



THE AGRARIAN IMAGINATION

Development and the Art of the Impossible

COLIN TODHUNTER

The Agrarian Imagination: Development and the Art of the Impossible © 2025 Colin Todhunter

Published by the Critical Globalisation Research Collective (UK and India). The CGRC is an independent network focused on critical research in globalisation, food systems and development.

Cover image: Streetside stall in Chennai 2024 by the author. Rear cover: Under the flyover in Jaipur 2025 by the author.

Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution: NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International. To view a copy of this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

This licence requires that reusers give credit to the creator. It allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form and for non-commercial purposes only. BY: Credit must be given to the creator. NC: Only non-commercial use is permitted. This means not primarily intended for or directed towards commercial advantage or monetary compensation. ND: No derivatives or adaptations are permitted.

About the Author

Colin Todhunter is an independent researcher and writer and a research associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal. In 2018, he was named a 'Living Peace and Justice Leader/Model' by Engaging Peace Inc. in recognition of his writing.

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 The Development Issue	3
Chapter 2 Crisis and Control: Endgame of Late Capitalism	10
Chapter 3 Guilt and Graffiti: The Legacy of 'Killer Carbide'	25
Chapter 4 Comforting Myth in a Dispossessed Reality	37
Chapter 5 Toxic Platter for India	43
Chapter 6 Big Ag's Humanitarian Propaganda	52
Chapter 7 The Sour Taste of Modern Development	62
Chapter 8 India's Fruit and Vegetable Markets	72
Chapter 9 Rhythm of the Lanes, Repercussions of Progress	79
Chapter 10 Beneath the Flyover, Beside the Temple	85
Chapter 11 Copenhagenising Cities	92
Chapter 12 The Agrarian Imagination: Iron Cage and the Moral Underground	99
Chapter 13 The Moral Function of 'The Impossible'	113
Chapter 14 Revolution from the Soil in Burkina Faso	118
Chapter 15 Revolutionising the Self	130
Chapter 16 Moving Forward	137
Sources	149

Introduction

This book is a collection of 16 essays that were originally written as standalone pieces. They have been brought together here to invite readers to reflect on how we might imagine and create futures that are just, ecologically balanced and rooted in dignity and community. They draw strength from those throughout history who dared to think differently and challenge what seemed unchangeable.

Creating a better world based on different values may appear impossible, yet it is through steady questioning, grounded action and shared hope that real transformation can begin to take shape.

This collection is an unflinching assessment of the systems that dictate how we live, labour and interact with one another and with the planet. It rejects the notion that 'development' is an inherently good idea by exposing how the standard model—driven by the needs of neoliberal global capital and top-down policy—functions as an engine of injustice, displacement and ecological destruction.

The essays scrutinise development across its political, social, environmental, and economic forms. They ask who truly benefits from the structures that shape our world and whether current notions of 'progress' genuinely serve the majority or protect the natural world. From the persistent agrarian struggles in India to the devastating legacy of the Bhopal disaster, the book provides concrete evidence of the violence and inequality woven into policies imposed from above.

Drawing on critical thinkers like Jiddu Krishnamurti, Mahatma Gandhi, Wendell Berry and Michel Foucault, this work blends philosophical critique with real-world observation and urgent reportage. The power dynamics are exposed, and there is a call for

alternative ways of seeing and practising change. Recurring threads, including food sovereignty, ecological care and resistance, give the collection its core structure and emotional weight.

Ultimately, this book is both a thorough critique and a source of hope. It argues for change that is community-led, rooted in dignity and justice and guided by ecological wisdom and draws inspiration from both historical and present-day struggles. It speaks directly to anyone seeking to understand how the prevailing idea of development impacts ordinary life and what it takes to build a different, more equitable future.

This collection of essays is part of a series of open-access e-books by the author, which offer valuable background and context for readers: *Food, Dependency and Dispossession: Resisting the New World Order* (2022), *Sickening Profits: The Global Food System's Poisoned Food and Toxic Wealth* (2023) and *Power Play: The Future of Food* (2024). Many of the themes explored in this current collection connect back to those volumes, and readers are encouraged to consult them to deepen their understanding.

The author's works are based on original analyses and translated into accessible publications for broad public reach. They are released under an open access framework and freely available for non-commercial use.

Chapter One

The Development Issue

The questions raised in the introduction—about justice, dignity and the meaning of progress—inevitably come up against the realities of power. While we may imagine what development and progress might be, we must also turn to what it has become: a system of extraction disguised as improvement.

In this chapter, we trace how the language of growth and modernisation conceals a deeper pattern of control and dispossession that continues to define the so-called development project.

In recent years, there has been much concern about a great reset, techno-feudalism, ecomodernism and technocracy, clampdowns on free speech, dissent and protest and the general erosion of civil liberties. The developments are associated with a ‘new normal’, which is in turn linked to the economic crisis affecting the Western countries and consequent economic restructuring.

However, it is business as before in terms of the ‘old normal’. The ‘old normal’ thrives. The old normal of resource plunder, violence, environmental devastation and human dislocation. Dependency and dispossession remain at the core of the global economic system.

Civil liberties are being eroded in the West, but these ‘rights’ barely exist in many places across the world (that often call themselves ‘democratic’).

