

Why Are Indian Farmers Committing Suicide and

How Can We Stop This Tragedy?

By Vandana Shiva, Huffington Post May 18, 2009

In a land where reincarnation is a commonly held belief, where the balance sheet of life is sorted out over lifetimes, where resilience and recovery has been the characteristic of the "kisan," the peasant cultivation, why are Indian farmers committing suicide on a mass scale?

200,000 farmers have ended their lives since 1997.

Farmers' suicides are the most tragic and dramatic symptom of the crisis of survival faced by Indian peasants. Rapid increase in indebtedness is at the root of farmers' taking their lives. Debt is a reflection of a negative economy. Two factors have transformed agriculture from a positive economy into a negative economy for peasants: the rising of costs of production and the falling prices of farm commodities. Both these factors are rooted in the policies of trade liberalization and corporate globalization.

In 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporations like Cargill, Monsanto and Syngenta. The global corporations changed the input economy overnight. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds, which need fertilizers and pesticides and cannot be saved. Corporations prevent seed savings through patents and by engineering seeds with non-renewable traits. As a result, poor peasants have to buy new seeds for every planting season and what was traditionally a free resource, available by putting aside a small portion of the crop, becomes a commodity. This new expense increases poverty and leads to indebtedness.

The shift from saved seed to corporate monopoly of the seed supply also represents a shift from biodiversity to monoculture in agriculture. The district of Warangal in Andhra Pradesh used to grow diverse legumes, millets, and oilseeds. Now the imposition of cotton monocultures has led to the loss of the wealth of farmer's breeding and nature's evolution.

Monocultures and uniformity increase the risk of crop failure, as diverse seeds adapted to diverse to eco-systems are replaced by the rushed introduction of uniform and often untested seeds into the market. When Monsanto first introduced Bt Cotton in 2002, the farmers lost 1 billion rupees due to crop failure. Instead of 1,500 kilos per acre as promised by the company, the harvest was as low as 200 kilos per acre. Instead of incomes of 10,000 rupees an acre, farmers ran into losses of 6,400 rupees an acre. In the state of Bihar, when farm-saved corn seed was displaced by Monsanto's hybrid corn, the entire crop failed, creating 4 billion rupees in losses and increased poverty for desperately poor farmers. Poor peasants of the South cannot survive seed monopolies. The crisis of suicides shows how the survival of small farmers is incompatible with the seed monopolies of global corporations.

The second pressure Indian farmers are facing is the dramatic fall in prices of farm produce as a result of the WTO's free trade policies. The WTO rules for trade in agriculture are, in essence, rules for dumping. They have allowed wealthy countries to increase agribusiness subsidies while preventing other countries from protecting their farmers from artificially cheap imported produce. Four hundred billion dollars in subsidies combined with the forced removal of import restriction is a ready-made recipe for farmer suicide. Global wheat prices have dropped from \$216 a ton in 1995 to \$133 a ton in 2001; cotton prices from \$98.2 a ton in 1995 to \$49.1 a ton in 2001; Soya bean prices from \$273 a ton in 1995 to \$178 a ton. This reduction is due not to a change in productivity, but to an increase in subsidies and an increase in market monopolies controlled by a handful of agribusiness corporations.

The region in India with the highest level of farmers suicides is the Vidharbha region in Maharashtra -- 4000 suicides per year, 10 per day. This is also the region with the highest acreage of Monsanto's GMO Bt cotton. Monsanto's GM seeds create a suicide economy by transforming seed from a renewable resource to a non-renewable input which must be bought every year at high prices. Cotton seed used to cost Rs 7/kg. Bt-cotton seeds were sold at Rs 17,000/kg. Indigenous cotton varieties can be intercropped with food crops. Bt-cotton can only be grown as a monoculture. Indigenous cotton is rain fed. Bt-cotton needs irrigation. Indigenous varieties

are pest resistant. Bt-cotton, even though promoted as resistant to the boll worm, has created new pests, and to control these new pests, farmers are using 13 times more pesticides than they were using prior to introduction of Bt-cotton. And finally, Monsanto sells its GMO seeds on fraudulent claims of yields of 1500/kg/year when farmers harvest 300-400 kg/year on an average. High costs and unreliable output make for a debt trap, and a suicide economy.

While Monsanto pushes the costs of cultivation up, agribusiness subsidies drive down the price farmers get for their produce.

Cotton producers in the US are given a subsidy of \$4 billion annually. This has artificially brought down cotton prices, allowing the US to capture world markets previously accessible to poor African countries such as Burkina Faso, Benin, and Mali. This subsidy of \$230 per acre in the US is untenable for the African farmers. African cotton farmers are losing \$250 million every year. That is why small African countries walked out of the Cancun negotiations, leading to the collapse of the WTO ministerial.

The rigged prices of globally traded agriculture commodities steal from poor peasants of the South. A study carried out by the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology (RFSTE) shows that due to falling farm prices, Indian peasants are losing \$26 billion annually. This is a burden their poverty does not allow them to bear. As debts increase -- unpayable from farm proceeds -- farmers are compelled to sell a kidney or even commit suicide. Seed saving gives farmers life. Seed monopolies rob farmers of life.

Farmers suicides in the state of Chattisgarh have recently been before in the news. 1593 farmers committed suicide in Chattisgarh in 2007. Before 2000 no farmers suicides are reported in the state. Chattisgarh is the Centre of Diversity of the indige varieties of rice. More than 200,000 rices used to grow in India. This is where eminent rice scientists Dr. Richaria did his collections and showed that tribals had bred many rices with higher yields than the green Revolution varieties.

Today the rice farming of Chattisgarh is under assault. When indigenous rice is replaced with green Revolution varieties, irrigation becomes necessary. Under globalization pressures, rice is anyway a lower priority than exotic vegetables. The farmers are sold hybrid seeds, the seeds need heavy inputs of fertilizers and pesticides, as well as intensive irrigation. And crop failure is frequent. This pushes farmers into debt and suicide.

Chattisgarh is also a prime target for growing of Jatropha for biofuel. Tribals farms are being forcefully appropriated for Jatropha plantations, aggravating the food and livelihood crisis in Chattisgarh. The diesel demand of the automobile industry is given a priority above the food needs of the poor. The suicide economy of industrialized, globalised agriculture is suicidal at 3 levels -- it is suicidal for farmers, it is suicidal for the poor who are derived food, and it is suicidal at the level of the human species as we destroy the natural capital of seed, biodiversity, soil and water on which our biological survival depends. The suicide economy is not an inevitability. Navdanya has started a Seeds of Hope campaign to stop farmers suicides. The transition from seeds of suicide to seeds of hope includes:

- A shift from GMO and non renewable seeds to organic, open pollinated seed varieties which farmers can save and share
- A shift from chemical farming to organic farming
- A shift from unfair trade based on false prices to fair trade based on real and just prices

The farmers who have made this shift are earning 10 times more than the farmers growing Monsanto's Bt-cotton.

Activist and physicist Vandana Shiva is founder and director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy in New Delhi.

She is author of more than three hundred papers in leading journals and numerous books, including Monocultures of the Mind: Biodiversity, Biotechnology, and the Third World and Earth Democracy. Vandana is a founding director of International Forum on Globalization.

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