

Monsanto's 'Hand of God': Planned Obsolescence of the Indian Farmer

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The mantra of global agribusiness companies is that they care about farmers. They also really care about humanity and want to help to feed a growing world population, preferably by using genetically modified (GM) crops. They say that they want to assist poor farmers by helping them to grow enough to earn a decent income. It seems like a win-win situation for everyone.

To listen to the PR, however, you could be forgiven for believing that these companies are driven by altruistic tendencies and humanitarian goals rather than by massive profit margins and delivering on shareholder dividends.

To promote itself and its products, the US multinational company Union Carbide came out with a series of brochures in the nineteen fifties and sixties with powerful images depicting a large 'hand of god' in the sky, which hovered over a series of landscapes and scenarios in need of 'fixing' by the brave new world of science and the type of agricultural technology to be found in a pesticide canister. One such image is of a giant hand pouring chemicals from a lab flask upon Indian soil, with a pesticide manufacturing factory in the distance and Mumbai's Gateway of India opposite.



Science helps build a new India

Oxen working the fields . . . the eternal river Ganges . . . jeweled elephants on parade. Today these symbols of ancient India exist side by side with a new sight—modern industry. India has developed bold new plans to build its economy and bring the promise of a bright future to its more than 400,000,000 people. ► But India needs the technical knowledge of the western world. For example, working with Indian engineers and technicians, Union Carbide recently made available its vast scientific resources to help build a major chemicals and plastics plant near Bombay. ► Throughout the free world, Union Carbide has been actively engaged in building plants for the manufacture of chemicals, plastics, carbons, gases, and metals. The people of Union Carbide welcome the opportunity to use their knowledge and skills in partnership with the citizens of so many great countries.

A HAND IN THINGS TO COME

WRITE for book of U.S.A. "The Evolving Universe of Union Carbide," which tells how research in the field of carbons, chemicals, gases, metals, plastics and nuclear energy keep bringing new wonders into your life. Union Carbide Corporation, 200 Park Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.



It was a scene where science met tradition, where the helping hand of god, in this case Union Carbide, assisted the ignorant, backward Indian farmer who is shown toiling in the fields. The people at Union Carbide didn't do subtlety back then.

We can now look back and see where Union Carbide's helping hand got the people of Bhopal and the deaths caused by that pesticide factory depicted in the image. And we can also see the utter contempt its top people in the US displayed by dodging justice and failing the victims of Bhopal. There's humanitarianism for you: playing god with people's lives and denying responsibility.

The supposed humanitarian motives of global agribusiness are often [little more than a sham](#). If these companies, their supporters and media shills and PR mouthpieces really want

to feed the world and assist poor farmers in low income countries, as they say they do, they would do better by addressing the political, economic and structural issues laid out [here](#) which fuel poverty and hunger. And that includes the role of agribusiness itself in determining unfair world trade rules and trade agreements, such as the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which help grant it access to agriculture across the globe and recast it for its own ends. (In fact, US agribusiness and the transformation of food-sufficient countries into food-deficit ones has long been bound up with the projection of Washington's global power - see [this](#).)

They would also do better by acting on the recommendations of various reports that conclude agro-ecological approaches are more suitable for these countries and that GM and chemical-dependent practices are not required and are inappropriate (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)).

Many of the people these companies supply their inputs to and make a profit from are smallholder farmers who live on a financial knife edge in low income countries Monsanto has appropriated around \$900 million from India's farmers over the last decade or so - illegally according to [this](#) . By way of contrast, Monsanto CEO Hugh Grant brought in \$13.4 million in 2014 alone, according to Bloomberg.

Writing in India's [Statesman newspaper](#) recently, Bharat Dogra illustrates the knife-edge existence of the people that rich agribusiness profits from by discussing the case of Babu Lal and his wife Mirdi Bai who have been traditionally cultivating wheat, maize, and bajra (millet) on their farmland in Rajasthan. Their crops provided food for several months a year to the 10-member family as well as fodder for farm and dairy animals which are integral to the mixed farming system employed.

Dogra notes that company (unspecified - but Monsanto and its subsidiaries dominate the GM cotton industry in India) agents approached the family with the promise of a lump-sum payment to plant and produce Bt (GM) cotton seeds in two of their fields. Babu Lal purchased pesticides to help grow the seeds in the hope of receiving the payment, which never materialised because the company agent said the seeds produced had "failed" in tests.