We only see greed and outright plunder underpinned by unconstitutional land takeovers and the trampling of democratic rights. For supporters of cronyism and manipulated markets, which

to all extent and purposes is what the neoliberal development agenda has fuelled, there have been untold opportunities for well-placed billionaires to make a fast buck from various infrastructure projects and privatisation sell-offs.

Powerful corporations are shaping the development agenda with the full backing of the state on hand to forcibly evict people from their lands and hand it over to mineral-hungry industries or agribusiness to fuel a warped, unsustainable model of development and swell the pockets of elite interests.

For instance, TIME magazine ran the piece *India Is Pulling Back on Coal. For Many, the Damage Is Done* in October 2023, highlighting the social and ecological devastation caused by the Adani Group. Much controversy surrounds Gautam Adani, who is now India's second-richest billionaire.

Around the world, an urban-centric, high-energy model of development is stripping communities and environments bare.

In addition to displacing people to facilitate the needs of resource extraction industries that devastate tribal lands and pristine forests, land grabs for Special Economic Zones, nuclear plants and other projects have forced many others from the land.

And then there are the farmers: a 'problem' while on the land and a 'problem' to be somehow dealt with once displaced. But food producers, the genuine wealth creators of a nation, only became a problem when Western agribusiness was given the green light to take power away from farmers and recast agriculture in its own image.

In India, Hinduism and tribal society beliefs sanctify certain animals, places, rivers or mountains. But it's also a country run by

Wall Street-sanctioned politicians who convince people to accept or be oblivious to the destruction of the same.

Many are working to challenge the devastating impacts of development. Yet how easy will it be for them to be swept aside by officialdom which seeks to cast them as ‘subversive’? How easy it is for the corrosive impacts of rapacious, hugely powerful corporations to colonise almost every area of social, cultural and economic life and encourage greed, selfishness, apathy, irretrievable materialism and acquisitive individualism.

The corporations behind it achieve hegemony by altering mindsets via advertising, clever PR or by sponsoring (hijacking) major events, by funding research in public institutions and slanting findings and the knowledge paradigm in their favour or by coopting policymakers to ‘structurally readjust’ society for their benefit. They do it by many methods and means.

Before you realise it, culture, politics and the economy have become colonised by powerful private interests. The prevailing economic system soon becomes cloaked with an aura of matter of factuality, an air of naturalness, which is never to be viewed for the controlling power play that it really is.

Seeds, mountains, water, forests and biodiversity are sold off. Farmers and tribals are sold out. And the more that gets sold off, the more who get sold out, the greater the amount of cash that changes hands, and the easier it is for the misinformed to swallow the lie of ‘growth’.

The type of ‘progress and development’ being sold makes many of the beneficiaries of it in the cities blind to the misery and plight of the hundreds of millions who are deprived of their lands and livelihoods. Those who are sacrificed on the altar of plunder in the

countryside, in the forests or in the hills become regarded as the price worth paying for ‘progress’.

Beneath the visible machinery of land grabs and corporate deals lies something less tangible yet more pervasive: the capture of thought itself. Development, after all, depends on bulldozers and laws as well as on what people come to accept as ‘normal’.

‘Common sense’, culture and ideology become instruments of power, shaping what societies believe is possible and what they quietly endure.

Hegemony

If you look up a dictionary definition of violence, ‘intense force’ will be included somewhere. You may also find ‘injurious physical force or treatment’ and an ‘unwarranted exertion of force or power’ (all definitions are found to describe violence on Dictionary.com). If we take these terms as our starting point, we may justifiably claim development to be a form of violence.

In many instances, development constitutes ‘injurious physical force or treatment’. In Congo, for example, rich corporations profit from war and conflict. And in India, tens of thousands of militias (including in 2005, Salwa Judum) were put into tribal areas to forcibly displace 300,000 people and place 50,000 in camps. In the process, rapes and human rights abuses have been common.

But there is another form of violence. It often goes unnoticed and is so institutionalised that it is seldom regarded as actually constituting violence. The fact that many do not regard it as violence is thanks mainly to what philosopher and social theorist Michael Foucault suggested is our taken for granted knowledge about the world in general and how we regard ourselves in it. This ‘common sense’ knowledge may seem benign and neutral but must

be viewed within the context of power: it is part of the discourse of the powerful.

Cultural norms and the prevailing social and economic system are an accepted form of 'truth', of reality and of how many people view the world and evaluate others. Endless glossy commercials and TV shows that wallow in the veneration of money, fame and narcissism are conveying the message that material wealth represents the epitome of success. This ideology is, in itself, a form of violence: an unwarranted exertion of power.

This hegemonic ideology is, of course, based on a false assumption, on a lingering lie. And part of that lie is the joining of bogus notions of success and failure at the hip. Notions of failure are implicit in the messages surrounding money and wealth. If you are not on the Forbes rich list, or at least aspiring to be on it, you are somehow a failure. If you don't buy this product or wear that item, you somehow don't cut it.

In true Foucauldian style, the ideology of modern 'developed' society is a power play concerned with redefining who we are or what we should be, what is acceptable and what is unacceptable.

Passive consumerism underpinned by resource plunder has been at the heart of the system. The violence of development is on a sliding scale. At one end is a hegemonic ideology, at the other, outright brutality.

