

Monsanto, Cereal Killer GM and Agrarian Suicides in India

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The Green Revolution is dead. Its hybrids and high-yield varieties allowed for significant increases in the production of crops like wheat. But its negative side effects have intensified rather than gone away.

The technological package of the Green Revolution caused severe salination of the soil, indiscriminate exploitation and choking of aquifers and intense pollution with all types of pesticides. More seriously, it sowed an economic, social and environmental crisis in the life of poor farmers that takes more lives every year. One example is that of Anil Khondwa Shinde, a small farmer of Vidarbha district in Maharashtra state (in mid-western India). He killed himself two months ago consuming a powerful insecticide. He was 31 years old and died within minutes. The difference between the production costs and the retail price did not allow him to pay back to the providers the credit extended to him for the inputs.

An isolated incident? Not at all. The Indian Ministry of Agriculture admits to the following figures: there were 100,000 suicides by farmers between 1993 and 2003. And between 2003 and October 2006, there have been some 16,000 suicides by farmers each year. In total, between 1993 and 2006, there were around 150,000 suicide by farmers, 30 a day for 13 years!

The Maharashtra government itself accepts the figure of 1,920 farmers' suicides in Vidarbha between January 2001 and August 2006. Farmers' organisations of the district state that there were 782 suicides by agricultural producers. Data for the past three months indicate that on average there was a suicide every eight hours.

What conditions give rise to a suicide rate of about 30 farmers a day? It is said that the reason for this is indebtedness, but the ultimate reason is the imposition of a completely unsuitable agricultural technology, as much from the economic as from the environmental viewpoint.

Anil Shinde had decided to plant Bt cotton, a transgenic variety produced by Monsanto that supposedly reduces the need for insecticides and increases the return for the grower. Shinde is not an exception. Hundreds of farmers who had planted transgenic cotton in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka have sought suicide as way out of a desperate situation that worsens year after year.

An important element of the tale is that Monsanto's Bt cotton variety offers some protection against cotton bollworm (*Helicoverpa zea*) but not against other pests (*Spodoptera*, for example) which affect this commercial crop in India. Producers like Shinde, who turned to Monsanto cotton looking to lower pesticide costs, were taken by surprise though in any case, they have had to keep using the inputs. Even worse, the debt trap got on top of them much quicker as the Monsanto cotton seeds are more expensive.

In many districts, the local moneylenders of the past have been substituted by the network of dealers and salesmen of large companies and their methods of debt recovery have been frequently criticised. When the incidence of suicides intensified, the government launched a "help" programme with an assured payment of about \$2,000 to the surviving families but that money goes straight to the pockets of the creditors and, in fact, has become a perverse incentive that more farmers take their lives.

But the politicians are the same on all sides. The Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar, delights in living in the past, always speaking about the triumph of the Green Revolution. The message of his speeches is always the same: India needs genetically modified crops to help the poor farmers escape poverty and to resolve the "problem of hunger".

Thanks to the neo-liberal opening-up promoted by the government, the area dedicated to transgenic cotton in Vidarbha increased from 0.4% to 15% in just three years. In that timeframe, the rate of agrarian suicides also increased, which makes Monsanto the worst serial killer in history. Or, if we want to play with words, just as that company plays with the life of millions of farmers, we could describe Monsanto as the worst cereal killer of the planet.

Thousands of farmers, whose way of life has been destroyed as they have fallen into the clutches of the creditors, have turned to suicide as the only escape. In the process, they have exposed the failure of an agricultural project based on a technological "solution" with multiple negative effects and dysfunctional social relations. Why not heal the damages of the Green Revolution rather than

rush to embrace the GM technology?

The seeds of destruction want to tell us something. But this winter, New Delhi seems more concerned with environmental pollution than the tragedy that unfolds daily in the countryside.
Translated by Supriyo Chatterjee

Alejandro Nadal is professor at the Center for Economic Studies and coordinator of the Science and Technology program of El Colegio de Mexico

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Supriyo Chatterjee: supriyo@chatterjees.freemove.co.uk