmers for SEZ's through violence and deceit. As a result and at no cost, Reliance has a huge rural, semi-urban and suburban user base—especially farmers. Although Free Basics has been [banned](#) (for the time being), Reliance continues to offer the service across its networks.

A collective corporate assault is underway globally. Having lined up all their ducks, veterans of corporate America such as Bill Gates are being joined by the next wave of philanthro-corporate Imperialists, including Mark Zuckerberg. The similarities in Gates and Zuckerberg's perfectly rehearsed, PR firm-managed announcements of giving away' their fortunes is uncanny. Whatever entity the Zuckerbargs form to handle the US\$45 billion they will be investing will most likely end up looking a lot like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. ie: powerful enough to [influence](#) the climate negotiations, responsible for nothing.



An advertisement for Facebook's Free Basics internet service. It reads, "What Net Neutrality Activists Won't Tell You."

What could Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg have to gain from dictating terms to governments during the climate summit? "The Breakthrough Energy Coalition will invest in ideas that have the potential to transform the way we all produce and consume energy," Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook page. It was an announcement of Bill Gates' Breakthrough Energy Coalition, the combined wealth of hundreds of billions of dollars of 28 private investors who will influence how the world produces and consumes energy.

At the same time, Gates is currently behind a push to force chemical, fossil fuel dependent agriculture and patented GMOs ([#FossilAg](#)) through the [Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa](#) (AGRA). It is an attempt to lock African farmers into a dependence on fossil fuels that should be left underground, as well as creating a dependence on Monsanto for seeds and petrochemicals.

95% of the [cotton in India](#) is Monsanto's proprietary Bt Cotton. This year, in regions from Punjab to Karnataka, 80% of this Bt crop [failed](#) —that's 76% of Bt Cotton farmers with no crop left at harvest time. If they had a choice, they would switch. But what resembles a choice between cotton seeds is the same Bt Cotton seed, marketed by different companies under different names, purchased in desperation as farmers try combination after combination of seeds, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides—all of which have chemical names designed to make you feel inadequate—until you have no 'choices' left but to take your own life.

What Monsanto has done by pushing [Intellectual Property Rights \(IPR\) laws](#) and patents on seeds, Zuckerberg is attempting to do to internet freedom in India. And like Monsanto, he is targeting the most marginalised Indians.

Free Basics will limit what the internet is to a vast majority of India. Already at its outset Free Basics has said it won't allow video content on the basis that it will interfere with the telecom companies' services (read: profits)—despite the TRAI's own recommendation that video content is more accessible to different parts of the population.

Once allowed as a free service, what is to stop telecom companies from redefining the internet to suit their own interests, and those of their corporate partners? After all, the ban on Free Basics has not stopped Reliance from carrying on with the service to its huge user base, a large proportion of who are farmers.

Why should Mark Zuckerberg decide what the internet is to a farmer in Punjab, who has just lost 80% of his cotton harvest because Monsanto's Bt Cotton and the chemicals he was told to spray completely failed? Should the internet allow him to see how GMO technology has failed everywhere in the world and is only kept afloat through unfair market and trade policies, or should the internet suggest the next patented molecule he should spray on his crop?

The Monsanto-Facebook connection is a deep one. The top 12 investors in Monsanto are the [same](#) as the top 12 investors in Facebook, including the Vanguard Group. The Vanguard Group is also a top investor in John Deere, Monsanto's new partner for '[smart tractors](#)', bringing all food production and consumption, from seed to data, under the control of a handful of investors.

It's no surprise that the Facebook page March Against Monsanto, a major American movement in support of labelling and regulating GMOs, was [deleted](#).

Recently India has seen an explosion in e-retailing. From large corporations to entrepreneurs, people all over the country are able to sell what they make to a market that was earlier unreachable to them. Craftsmen have been able to grow their businesses, farms have found consumers nearby.

Just like Monsanto with patented seeds, Zuckerberg wants not just a slice, but the whole pie of the basic economy of the Indian people, especially its farmers and peasants. What would Monsanto's monopoly over climate data mean for farmers enslaved through a Facebook gateway to Monsanto data delivered through an internet that is controlled by Facebook? What would this mean for internet and food democracy?

The right to food is the right to choose what we want to eat; to know what is in our food ([#LabelGMOsNow](#)) and to choose nourishing, tasty food—not the few packaged goods that corporations want us to consume.

The right to the internet is the right to choose what spaces and media we access; to choose spaces that enrich us—not what companies think should be our 'basics'.

Our right to know what we are eating is as essential our right to information, *all* information. Our right to an open internet is as essential to our democracy as our right to save, exchange and sell open pollinated farmers' seeds.

In the ultimate Orwellian doublespeak, "free" for Zuckerberg means "privatised", a far cry from privacy—a word Zuckerberg does not believe in. And like corporate-written "free" trade agreements, Free Basics is anything but free for citizens. It is an enclosure of the commons, which are 'commons' because they guarantee access to the commoner, whether it be seed, water, information or internet. What Monsanto's IPRs are to seed, Free Basics is to information.

Smart Tractors from John Deere, used on farms growing patented Monsanto seed, sprayed and damaged using Bayer chemicals, with soil and climate data owned and sold by Monsanto, beamed to the farmer's cellphone from Reliance, logged in as your Facebook profile, on land owned by The Vanguard Group.

Every step of every process right up until the point you pick something up off a supermarket shelf will be determined by the interests of the same shareholders.

Talk about choice.

Dr. Vandana Shiva is a philosopher, environmental activist and eco feminist. She is the founder/director of Navdanya Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology. She is author of numerous books including, [Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis](#); [Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply](#); [Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace](#); and [Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development](#). Shiva has also served as an adviser to governments in India and abroad as well as NGOs, including the International Forum on Globalization, the Women's Environment and Development Organization and the Third World Network. She has received numerous awards, including 1993 Right Livelihood Award (Alternative Nobel Prize) and the 2010

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