Underpinning the mindset of this development paradigm is what renowned environmentalist, writer and campaigner Vandana Shiva calls a view of the world that encourages humans to regard man as conqueror and owner of the Earth. This has led to the technological hubris of geo-engineering, genetic engineering and nuclear energy. Shiva argues that it has led to the ethical outrage of owning life forms through patents, water through privatisation, the

air through carbon trading. It is leading to appropriation of the biodiversity that serves the poor.

In the article *The Fate of (Secular) Indian Democracy 50 Years After Jawaharlal Nehru* (countercurrents.org, 14 November 2014) Sukumaran C V says:

“We look at the state-of-the-art airports, IITs, highways and bridges, the inevitable necessities for the corporate world to spread its tentacles everywhere and thrive, depriving the ordinary people of even the basic necessities of life and believe it is development.”

And we continue to see more rural population displacement and human dislocation, more mining, port and other big infrastructure developments and the further entrenchment of corporate interests and their projects.

In *The Greater Common Good*, Arundhati Roy writes about the thousands of tribal people displaced by the Narmada Sarovar Dam in India:

“Many of those who have been resettled are people who have lived all their lives deep in the forest... Suddenly they find themselves left with the option of starving to death or walking several kilometres to the nearest town, sitting in the marketplace offering themselves as wage labour, like goods on sale... Instead of a forest from which they gathered everything they needed—food, fuel, fodder, rope, gum, tobacco, tooth powder, medicinal herbs, housing materials—they earn between ten and twenty rupees a day...”

State-corporate brutality experienced by society’s most marginalised was also highlighted by Roy in *The Ghosts of Capitalism*, where she tells of the ‘invisible’ and shoved-aside victims of rampant plunder.

Writing in *The Ecologist* (4 February 2014) Helena Paul notes a similar situation in Paraguay:

“Repression and displacement, often violent, of remaining rural populations, illness, falling local food production have all featured in this picture. Indigenous communities have been displaced and reduced to living on the capital’s rubbish dumps. This is a crime that we can rightly call genocide—the extinguishment of entire Peoples, their culture, their way of life and their environment.”

So, what is the answer?

This is a question that the following chapters aim to address. Collectively, they examine the forces shaping the dominant notion of development and its destructive consequences, consider possible alternatives and reflect on how collective action can contribute to building a more just world.

Chapter Two

Crisis and Control: Endgame of Late Capitalism

When the story of progress begins to fracture, power finds new ways to reassert itself through fear, emergency and the constant management of instability. This chapter examines how capitalism, facing its own contradictions, turns crisis into strategy and control into survival and fuels the prevailing agenda of development.

It must be made clear from the start that, drawing on the work of sociologist Max Weber, capitalism is an ‘ideal type’ concept. An ideal type is a conceptual tool that highlights certain key characteristics of a phenomenon by accentuating some elements while omitting others. It is not meant to perfectly correspond to any specific real-world instance but serves as a construct to analyse and compare social or economic phenomena.

This framing is critical: while capitalism is often described as a system of free markets and voluntary exchange, in reality, it frequently relies on collusion, corruption and state-corporate coercion and violence. Having stated this, as an economic system, capitalism inherently requires constant growth, expanding markets and sufficient demand to sustain profitability.

However, as markets saturate and demand falls, overproduction and overaccumulation of capital become systemic problems, leading to economic crises. When capital cannot be reinvested profitably due to declining demand or lack of new markets, wealth accumulates excessively, devalues and triggers crises. This tendency is linked to a long-term decline in the capitalist rate of profit, which has fallen significantly since the 19th century.

Neoliberalism's playbook

Capitalism in the form of neoliberal globalisation since the 1980s has responded to these crises by expanding credit markets and increasing personal debt to maintain consumer demand as workers' wages are squeezed, jobs are shifted to low-income economies and people are made unemployed.

Other strategies have also been deployed. These include financial and real estate speculation, stock buybacks, massive bailouts, public asset selloffs, regulatory 'reform' and subsidies using public money to sustain private capital and boosting militarism, which drives demand in many sectors of the economy (one reason why Germany and other European countries are following in the footsteps of the US by boosting their spending on militarism and creating bogeymen as a justification).

These financial manoeuvres are not isolated tactics but part of a broader neoliberal agenda that also involves deregulating international capital flows and exposure to global capital markets, resulting in the obsession of governments maintaining 'market confidence' to hedge against capital flight while surrendering economic sovereignty to 'the market' (finance capital). We also see the displacement of production in other countries in order to capture foreign markets.

This global expansion of neoliberal capitalism is a form of imperialism carried out under the notion of 'development' where powerful corporations and financial interests impose structural adjustments and policies that undermine local economies, especially in the Global South. The capture of new markets abroad is essential for capital accumulation and offsetting potential declining profitability at home.

This imperial dynamic is particularly visible in the agricultural sector. For instance, the process involves the destruction of indigenous rural economies, the imposition of chemical-dependent industrial agriculture and transformation of food systems to benefit global agribusiness oligopolies. Think too of the profit-driven technofixes being rolled out by Big Tech and Big Ag under the guise of ‘data-driven’ and ‘precision’ agriculture: the ultimate commodification and corporate capture of knowledge, seeds, data and so on under the crisis narrative of impending Malthusian catastrophe.

