

Why does a farmer in India commit suicide every 30 minutes?

A farmer in India swallows a bottle of pesticide and falls dead. And the tragedy of this suicide is compounded. His wife and children now have to pay the debts he owed that drove him into such desperation. They may not have a way to farm the land. They may be forced to work another farmer's field for 45 cents a day.

Since 1995, about a quarter of a million farmers in India have committed suicide. Most are small farmers, more than 85 percent were deeply in debt. In 2009, 17,638 farmers killed themselves—an average of one every 30 minutes.

In a country the U.S. upholds as a model of capitalist democracy, tens of thousands of farmers are driven to kill themselves because they have gone deep into debt to feed their families.



Farming in Hyderabad, India.

Photo: Flickr/Ben Sullivan/revcom

India's agricultural system has increasingly become tied into the global imperialist market. And as a result, many farmers have been pushed to switch from food to cash crops, like cotton, to sell on the global market.

The system of capitalism-imperialism envelops the whole world—where the production of everything is driven and shaped by the drive to maximize profit. A small handful of rich, imperialist countries, with the U.S. at the top, dominate the poor countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—where over 80 percent of the world's people live. Imperialism sets the terms for what will be produced in these countries—not to meet the needs of the people, but in the interests of profit.

Countries dominated by imperialism are subjected to Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—which are controlled by the imperialist powers, especially the U.S. To get loans and lower interest rates, Third World governments have to meet strict conditions and carry out certain "reforms" aimed at creating more favorable conditions for imperialist trade and investment.

What do these workings of capitalism have to do with farmers committing suicide in India?

In 1998, the World Bank's structural adjustment policies forced India to open up its seed sector to global corporations like Monsanto. Regular seed used by farmers was quickly replaced by genetically modified seeds—which cost more, require more costly fertilizers, and have to be bought every planting season (with regular seeds, farmers can use seeds from the previous year's crop). With some of these new seeds there is a greater risk of crop failure. And a farmer can end up getting very little for his crop because of the ups and downs of the global market.

The farmers are squeezed into debt from two sides. They take out loans to pay for the more expensive seed and fertilizers. And under SAP reforms the Indian government cuts back social services and low-cost credit to farmers. So the farmers seek local money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. And they go deeper into debt if the weather is bad and the crop fails... if someone in the family gets sick or dies... if the children go to school.

Some farmers who commit suicide owe multiple loans—from a bank, a relative, a local money lender. One farmer, the night before he killed himself, borrowed one last time. He got a loan from someone in the village for about \$9—the cost of a one-liter bottle of pesticide, which he used to take his life.



Photo: AP

Family with the body of Kontam Srinivas, a 26-year-old farmer who committed suicide by consuming pesticides in Chatapally village, in Medak district, August 25, 2009.

In India, the much-worshipped "market economy"—capitalism—has produced the largest recorded wave of suicides in human history. And the desperate situation faced by ruined farmers in India can be seen around the world. In Ethiopia, a country historically wracked by famine, farmers are pushed to grow coffee for export, subjected to the mercies of the global coffee market. In the impoverished Ivory Coast, people grow cocoa for chocolate bars. In Taiwan and Malaysia, people raise orchids for European and American flower shops. All this, across the planet, is dictated by the drive for profit and the geopolitical needs of capitalism-imperialism.

The world does not have to be this way! The basis exists, in human knowledge, technology, and resources, to solve the needs—including for food and clothing—of humanity. Under socialism making sure people have enough food will be the first priority in agricultural production and part of building a whole world of shared abundance for everybody.

India's epidemic of farmer suicides, and the fact that this horror is a result of the very workings of the capitalist-imperialist system, speaks powerfully to the urgent need for revolution.



Family members of farmers who committed suicide at a 2007 event organized to highlight the situation of the hundreds of farmers who committed suicide in the state of Maharashtra.

Photo: AP