

Globalization and Social Destruction: Stealing Wealth and Health in India

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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What is happening in India right now encapsulates the current battle that is taking place across the globe, which will decide the future direction of humanity.

This country of 1.2 billion people is where modernity meets tradition head on. We are not just talking about 'modernity' in some kind of benign technocratic sense here, stripped of all political or ideological context; we are discussing a specific form, a variety that has little to do with progress or with making life easier for the bulk of the people, not unless that is you equate 'modernity' with increasing powerlessness, subjugation and the destruction of local traditions or economies.

The trouble is that 'globalisation' is too often confused with a beneficial notion of modernity and genuine mutual interdependence and cooperation between nation states, which in reality it clearly is not. Based on this deliberate misrepresentation by politicians and the mainstream media, we are encouraged to regard globalisation as a positive thing and to embrace it. Globalisation has come to India and is impacting all aspects of life. So let's take a look at it in action.

Globalisation in India

Today, individualism, inequality and capitalism are increasingly being accepted as ultimate truths and as comprising a reality of how many view the world and evaluate others around them. Social and cultural traditions dating back thousands of years are being uprooted thanks to a redefining of the individual in relation to the collective, how people should live and what they should aspire to be like, ably assisted of course by an all pervasive advertising industry that reaches out even into the small towns and villages these days. Consumerism's world view is being fed to people and corporate news organisations are following suit with sensationalist, celebrity-related infotainment formats that dovetail with celebrity-endorsed products and commercials as well as high profile events (like the corporate ad fest known as the Indian Premier League). The result is that this world view (and the social relations endorsed by it) is becoming regarded as 'natural' and is not viewed for the controlling culture it is: a hegemonic one that binds people to products and ultimately to capitalism and one that is immune to its own falsehoods.

Transnational companies are in effect trying to cast India in consumer capitalism's own sordid image: a morally, socially and economically bankrupt one at that. Hand in hand with this is an ongoing civil war in the 'tribal belt' and other violent conflicts elsewhere in the country. Powerful foreign (and Indian) corporations with the full military backing of the Indian state are attempting to grab lands for various industries, including the resource

extraction, nuclear and real estate sectors. It is for good reason that environmentalist Vandana Shiva argues that the plundering of Indian agriculture in order to cast it in the image of one that is beneficial for Western interests is resulting in a forced removal of farmers from the land and the destruction of traditional communities on a scale of which has not been witnessed anywhere before throughout history.

The ratio between the top and bottom ten per cents of wage distribution has doubled since the early 1990s, when India opened up its economy. According to the 2011 Organisation for Cooperation and Economic Development report 'Divided we stand', the doubling of income inequality over the last 20 years has made India one of the worst performers in the category of emerging economies. 42 per cent of 1.2 billion live on less than \$1.25 per day, the highest number of poor in the world.

But these are the types of things that happen when US corporations and their stooges in the US government or at the IMF, World Bank, WTO or some other political machinery come beating at a government's door with promises, bribes, threats or lop-sided deals. If you have read John Perkins's book 'Confessions of an economic hitman', you will immediately get the point here. Moreover, the impulse for Western capitalism to seek out foreign markets has been heightened due to the current plight of Western economies.

And don't forget that it was these same corporate swindlers that helped destroy the post-1945 Keynesian consensus and tip the balance in favour of elite interests in the first place during the early 1970s, which eventually led to the depression of wages and therefore demand and thus economic crisis. The debt-inflated economies that resulted from the 1980s onwards could not be sustained, and places like India now seemingly represent rich pickings for a certain brand of slash and burn capitalism.

Call it 'globalisation' if you must, but let's call it for what it really is: imperialism. In an effort to maintain profit margins, elite concerns are going abroad to plunder public assets and exploit human labour or trample on human life.

The worst thing is that it doesn't have to be this way. Modernity and progress should be about improving quality of life of the masses and a wider sense of well-being or happiness. And, according to various 'well-being' surveys in recent years (Happy Planet Index, World Values Survey and the Human Development Index), the key to achieving such things may well lie in good health, decent education, greater levels of social equality and welfare provision, self-sustaining communities and people living within the limits set by the environment. It's for a reason that the US and UK tend not to do so well in such surveys, as they have been the most strident proponents of economic neo-liberalism and empire in recent years. Once political leaders abdicate responsibility for organising a society in a way that works for the public good and place emphasis on 'deregulation' and cede power to 'the market' (aka giving the corporate thieves the keys to their home), what we are left with are places like the US where capitalism and oligarchy reign supreme and 'socialism' becomes a misused and abused concept and identified not as a realistic alternative, but as some awful conspiracy that lies behind the rot.

As India hangs onto the coat tails of Uncle Sam's agenda for global hegemony, are we to sit back and watch Indian society being hollowed out in a similar way to that of the US? Possibly so, if we are to take the food and agriculture sector as a starting point.

The globalisation of food and agriculture in India

The government has already placed part of agriculture in the hands of powerful western agribusiness. You don't have to look far to read the many reports and research papers to know the effects - biopiracy, patenting and seed monopolies, pesticides and the use of toxins leading to superweeds and superbugs, the destruction of local rural economies, water run offs from depleted soil leading to climate change and severe water resource depletion and contamination.