And this alludes to the fact that capital seeks ideological cover for its financial ambitions. The climate emergency narrative is being used to legitimise new financially lucrative instruments such as carbon trading and green investments, schemes designed to absorb surplus wealth under the guise of environmentalism. This reflects a broader pattern where perceived (or manufactured) crises are exploited to create speculative markets and investment opportunities that maintain capital accumulation.

COVID and Ukraine

This logic reached a new intensity during the COVID event, which provided a stark and recent illustration of how the ongoing crisis of neoliberal capitalism is exploited and managed, serving as a critical phase in its evolution. This event and associated lockdowns amplified structural inequalities and reshaped the dynamics of capital and control.

COVID was used as a strategy of ‘creative destruction’, accelerating the destruction of millions of livelihoods globally and pushing small businesses towards bankruptcy. Rather than providing genuine aid to the public, COVID policies and massive government spending primarily benefited large corporations—

boosting their margins while forcing smaller enterprises to the brink and consolidating corporate power.

At the same time, COVID was used to justify unprecedented restrictions on freedoms, increased surveillance and digital control mechanisms. More on this later.

Lockdowns helped reshape capitalist accumulation patterns by externally imposing economic shutdowns that monetary policy alone could not achieve. They created conditions for increased indebtedness for households, small businesses and (Global South) nations, corporate bailouts and the imposition of new forms of control, thereby managing the contradictions of capitalism through non-market means.

According to Prof. Fabio Vighi of Cardiff University, financial markets were already collapsing before lockdowns were imposed; lockdowns did not cause the market crash in early 2022 but were imposed because financial markets were failing.

Lockdowns effectively turned off the engine of the economy—suspending business transactions and draining demand for credit—which allowed central banks, particularly the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank, to flood financial markets with massive emergency monetary injections without triggering hyperinflation in the real economy. Looking at Europe, investigative journalist Michael Byrant says that €1.5 trillion was needed to deal with the financial crisis in Europe alone in 2020.

This strategy was designed to stabilise and restructure the financial architecture by halting the flow of economic activity temporarily, enabling a multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Big Finance and large corporations under the guise of COVID relief. A bailout that dwarfed anything seen during the 2008 financial crisis.

Lockdowns not only destroyed small businesses and accelerated corporate consolidation, but—unlike the 2008 bailouts—this process faced little opposition, as it was justified as a public health necessity.

While COVID marked one phase of crisis management, the subsequent war in Ukraine has further accelerated these dynamics. It has served to redirect flows of energy, finance and industrial capacity. The destruction of Europe's energy ties with Russia—via sanctions, decoupling and sabotage—engineered a forced dependency on high-cost US liquefied natural gas, delivering record profits to American fossil fuel firms (in 2022 alone, US LNG exports to the EU more than doubled—from 22 to 56 billion cubic metres—making up over half of all US LNG exports).

As European industries faltered under the weight of inflation and energy instability, the US subordinated its allies through enforced dependency while securing new opportunities for accumulation at home. Dollar supremacy was reinforced, compliance internalised and capital relocated under the banner of war. In this scenario, Europe has become both a very junior partner and collateral damage with its economic sovereignty sacrificed on the altar of transatlantic profit realignment.

The state, crisis and control

This brings us to a broader understanding of the state's role in maintaining the economic system. The state and ideology are crucial for maintaining capitalism's economic base, with the state intervening through financial support and strategic market expansion. At the same time, ideology shapes public perception and legitimises actions by re-framing individual freedoms and exploiting crises like COVID and Ukraine to manage dissent and uphold elite power.

This ideological reconfiguration aligns with technological transformation. The rise of artificial intelligence and advanced automation technologies—such as robotics, driverless vehicles, 3D printing, drone technology and even ‘farmerless farms’—will reshape the traditional mass labour force that underpins capitalist economic activity: it is being profoundly transformed and, ultimately, significantly reduced.

Looking ahead, as economic activity is restructured through these technologies, the entire social infrastructure built to reproduce labour—mass education, welfare, healthcare—will be rendered increasingly unnecessary because fewer workers are needed to sustain production and services. This transformation alters labour’s classical role as a seller of labour power to capital, fundamentally changing the dynamics of the labour-capital relationship.

The question is: if labour is defined in terms of its relation to capital and is the condition for the existence of the working class, why bother with maintaining or reproducing labour?

In this context of social erosion, neoliberalism has already weakened trade unions, suppressed wages and increased inequality. And now the message is: get used to being poor or on the scrapheap, and dissent will not be tolerated.

From surveillance to subjugation

The so-called ‘Great Reset’ anticipates a fundamental transformation of Western societies, resulting in permanent restrictions on liberties and mass surveillance.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has speculated about a future where people ‘rent’ rather than own goods (as seen in the widely circulated ‘you will own nothing and be happy’ video), raising concerns about the erosion of ownership rights under the rhetoric

of a 'green economy', 'sustainable consumption' and 'climate emergency'.

Climate alarmism and the mantra of sustainability are about promoting money-making schemes. Beyond this, these narratives also serve to cement social control.

Neoliberalism has run its course, resulting in the impoverishment of large sections of the population. But to dampen dissent and lower expectations, the levels of personal freedom we have been used to will not be tolerated. This means that the wider population will be subjected to the discipline of an emerging surveillance state.

