

Import and Die: Self-sufficiency and Food Security in India

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Featured image: VP M Venkaiah Naidu (Source: [Livemint](#))

India's Vice-President M Venkaiah Naidu [recently stated](#) that the country cannot survive on imported produce for its food security. He called for a greater focus on agriculture: "We can export (agricultural produce) for the time being but the population is growing."

Naidu pointed out what has become increasingly apparent:

"People are leaving agriculture and going to other professions. An agriculturist does not want his son to continue with the profession because of uncertain monsoons, natural calamities, market exploitation, etc. All this is affecting agriculture."

Noting that agriculture is becoming financially unviable for farmers, he called for an end to the urban-rural divide by ensuring that people living in rural areas are provided basic amenities.

There are hints of the need to achieve food self-sufficiency in what he says and that is encouraging. But there is also a [World Bank-backed plan](#) for the future of India and the majority of farmers don't have much of a role in it. Successive administrations in India have been facilitating this plan by making farming financially unviable with the aim of moving farmers out of farming and into the cities to work in manufacturing or service sector jobs – jobs that, by the way, [do not exist](#). It is an agenda founded on a [bogus model](#) of 'development'.

According to [this report](#), the number of cultivators in India declined from 166 million to 146 million between 2004 and 2011. Some 6,700 left farming each day. Between 2015 and 2022 the number of cultivators is likely to decrease to around 127 million.

The aim is to restructure agriculture according to the wishes of the US and its agribusiness corporations.

It entails displacing the existing labour-intensive system of food and agriculture with one dominated by a few transnational corporate agribusiness concerns which will control all aspects of the sector from seed to plate. As a result, small, independent cultivators and food processing concerns are being impoverished through exposure to a rigged international market and rising input costs or find it [increasingly difficult to operate](#) and are being forced out of the sector.

Although there is talk about doubling farmers' incomes in the coming years, at the same time this also involves drastically reducing the numbers remaining in agriculture. Moreover, a doubling of income is still too little too late considering just how much farmers' incomes have [fallen behind](#) those of the wider population, reflected in the [dire conditions](#) of India's rural dwellers.

For all the discussion about loan waivers for farmers and raising income levels, this does not address the core of the problem affecting agriculture: spiralling input costs, lack of government assistance and the impacts of cheap, subsidised imports which depress farmers' incomes.

Take the cultivation of pulses, for instance. Pulses production [increased by 40%](#) during the last 12 months (a year of record production). At the same time, however, imports also rose resulting in black gram selling at [4,000 rupees per quintal](#) ([much less](#) than during the previous 12 months). This has effectively driven down prices thereby reducing farmers already meagre incomes. We have already witnessed a running down of the indigenous edible oils sector thanks to Indonesian palm oil imports on the back of World Bank pressure to reduce import tariffs.

On the one hand, there is talk of India becoming food secure and self-sufficient; on the other, there is pressure from the richer nations for the Indian government to further reduce support given to farmers and open up to imports and 'free' trade. But this is based on hypocrisy.

[Consider that](#) some 3.2 million people were engaged in agriculture in the US in 2015. The US govt provided them each with a subsidy of \$7,860 on average. Japan provides a subsidy of \$14,136 and New Zealand \$2,623 to its farmers. In 2015, a British farmer earned \$2,800 and \$37,000 was added through subsidies. The Indian govt provides on average a subsidy of \$873 to farmers. However, between 2012 and 2014, India reduced the subsidy on agriculture and food security by \$3 billion.

According to policy analyst Devinder Sharma [subsidies provided](#) to US wheat and rice farmers are more than the market worth of these two crops. He also notes that, per day, each cow in Europe receives subsidy worth more than an Indian farmer's daily income.

Mechanisms such as minimum support prices, public distribution and government procurement (whatever the deficiencies of these may be) have assured a certain degree of food security for India. But what does the US and its agribusiness corporations desire? A return to an India unable to feed itself and [reliant on US shipments](#)?

How can the Indian farmer compete with an influx of artificially cheap imports? The simple answer is that s/he cannot. These imports destroy the livelihoods of small-scale cultivators who are the backbone of food production in India.

Relying on imports and transnational agribusiness with its proprietary seeds and inputs to take over Indian agriculture is not a recipe for food security.

The authors of [this piece](#) argue that:

"In an economy driven by jobless growth, compulsive migration to cities is often a case of distress transhumance. These migrants then become the new

“serfs” of the informal services and construction sector, while the existing rural and agrarian problems remain unresolved.”

Does India want to follow in the footsteps of Mexico? Aside from destroying the nation’s [health and home-grown food supply chain](#), ‘free’ trade has allowed subsidised US [corn to be dumped](#) in the country, fuelled unemployment and transformed a former productive peasantry into a [problematic group](#).

To avoid similar outcomes, India [must try to delink from or roll back the neoliberal globalisation agenda](#), bring in capital controls, manage foreign trade to suit its own interests and expand domestic production. By encouraging self-sufficiency, providing [a guaranteed income](#) and by investing in farmers, meaningful work can be generated and genuine ([nutritionally sound](#)) food security achieved.

The problem is that self-sufficiency is not to the liking of the US and the World Bank. Washington has for many decades regarded its leverage over global agriculture as a [tool to secure its geostrategic goals](#).

The future it has in mind for Indian agriculture is another story entirely and, as an alternative to a system of ecologically sustainable, self-sufficient farming, is one well worth [contemplating](#).

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