The family faced economic ruin, not least because the food harvest was much lower than normal as the best fields and most labour and resources had been devoted to Bt cotton. There was hardly any fodder too. It all resulted in Babu Lal borrowing from private moneylenders at a high interest rate to meet the needs of food and fodder.

Things were to get much worse though as the company's agent allegedly started harassing Babu Lal for a payment of about 10,000 rupees in lieu of the fertilisers and pesticides provided to him. Several other tribal farmers in the area also fell into this trap, and reports say that the soil of fields in which Bt cotton was grown has been badly damaged.

The promise of a lump-sum cash payment can be very enticing to poor farmers, and when companies use influential villagers to get new farmers to agree to plant GM cotton, tribal farmers are reluctant to decline the offer. When production is declared as having failed, solely at the company's discretion it seems, a family becomes indebted.

According to Dogra's piece, there is growing evidence that the trend in tribal areas to experiment with Bt cotton has disrupted food security and has introduced various health

hazards and ecological threats due to the use of poisonous chemical inputs.

What seed companies are doing is experimenting with farmers' livelihoods and lives. 'Success', regardless of the impact on the farmer, is measured in terms of company profits. However, failure for the farmer is a matter of life and death. Look no further than the spike in suicides across the cotton belt since 1997. Even 'success' for the farmer may not amount to much when the costs of the seeds and associated chemical inputs are factored into any possible increase in yield or income.

Despite constant denials by Monsanto and its supporters in the media that Bt cotton in India has nothing or little to do with farmer suicides in India, a [new study](#) directly links the crisis of suicides among Indian farmers to Bt cotton adoption in rain-fed areas, where most of India's cotton is grown. As outlined in the case of Babu Lal above, many fall into a cycle of debt from the purchase of expensive, commercialised GM seeds and chemical inputs that then often fail to yield enough to sustain farmers' livelihoods.

Dogra's story is about one family's plight, but it is a microcosm of all that is wrong with modern agriculture and that could be retold a million times over in India and across the world: the imposition of cash monocrops and the subsequent undermining of local food security (leading to food-deficit regions and to a reliance on imports); the introduction of costly and hazardous (to health and environment) chemical inputs and company seeds; crop failure (or, in many cases, the inability to secure decent prices on a commercial market dominated by commodity speculators in the US or rigged in favour of Western countries); and spiralling debt.

The situation for India's farmers is dire across the board. Consider that 670 million people in India's the rural areas live on less than 33 rupees a day (around 50 US cents) a day. And consider that than 32 million quit agriculture between 2007 and 2012. Where did they go? Into the cities to look for work. Work that does not exist.

Between 2005 and 2015, only 15 million jobs were created nationally. To keep up with a growing workforce, around 12 million new jobs are required each year. Therefore, if you are going to place the likes of Babu Lal and millions like him at the mercy of the 'helping hand' of giant agribusiness companies or the whims of the market, you may well be consigning him and millions like him to the dustbin of history given the lack of options for making a living out there.

In fact, that is exactly what the Indian government is doing by leaving farmers like him to deal with agribusiness and the vagaries of the market and having to compete with heavily subsidised Western agriculture/agribusiness, whose [handmaidens at the WTO](#) demand India reduces import restrictions. Little wonder then that 300,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide since 1997.

While the West tries to impose its neoliberal agenda of cutting subsidies to agriculture and dismantling [price support mechanisms](#) and the [public distribution system](#) that if effectively run would allow Indian farmers to receive a decent stable income, farmers are unsurprisingly leaving the sector in droves as agriculture becomes economically non-viable. Forcing farmers to leave the land is a deliberate strategy. Just like it is a deliberate strategy to give massive handouts to industry and corporate concerns who are not delivering on jobs. It's all about priorities. And farmers are not a priority. [They are being driven from farming, while all the advantages are being given to a failing corporate-industrial sector.](#)

With 300,000 having killed themselves in the last 18 years and many more heavily indebted or existing on a pittance, what we are witnessing is the destruction of the Indian farmer. Structural violence doesn't require guns or knives – economic policies and political choices will do just fine.

This type of violence involves the [uprooting of indigenous agriculture](#) and replacing it with a chemical-intensive Western model based of agriculture, whereby those farmers left on the land are to be recipients of the inputs and knowledge of agribusiness companies. This began with the 'green revolution' and is continuing apace today courtesy of GM cotton seeds and possibly GM food given that open field trials of GM food crops now taking place (GM is a [fraudulent enterprise](#) and is surrounded by various myths that are deconstructed [here](#)).