To push back against any dissent, ordinary people are being told that they must sacrifice personal liberty in order to protect public health, societal security or the climate. Unlike in the old normal of consumer-oriented neoliberalism, an ideological shift is occurring whereby personal freedoms are increasingly depicted as being dangerous because they run counter to the collective good.

In the 1980s, to help legitimise the deregulation-privatisation neoliberal globalisation agenda, government and media instigated an ideological onslaught, driving home the primacy of 'free enterprise', individual rights and responsibility and emphasising a shift away from the role of the 'nanny state', trade unions and the collective in society.

We are currently seeing another ideological shift. As in the 1980s, this messaging is being driven by an economic impulse. This time, the collapsing neoliberal project.

The masses are being conditioned to get used to lower living standards and accept them. At the same time, to muddy the waters, the message is that lower living standards are the result of

mass immigration or supply shocks that both the Ukraine conflict and ‘the virus’ have caused.

The net-zero carbon emissions agenda will help legitimise lower living standards (reducing your carbon footprint) while reinforcing the notion that our rights must be sacrificed for the greater good. You will own nothing, not because the rich and their neoliberal agenda made you poor, but because you will be instructed to stop being irresponsible and must act to protect the planet.

Decreased consumption (your poverty) will be sold as being good for the planet by coopting the concept of ‘degrowth’; something to be imposed on the masses while elites continue to accumulate. This contrasts with genuine ecological or socialist degrowth proposals that would target elite consumption and redistribute resources.

Meanwhile, the framework is in place to ensure that huge corporations and the super-rich continue to rake in near-record profits through militarism, an energy transition, a food transition, speculative finance schemes, carbon trading, data monetisation, surveillance capital, pharmaceuticals, green bonds, commodities and agribusiness, real estate and climate risk derivatives.

And there is always money available for Ukraine and various destabilisations around the world to further ensure the bottom line of giant corporations.

India as global microcosm

To illustrate global dynamics and the real-world impact of neoliberal policies, we can examine the case of India’s agricultural sector. And this is where we need to situate the entire notion of ‘development’, not as some kind of benign venture but as integral to the dynamics of global capital accumulation.

Structural adjustment programmes imposed by institutions like the IMF and World Bank or bilateral agreements with the US have forced countries like India to radically transform their agricultural sectors. Subsequent directives have demanded dismantling public support systems such as state-owned seed supply, subsidies and public agricultural institutions, while promoting export-oriented cash crops to earn foreign exchange.

This shift is part of a neoliberal agenda to further integrate agriculture into global capital markets, reduce the role of the state and open up the agrifood sector to foreign direct investment and multinational agribusiness corporations.

The outcome in India thus far has been devastating for millions of small-scale farmers and rural dwellers. Neoliberal reforms have led to spiralling input costs, dependency on proprietary seeds and agrochemicals and the erosion of traditional farming systems. This has resulted in widespread indebtedness, economic distress and a decline in the number of cultivators—millions have been pushed off the land, many driven to suicide, and hundreds of millions face jobless growth and rural displacement.

This restructuring facilitates the capture of agriculture by large agribusiness corporations and financial investors. These entities dominate global commodity trading and are consolidating control over seeds, inputs, logistics and retail. Across the world, the public sector's role is increasingly reduced to a facilitator of private capital, enabling the entrenchment of industrial, GMO-based commodity crop agriculture suited to corporate interests rather than local food security or ecological sustainability.

Contrast this with agroecology, a means to free farmers from dependency on manipulated commodity markets, unfair subsidies and food insecurity. Agroecology prioritises local food sovereignty, ecological sustainability and farmer knowledge, opposing the

reductionist, industrial agriculture paradigm promoted by capitalist agribusiness.

In India, the policy of population displacement compels displaced rural workers to migrate to urban areas in search of precarious, low-paid employment or remain unemployed, swelling the ranks of a surplus labour force.

This reserve army of labour is not accidental but serves a strategic function within global capitalism. It helps suppress wages and weaken the bargaining power of workers and trade unions both in India and internationally. By maintaining a large pool of cheap and insecure labour, capital can discipline workers through competition and insecurity.

Moreover, many of these displaced Indian workers are absorbed into offshored factories and global supply chains, effectively acting as a tool to undermine labour rights and conditions in wealthier countries.

This analysis reflects the country's incorporation into the global capitalist system, where rural displacement and labour 'flexibility' are central to maintaining capitalist dynamics.

There is a historical comparison to be made between the displacement of people from the land in England during the Industrial Revolution and the contemporary displacement of the peasantry in India under neoliberal capitalism. Just as the enclosure movement in England forcibly removed peasants from their land, pushing them into cities to become a labour force for emerging industrial capitalism, a similar process is unfolding in India today.

Benign language

This displacement is not simply a byproduct of ‘development’ but a deliberate process tied to capitalist accumulation and imperialist restructuring of agriculture, where local food systems and rural livelihoods are subordinated to corporate interests and global markets.

Global communications and business strategy company APCO Worldwide is a lobby agency with firm links to the Wall Street/corporate US establishment and facilitates its global agenda. Some years ago, following the 2008 financial crisis, APCO stated that India’s resilience in weathering the global downturn has made governments, policy makers, economists, corporate houses and fund managers believe that the country can play a significant role in the recovery of global capitalism.

