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Microsoft vs Indian Farmers: Agri-Stacking the System

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In April, the Indian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Microsoft, allowing its local partner CropData to leverage a master database of farmers. The MoU seems to be part of the AgriStack policy initiative, which involves the roll out of 'disruptive' technologies and digital databases in the agricultural sector.

Based on press reports and government statements, Microsoft would help farmers with post-harvest management solutions by building a collaborative platform and capturing agriculture datasets such as crop yields, weather data, market demand and prices. In turn, this would create a farmer interface for 'smart' agriculture, including post-harvest management and distribution.

CropData will be granted access to a government database of 50 million farmers and their land records. As the database is developed, it will include farmers' personal details, profile of land held (cadastral maps, farm size, land titles, local climatic and geographical conditions), production details (crops grown, production history, input history, quality of output, machinery in possession) and financial details (input costs, average return, credit history).

The stated aim is to use digital technology to improve financing, inputs, cultivation and supply and distribution.

It seems that the blueprint for AgriStack is in an advanced stage despite the lack of consultation with or involvement of farmers themselves. Technology could certainly improve the sector but handing control over to powerful private concerns will merely facilitate what they require in terms of market capture and farmer dependency.

Such 'data-driven agriculture' is integral to the recent farm legislation which includes a proposal to create a digital profile of cultivators, their farm holdings, climatic conditions in an area, what is grown and average output.

Of course, many concerns have been raised about this, ranging from farmer displacement, the further exploitation of farmers through microfinance and the misuse of farmer's data and increased algorithmic decision-making without accountability.

The displacement of farmers is not lost on the Research Unit for Political Economy (RUPE) which, in a three-part series of articles, explains how neoliberal capitalism has removed peasant farmers from their land to facilitate an active land market for corporate interests. The Indian government is trying to establish a system of 'conclusive titling' of all land in the country, so that ownership can be identified and land can then be bought or taken away.

Taking Mexico as an example, RUPE says:

> "Unlike Mexico, India never underwent significant land reform. Nevertheless, its current programme of 'conclusive titling' of land bears clear resemblances to Mexico's post-1992 drive to hand over property rights… The Indian rulers are closely following the script followed by Mexico, written in Washington."

The plan is that, as farmers lose access to land or can be identified as legal owners, predatory institutional investors and large agribusinesses will buy up and amalgamate holdings, facilitating the further roll out of high-input, corporate-dependent industrial agriculture – which has already helped fuel wide-scale financial distress among farmers and a deep-rooted agrarian and environmental crisis.

By harvesting (pirating) information – under the benign-sounding policy of data-driven agriculture – private corporations will be better placed to exploit farmers' situations for their own ends: they will know more about their incomes and businesses than individual farmers themselves.

Open letter

Some 55 civil society groups and organisations have written to the government expressing these and various other concerns, not least the perceived policy vacuum with respect to the data privacy of farmers and the exclusion of farmers themselves in current policy initiatives.

In an open letter, they state:

"At a time when 'data has become the new oil' and the industry is looking at it as the next source of profits, there is a need to ensure the interest of farmers. It will not be surprising that corporations will approach this as one more profit-making possibility, as a market for so-called 'solutions' which lead to sale of unsustainable agri-inputs combined with greater loans and indebtedness of farmers for this through fintech, as well as the increased threat of dispossession by private corporations."

They add that any proposal which seeks to tackle the issues that plague Indian agriculture must address the fundamental causes of these issues. The current model relies on 'tech-solutionism' which emphasises using technology to solve structural issues.

There is also the issue of reduced transparency on the part of the government through algorithm-based decision-making.

The 55 signatories request the government holds consultations with all stakeholders, especially farmers' organisations, on the direction of its digital push as well as the basis of partnerships, and put out a policy document in this regard after giving due consideration to feedback from farmers and farmer organisations. As agriculture is a state subject, the central government should consult the state governments also.

They state that all initiatives that the government has begun with private entities to integrate and/or share multiple databases with private/personal information about individual farmers or their farms be put on hold till an inclusive policy framework is put in place and a data protection law is passed.

It is also advocated that the development of AgriStack, both as a policy framework and its execution, should take the concerns and experiences of farmers as the prime starting point.

The letter states that if the new farm laws are closely examined, it will be evident that unregulated digitalisation is an important aspect of them.

There is the strong possibility that monopolistic corporate owned e-commerce 'platforms' will eventually control much of India's economy given the current policy trajectory. From retail and logistics to cultivation, data certainly will be the 'new oil', giving power to platforms to dictate what needs to be manufactured and in what quantities.

Those farmers who remain in the system will be tied to contracts and told how much production is expected, how much rain is anticipated, what type of soil quality there is, what type of inputs are required and when the produce needs to be ready – and how much money they will receive.

Handing over all information about the sector to Microsoft and others places power in their hands – the power to shape the sector in their own image.

The data giants and e-commerce companies will not only control data about consumption but also hold data on production, logistics, who needs what, when they need it, who should produce it, who should move it and when it should be moved.

Bayer, Corteva, Syngenta and traditional agribusiness will work with Microsoft, Google and the big-tech giants to facilitate AI-driven farmerless farms and e-commerce retail dominated by the likes of Amazon and Walmart. A cartel of data owners, proprietary input suppliers and retail concerns at the commanding heights of the economy, peddling toxic industrial food and the devastating health impacts associated with it.

And elected representatives? Their role will be highly limited to technocratic overseers of these platforms and the artificial intelligence tools that plan and determine all of the above.

As for farmers, many if not most will be forced to leave the sector. Tens of millions unemployed and underemployed 'collateral damage' stripped of their means of production.

Centuries' old knowledge of cultivation and cultural practices passed on down the generations – gone. The links between humans and the land reduced to an AI-driven technocratic dystopia in compliance with the tenets of neoliberal capitalism.

As it currently stands, AgriStack will help facilitate this end game.

The open letter referred to can be read on the website of the Alliance For Holistic and Sustaibable Agriculture. For a summary of the recent farm legislation and the implications see this segment by Colin Todhunter on UK-based KTV.

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