It begs the question: are traditional skills and knowledge gained over thousands of years to be cast aside in favour of a model that stresses agribusiness inputs and the 'knowledge' required to make them work? Very often, these inputs (or products) result in a continuous process of crisis management (under the banner of 'research and development') and short-termism: new products – that are ultimately destined to fail – to replace the older products that have already failed. This scenario is only good for one thing – the profit sheets of the agribusiness cartel as it pushes its never-ending stream of 'innovations' onto the hapless farmer.

For example, going back a couple of years, a report in [Business Standard](#) (BS) stated that Bt cotton yields in India had dropped to a five-year low. India approved Bt cotton in 2002 and within a few years yields increased dramatically. However, most of the rise in productivity seemingly had [nothing to do with Bt cotton](#) itself.

What's more, since Bt has taken over, yields have been steadily worsening. According to BS, bollworms are developing resistance. Contrary to what farmers were originally told, the Monsanto spokesperson quoted by BS says that such resistance is to be expected. However, when Bt cotton arrived in India, farmers were told that they wouldn't have to spray any more. All that farmers had to do was plant the seeds and water them regularly. They were told that, as GM seeds are insect resistant, there was no need to use huge amounts of pesticides.

But, according to Monsanto's spokesperson, the bollworm problem is all the Indian farmers' fault because 'limited refuge planting' is one of the factors that may have contributed to pink bollworm resistance. Using the 'wrong' biotech seed is another. The answer from the biotech sector to combat falling yields is continuous R&D to develop new technologies and new strains of GM seeds to try to stay ahead of insect resistance or falling yields.

Agribusiness corporations are engaged in managing and thus profiting from the crises they themselves have conspired to produce with their destruction of traditional agriculture and local economies and their chemical inputs and genetic engineering. By its very nature – by tampering with nature – US agribusiness is designed to stumble from one crisis to the next. And it will do so by hiding behind the banners of 'innovation' or 'research and development'. But, it's all good business. And that's all that really matters. There's always money to be made from blaming the victims for the mess created and from a continuous state of crisis management.

Ultimately, this is what capitalism is all about: planned obsolescence – planned obsolescence of its products, in order that profits can be made from a stream of new

'wonder' products and, as far as India is concerned, planned obsolescence of its farmers as agribusiness sets out to uproot tradition and shape farming in its own corporate image. And part of the great con-trick is that it attempts to pass off its endless crises and failures as brilliant successes.

If anything highlights how this traditional knowledge and practices are being cast aside, it is the recent case of Bt cotton and whitefly. In the cotton belt of Punjab and Haryana, the tiny whitefly has caused extensive damage. They sprayed this way and that way with pesticides. The agritech companies blamed farmers for not spraying correctly. The companies blamed each other for selling the wrong chemicals to farmers. It's a repeat of the bollworm blame game. In any case, the pesticide use failed to kill the whitefly that ravaged cotton crops.

Writing [on his blog](#), food and trade policy analyst Devinder Sharma says that the only time whitefly did not destroy crops was when pesticides were not used. Instead, farmers used 'insect equilibrium' and their knowledge of which insects kill crop-predator pests. Knowledge built over centuries of trial and error and which did not come courtesy of a white-coated figure in a lab. Knowledge that is in danger of being wiped out as farmers are being turned into consumers of agritech products.

Sharma notes in that the areas where extensive pesticide use failed to defeat the whitefly, they "stand like an oasis in a heavily polluted chemical desert." In the areas that were not ravaged, pesticides have not been used for several years. Benign insects are used to control harmful pests. They allowed the natural predators of whitefly to proliferate, which in turn killed the whitefly. Sharma says he has met women who can identify 110 non-vegetarian insects and also as many as 60 vegetarian insects (a few years back, [he also reported](#) how insect equilibrium was managing a mealy bug problem too).

For agribusiness, though, it is more profitable to hijack agriculture and recast it in its own 'hand of god' image. It can then serve up its industrial poisons and GMOs to farmers courtesy of politicians who handed agriculture to it on a plate.

Fast forward 50 years from that Union Carbide image and global agribusiness is today a bit more subtle in its approach. But the underlying messages and attitudes remain: that backward, ignorant farmers are in need of a giant 'helping hand', these companies know best and debt, economic distress and farmer suicides are not of its making or concern.

Global agribusiness is playing fast and loose with poor people's lives and is profiting handsomely.

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