Decoded, this means global capital moving into secure control of markets. Where agriculture is concerned, this hides behind emotive and seemingly altruistic rhetoric about ‘helping farmers’ and the need to ‘feed a burgeoning population’ (regardless of the fact this is exactly what India’s farmers have been doing). APCO talks about positioning international funds and facilitating corporations’ ability to exploit markets, sell products and secure profit.

And the state has been actively obliging. The plan is to displace the peasantry, create a land market and amalgamate landholdings to form larger farms that are more suited to international land investors and export-oriented industrial farming.

For instance, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was entered into by the Indian government in April 2021 with Microsoft, allowing its local partner, CropData, to leverage a master database of farmers. CropData was to 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, profiles of land held, production information and financial details.

The stated aim is to use digital technology to improve financing, inputs, cultivation and supply and distribution. The unstated aims are to impose a certain model of farming, promote profitable corporate technologies and products, encourage market (corporate) domination and create a land market by establishing 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.

Globally, the financialisation of farmland accelerated after the 2008 financial crisis. From 2008 to 2022, land prices nearly doubled throughout the world. Agricultural investment funds rose ten-fold between 2005 and 2018 and now regularly include farmland as a standalone asset class, with US investors having doubled their stakes in farmland since 2020.

Meanwhile, agricultural commodity traders are speculating on farmland through their own private equity subsidiaries, while new financial derivatives are allowing speculators to accrue land parcels and lease them back to struggling farmers, driving steep and sustained land price inflation.

As far as India is concerned, it is becoming a fully incorporated subsidiary of global capitalism. Displaced farmers and farm workers are pushed into urban sectors like construction, manufacturing and services, despite these sectors not generating enough jobs. This displacement will facilitate the replacement of labour-intensive, family-run farms with large-scale, mechanised monoculture enterprises controlled by a few powerful transnational agribusiness corporations and financial institutions.

Moreover, India is being directed to rely increasingly on its foreign exchange reserves to buy food on the international market as it is forced to eradicate its buffer food stocks.

This process is driven by pressure from global agribusiness and finance capital, which seek to dismantle India's public food procurement and distribution systems, including the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and the Public Distribution System (PDS). These state-backed mechanisms have historically ensured food security by maintaining strategic grain stocks and providing fair prices to farmers.

Eliminating these buffer stocks would mean that India would no longer physically hold and control its own food reserves. Instead, it would have to depend on volatile global markets to procure essential food supplies, using foreign currency reserves. This shift would make India vulnerable to price fluctuations, speculation by investment firms and manipulation by multinational corporations dominating global commodity markets.

The massive farmer protests in India in 2020-2021 were, in part, a resistance to these policies. Without buffer stocks, India would effectively be paying corporations such as Cargill to supply food, perhaps financed by borrowing on international markets.

Resistance and refusal

The narrative presented here reveals a deeply systemic crisis within capitalism—one that cannot be understood through isolated events, personality politics or short-term policy shifts.

From financialisation, predatory practices abroad and speculative markets to state-backed bailouts, war and digital surveillance, capitalism continually reinvents mechanisms to prolong its accumulation cycle.

This article exposes the underlying logic of an economic system marked by the increasing convergence of state and corporate power—a trajectory that points towards a shift away from ‘capitalism’, possibly towards a technocratic or even techno-feudalist system where e-commerce platforms, algorithms, programmable centralised digital currencies and monopolistic entities determine how we live.

Such developments raise urgent questions about the future shape of society and, crucially, how a mass movement might resist without being co-opted or subverted. Yet, recognising these dynamics is the essential first step in fostering informed debate and effective resistance.

However, the hegemonic class and its media and NGOs continue to divide the population along lines of race, religion, identity politics and immigration. They do anything and everything to sow division or sedate courtesy of gadgets, games, entertainment, infotainment and sports. Their media will do all it can to keep people in the dark about what is really happening and why.

But even when people do manage to see through the smokescreen, they will try to promote apathy, convincing people that nothing can be done about any of it anyway.

They will try anything to fragment opposition and suppress movements for systemic change. That is not to say resistance is absent—far from it, especially in the realm of food and agriculture.

The fightback against emerging digital authoritarianism is already underway and takes many forms: rights groups are challenging mass surveillance laws and practices in the courts; campaigns are mobilising to block or roll back digital ID schemes, facial recognition and mass data retention.

Mass mobilisations against surveillance infrastructure are growing, as are acts of refusal in the form of non-compliance with digital ID requirements, opt-outs and public data obfuscation campaigns. There is also a burgeoning movement to build and promote peer-to-peer, federated or blockchain-based social networks and communication tools and to develop grassroots internet infrastructure that bypasses state and corporate control.

International solidarity is crucial, too, to expose and resist the export of surveillance technologies and the global harmonisation of repressive policies.

Meanwhile hundreds of millions endure poverty and many more face declining living standards and welfare cuts. At the same time, the super-rich have stashed an estimated \$50 trillion in hidden accounts (as of 2020) and have only grown wealthier in recent years.

And here lies the crux of the matter—economic power. While resistance to the surveillance state and digital authoritarianism is vital, the deeper struggle is against the concentration of wealth and control in the hands of a global corporate and financial elite.

Across the world, workers, peasants and communities are organising through strikes, land occupations, agroecology, seed and food sovereignty movements, debt resistance and the fight to reclaim public goods. The task is to build movements capable not only of resisting but of transforming the structures of economic power that underpin the entire system.