It is no exaggeration to state that foreign corporations are already shovelling their poison into the mouths of Indians, which are being held open courtesy of the compliant Indian state. 'Mouths' and 'poison' are being used in a literal sense here. Traditional agricultural practices and, by implication food, is being destroyed by Western agribusiness. People are becoming sick of it. Again, 'sick' is being used in a literal sense. From how food is produced, to what ends up on the plate, both food sovereignty and the health of the nation are under threat. Export-oriented policies that are part of the structural adjustment of Indian agriculture have led to a shift in India from the production of food crops to commodities for exports. Food is being increasingly controlled by the likes of Monsanto, Syngenta and their subsidiaries, thanks to the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture which they had a direct hand in drawing up, and people are becoming ill due to the chemical inputs that are now a defining feature of modern agriculture and food processing.

One of the most revealing pieces about the impact of such chemical-based agriculture appeared in Bangalore's Deccan Herald newspaper just last week (Transformation of a food bowl into a cancer epicentre). Gautam Dheer writes that the contamination of drinking water by pesticides is a major cause of cancer in India's Punjab state. At this point, although various other factors may also be to blame, it is worth noting that cancers are on the rise in many of India's urban centres. For major organs, India has some of the highest incidence rates in the world. The links between pesticides and cancers and illnesses are well documented in Western countries (for instance, Dr Meryl Hammond, Campaign for Alternatives to Pesticides, told a Canadian parliament committee in 2009 that a raft of studies published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals point to strong associations between chemical pesticides and a vast range of serious life-threatening health consequences. And that's not even mentioning the impact of hormones or other additives in our food).

India is one of the world's largest users of pesticides. Ladyfinger, cabbage, tomato and cauliflower in particular may often contain dangerously high levels and fruits and vegetables are sprayed and tampered with to ripen and make them more colourful. Research by the School of Natural Sciences and Engineering at the National Institute of Advanced Studies in Bangalore reported in 2008 that many crops for export had been rejected internationally due to high pesticide residues.

Should we expect the health outcomes in India to be any different as it adopts or has already adopted a system of chemically dependent agriculture and food production? The mainstream media often cites the increasing prevalence of certain diseases as due to people 'adopting Western lifestyles and habits'. The individualization of health issues (poor lifestyle choices) is a convenient explanation which diverts attention from structural issues, not least how India's food and agriculture sector is being recast by Western corporations and the possible health impacts thereof.

In his piece, Gautam Dheer argues that Punjab stares at an inevitable crisis. Agriculture has

become increasingly unsustainable, and the model practised by desperate debt-ridden farmers has only meant more indiscriminate use of pesticides, something which is now being linked to the alarmingly high incidents of cancer in Punjab. Gautam writes that a study of two districts in Punjab revealed the presence of pesticides such as heptachlor and chloropyrifos and other heavy metals in samples of drinking water and concluded that these had led to a higher incidence of cancer. The Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) in Chandigarh states that the indiscriminate use of pesticides in crop production in Punjab is one of the reasons for high incidents of cancer in Punjab.

Moreover, Punjab's ground water table has dramatically dipped due to over exploitation by chemical-dependent agriculture, which is by its very nature heavily water-intensive. In several places, the use of ground water has either been completely banned or restricted. Although Punjab pioneered the 'Green Revolution' (or perhaps because it did), the average annual growth of the GDP from agriculture and allied sectors in the last seven years for Punjab has remained at a mere 1.76 per cent, against the national average of 3.7 per cent. In fact, it plunged to below one per cent in last fiscal year.

What's the answer: more chemical inputs to try to boost yields? More water depletion, increased contamination? Punjab already has 90 cancer patients for every 100,000 of its population: ten times more than the national average. Giant community reverse-osmosis plants have come up in almost all districts of the state to help matters with safe drinking water

In Punjab, groundwater is continuously declining in 85 per cent of areas within the state. Nitrate presence in water has gone up by ten times in the past four decades. Of 138 hydrogeological blocks, over 100 are listed as dark or grey zones due to over-exploitation. Groundwater levels are going down by about 60 cm every year. As per official estimates, nearly 35,000 pumps have been going underground each year over the last four years.

Punjab has to find a quick solution for this form of agriculture that is not only unsustainable, but deathly too. Environmentalist Vandana Shiva argues that this type of intensive chemical-industrial agriculture, with its reliance on vast amounts of fresh water, fertilisers, pesticides and the like and is destroying biodiversity and is unsustainable in the long term. It might have increased production in the relative short term, but it has been at a terrible cost to health and the environment. The situation in Punjab could just be the tip of the iceberg.

For Shiva, the answer is to return to basics by encouraging biodiverse, organic, local crop systems, which she asserts is more than capable of feeding India's huge population - and, unlike chemical intensive agriculture - feeding it healthily.

In the meantime, powerful politically-connected and often extremely unscrupulous Big Agra and Big Oil concerns involved in fertiliser, pesticide and seed manufacturing (and let's not forget the genetically modified sector) have a lot invested in maintaining the current, highly profitable system. After all, the logic of global capitalism is to ensure profits for shareholders and thus grab increasing shares of markets wherever they may be and, as John Perkins notes, by all means necessary. An article in the journal Hortscience in 2009 by Donald R Davis (Declining fruit and vegetable composition: what is the evidence?) indicated falling nutritional values as a result of industrialised agriculture.

Should we be surprised? In a bankrupt system, nutritious, healthy, life-sustaining food or

healthy environments are but secondary concerns.

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Articles by: [Colin Todhunter](#)

About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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