

Global Capitalism and Livelihoods Denied: Whipping India's Farmers into Submission

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In India, there is a push to drive people from the countryside into cities. The mainstream narrative implies that urbanisation is natural in the evolution of societies and constitutes progress. The World Bank wants India to relocate 400 million people to urban centres. Former Chief Finance Minister P. Chidambaram once stated that 85% of the population would eventually live in cities, which would mean displacing many more than 400 million people given that the country's population is heading towards 1.3 billion and that over 60% reside in rural India.

It is easy for some to conflate urbanisation and progress and to believe this is how to 'develop'. But societies do not 'evolve' in a unilinear way. Policy makers merely look to prosperous countries and see the bulk of their populations living in cities with a small percentage working in (heavily subsidised and an unsustainable system of) agriculture. This is what 'we' must do, Indian politicians then say, spurred on by World Bank directives.

The route to capitalism and urbanisation was not 'natural' in Europe and involved the unforeseen outcomes of conflicts and struggles between peasants, landowners, the emerging class of industrialists and the state. The outcomes of these struggles resulted in different routes to modernity and levels of urbanisation.

In the book '[The Invention of Capitalism](#)', economic historian Michael Perelman lays bare the [iron fist behind the invisible hand](#) which whipped the English peasantry in a workforce willing to accept factory wage labour. In [this article](#) by Yasha Lavene, it is noted that 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, rich class of industrial capitalists.

A series of laws and measures were designed to push peasants out of the old and into the new by destroying their traditional means of self-support. Perelman outlines the many different policies through which peasants were forced off the land, not least the destruction of the access to common land by fencing off the commons.

Early capitalists and their cheerleaders complained how peasants were too independent and comfortable to be properly exploited. Indeed, many prominent figures advocated for their impoverishment, so they would leave their land and work for low pay in factories.

In effect, peasants were booted off their land by depriving a largely self-reliant population of its productive means. Although self-reliance persisted among the working class (self-education, recycling products, a culture of thrift, etc), this too was eventually eradicated via

advertising and an education system that ensured conformity and dependence on the goods manufactured by capitalism.

‘Development’: facilitating capital

“We build cyber cities and techno parks and IITs at the cost of the welfare of the downtrodden and the environment. We don’t think how our farmers on whose toil we feed manage to sustain themselves; we fail to see how the millions of the poor survive. We look at the state-of-the-art airports, IITs, highways and bridges, the inevitable necessities for the corporate world to spread its tentacles everywhere and thrive, depriving the ordinary people of even the basic necessities of life and believe it is development.” - [Sukumaran CV](#)

Today’s affluent sections of urbanised Indians are often far removed from the daily struggles of the farmers for whom they depend on for their food. While inequalities spiral, many city dwellers echo similar sentiments of the cheerleaders of early capitalism described by Perleman when they say loan waivers for farmers are a drain on the economy and any subsidies given to them or the poor in general just encourages unproductivity or fecklessness.

[Neoliberal dogmatists](#) are quite content to sign a death warrant for Indian farmers.

Despite nice-sounding, seemingly benign terms 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, policies and directives is the hard-nosed approach of neoliberal capitalism that is no less brutal for Indian farmers than early industrial capitalism was in England for its peasantry.

Like the English peasantry, India’s farmers are also being booted off the land.

Let us take a look at what has happened to India’s farmers. Trade policy and agriculture specialist Devinder Sharma has written much on their plight (access his writing [here](#)). GDP growth 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. Rural India consumes less calories than it did 40 years ago. And corporations receive massive handouts and interest-free loans because it supposedly spurs job creation (which it has not), while 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.

In short, although farmers continue to produce bumper harvests, the impact of underinvestment, lack of a secure income and effective minimum support prices; the undermining of the public distribution system; exposure to cheap imports courtesy of rigged international trade; the hardship caused by deregulation and profiteering companies which supply seeds and proprietary inputs; the loss of state agricultural support services; and the impacts of the corporate-backed/written Indo-US Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, have made farming financially non-viable for many.

It is a deliberate strategy: part of the plan to displace the existing system of production with one dominated from seed to food processing to retail to plate by Western corporations.

Independent cultivators are being bankrupted, land will be amalgamated to facilitate large-scale industrial cultivation and those that remain 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.

Between 300,000 and 400,000 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 and water shortages and poor health.

In addition to displacing people to facilitate the needs of resource extraction industries, unconstitutional land grabs for special economic zones, nuclear plants and other corporate money-making projects have forced many others from the land.

Various reports have concluded that we need to support more resilient, diverse, sustainable agroecological methods of farming and develop locally-based food economies. Indeed, small farms are more productive than giant industrial (export-oriented) farms and produce most of the world's food on much less land.

Instead, in India, the trend continues to move in the opposite direction towards industrial-scale agriculture for the benefit of Monsanto, Cargill, Bayer and other transnational players. Is [this the future India needs](#), with a fraction of farmers left on the land, trapped on an environmentally unsustainable chemical-GMO treadmill?

While whipping farmers, tribals and the unorganised sector into submission by depriving them of their livelihoods by one way or another, India's political elite blindly adhere to the mantra that urbanisation equals progress and look to the West, whose path to 'development' was based on colonialism, eradicating self-reliance and beating the peasantry into submission. There was nothing 'natural' or 'progressive' about any of it. It involved the planned eradication of peasants and rural life by capitalist interests and the sucking of wealth from places like India.

In India, the bidding of capital is these days done through its compliant politicians, the World Bank, the WTO and lop-sided, egregious back-room deals written by corporations.

Further information about the issues raised can be found in [these articles](#) by the author.

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