Chapter Three

Guilt and Graffiti:

The Legacy of ‘Killer Carbide’

The analysis of the 'Endgame of Late Capitalism' confirmed the structural violence inherent in a system designed for crisis and control. But the abstract language of economics must move to flesh-and-blood proof. Where does the contempt for life inherent in shareholder value manifest most brutally?

The answer lies in the lasting tragedy of Killer Carbide in Bhopal. This legacy is not an exception but the necessary starting point for understanding the system's *true* contempt for life.

In this chapter, we return to one of the most searing examples of industrial modernity's broken promise. It asks us to see how an event long framed as a tragedy of the past continues to shape lives, memory and justice today.

The criminality of Union Carbide is a continuing crisis that affects multiple generations. By connecting Bhopal to the broader impacts of the Green Revolution and the chemical paradigm in Indian agriculture, the article also situates the issue within a wider critique of corporate power.

I first visited Bhopal in 1998 and saw the memorial statue to the victims of Union Carbide's corporate criminality: a deadly gas leak from its pesticide plant in December 1984. There was quite a bit of graffiti in English and in Hindi. I can recall seeing “killer Carbide” and “Hang Anderson” (Warren Anderson was CEO at that time) in large letters. I recently returned to the site. The graffiti has gone, and the concrete statue is in a state of ongoing decay.

The Bhopal Gas Memorial Statue, also known as the ‘Statue of Mother and Child’, is a poignant public sculpture created by Dutch artist Ruth Waterman. Erected in 1985, it depicts a grieving woman with a hand over her face, holding her baby. Her posture and expression capture intense sorrow and trauma. Behind the woman, a child is seeking protection under her garment and yet another is reaching up for help. The statue is positioned at the periphery of the former Union Carbide factory site.

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy dominated global headlines and was the leading news story worldwide as it unfolded on 3 December 1984. More than 40 tons of highly toxic methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas leaked from a pesticide plant.

Some 10,000 were said to have died in the first three days following the leak. The final death toll is estimated to be between 15,000 and 20,000, with approximately 500,000 survivors grappling with a myriad of severe health problems, including respiratory ailments, blindness, cancers and genetic defects that continue to affect subsequent generations.

The tragedy was a consequence of substandard safety protocols, cost-cutting and inadequate staffing at the plant, which was majority-owned by the US-based Union Carbide Corporation (UCC).

In the immediate aftermath, the Indian government’s response was slow and inadequate. Although criminal cases were filed and several Union Carbide employees arrested, the most senior executives, including UCC chairman Warren Anderson, evaded meaningful prosecution. Anderson was arrested briefly on his arrival in India but released on bail and never returned to face trial in India. The Indian government’s claim for \$3.3 billion in damages was settled out of court in 1989 for \$470 million—a sum widely

criticised as grossly insufficient given the scale of human suffering.

Health crisis

Survivors of the gas leak continue to endure a broad spectrum of severe, long-term and chronic health consequences. These include debilitating respiratory problems such as pulmonary fibrosis, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, alongside neurological, musculoskeletal, ophthalmic issues like eye irritation, blindness and cataracts and various endocrine disorders. The immediate physical damage was relatively easier to assess, but the full extent of health-related damages, particularly chronic conditions, took many years to manifest, often emerging long after initial legal settlements were finalised.

This means that the true human cost of the disaster was severely underestimated during the early compensation frameworks, leading to inadequate and insufficient medical support for a population whose health was progressively deteriorating.

A significant challenge was the limited understanding of methyl isocyanate's (MIC) toxicity in humans. No population had ever been subjected to such a massive quantity of MIC. The initial ignorance about MIC's long-term toxicity, combined with the delayed manifestation of chronic health conditions, directly contributed to the severe underestimation of the true human cost. This profoundly affected the adequacy of compensation and the provision of ongoing medical care, leaving a legacy of unaddressed suffering.

Men who were in the womb at the time of the disaster exhibited a significantly higher risk of developing disabilities that affected their employment 15 years later. More strikingly, after 30 years, these individuals faced an eightfold higher risk of cancer compared to unexposed cohorts.

For men who never relocated from the affected area, the cancer risk was even more alarming, reaching a 27-fold increase. This quantitative evidence of inherited health burdens unequivocally demonstrates that the disaster's consequences are not limited to those directly exposed but extend to their descendants.

The disaster had devastating effects on the reproductive health of women. Academic studies document a four-fold increase in miscarriage rates following the gas leak, along with an elevated risk of stillbirth and neonatal mortality. Decades later, menstrual abnormalities and premature menopause have become common problems among exposed women and their female offspring.

Women residing within 100 km of Bhopal experienced a relative decrease in male births in 1985, with the proportion dropping from 64 per cent in 1981-84 to 60 per cent. This suggests a higher vulnerability of male foetuses to the external stressor of toxic gas exposure.

The most visible manifestation of intergenerational harm is the reported incidence of birth defects across three generations. These include severe conditions such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, Down's syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, blindness, learning difficulties and gross motor delay.

Compelling evidence indicates that genetic damage and chromosome instability persist in survivors, potentially playing a definitive role in the progression of cancer and other genetic diseases in subsequent generations. The consequences of toxic exposure are literally encoded within the genetic material of the affected population and their descendants.

Moreover, reports indicate high levels of mental stress, behavioural disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression. These mental health burdens are often exacerbated by

the ongoing socioeconomic challenges faced by the affected communities.

The gas leak affected people across a substantially more widespread area than previously demonstrated, with health impacts visible in a 100 km radius around Bhopal. The original understanding of the gas leak's impact was often confined to a 7 km radius. However, the documentation of impacts up to 100 km fundamentally alters the scale of the disaster, underscoring the inadequacy of historical relief efforts and the need for a re-evaluation of the affected population for medical and compensatory purposes.

Reports indicate that governmental interference has hindered systematic investigations into persisting and emerging health problems. Findings from critical studies, such as those by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the Sambhavna Trust, have sometimes been contentious or even suppressed, raising concerns about transparency and the integrity of public health data.

A major impediment to effective treatment has been Union Carbide's persistent refusal to fully identify all leaked reaction products and their precise toxicity. This lack of crucial information has actively prevented doctors from developing appropriate and targeted treatment protocols for victims. Furthermore, workers at the plant were reportedly denied access to their own medical reports, with the corporation asserting its right to withhold this vital medical information as protected trade secrets.

This corporate secrecy and alleged governmental suppression of data highlight a critical dimension of the ongoing disaster: the active suppression of information that could alleviate suffering and improve long-term outcomes.

Environmental crisis

Decades after the initial gas leak, thousands of tons of toxic waste remain buried in and around the abandoned Union Carbide plant site. Although the former factory site was officially turned over to the state of Madhya Pradesh in 1998, neither Dow Chemical, which acquired UCC in 2001, nor the Indian government has properly cleaned the site.

Toxic wastes from the factory site were channelled into three massive ‘solar evaporation ponds’, which subsequently leaked slowly into the surrounding soil and groundwater. Internal UCC memos from as early as 1982 indicated that these ponds were leaking even before the gas disaster, demonstrating a long-standing awareness of the contamination risk. This poisoned groundwater has become the primary source of water for daily use—washing, cooking and drinking—for families in the affected areas, impacting an estimated 200,000 people across 71 villages.

Analysis of the contaminated water has identified a range of hazardous pollutants, including organochlorines, dichlorobenzene, trichlorobenzene, hexachloride, heavy metals such as mercury, lead, chromium and nickel, as well as various pesticides. The contamination of groundwater represents a secret second disaster, a slow form of environmental violence that extends the disaster’s timeline and scope of harm far beyond the initial gas leak.

The environmental contamination has had a disproportionately severe impact on already vulnerable communities in Bhopal. The polluted soil and water are directly linked to chronic health problems and a high incidence of birth defects among the area’s inhabitants.

The victims of the disaster and those suffering from the ongoing contamination predominantly belong(ed) to low-income,

marginalised and minority communities. This situation highlights the intersection of environmental degradation with social justice issues, demonstrating how environmental harm is unequally distributed, leading to compounded suffering for those least able to cope.

Major international human rights organisations and scholars have described Union Carbide's actions in Bhopal as an example of environmental racism. Amnesty International, in particular, stated on the 40th anniversary of the disaster that "environmental racism enabled forty years of injustice for survivors of the Bhopal gas tragedy".

While a recent development in January 2025 involved the shifting of 337 metric tons of hazardous waste for incineration, activists contend that this amount represents not even 0.05 per cent of the total waste present at the site. The Indian Supreme Court's 2004 order to provide clean drinking water to residents underscores the chronic environmental neglect.

Furthermore, there are ongoing disputes regarding the safety protocols for the incineration process, and a comprehensive scientific assessment of the contamination's full extent and impact remains elusive. This contradiction—between a visible, albeit small, cleanup effort and the vast, unaddressed contamination—demonstrates that, despite some symbolic actions, the core problem of comprehensive environmental remediation remains unresolved.

The disaster of development and the Green Revolution

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy is emblematic not only of industrial negligence but also of the broader consequences of the Green Revolution's chemical paradigm, revealing a stark irony between corporate promises and devastating realities.

Long before the gas leak, Union Carbide projected itself as a benevolent force shaping India's agricultural future through its infamous 'Hand of God' advertising campaign from the 1950s and 1960s. One ad depicted a giant godlike hand hovering over Indian fields, pouring chemicals onto the soil as if bestowing a miraculous gift of modern science and industrial progress to the 'backward' Indian farmer. The colossal hand poured pesticides from a laboratory flask, with a Union Carbide pesticide factory looming in the distance and Mumbai's iconic Gateway of India visible.

This imagery promised a brave new world for India, supposedly liberated from pestilence and poverty through chemical science, conveniently glossing over colonial legacies, misguided policy direction post-independence and echoing Western paternalistic sentiments that positioned local expertise as inferior.

The tragic irony is stark: Union Carbide's propaganda and practices resulted in one of the worst industrial disasters in history. The pesticides produced there, intended to protect crops, have also contributed to widespread human health crises and ecological harm.

Punjab, the heartland of India's Green Revolution, embraced chemical-intensive agriculture. It has unleashed a wave of environmental degradation and health problems. Pesticide overuse has contaminated soil and water, caused acute and chronic pesticide poisoning among farmers and rural communities and contributed to alarming rates of cancer, neurological disorders and reproductive health issues.

The Green Revolution was part of a development paradigm that regarded Indian agriculture as backward and in need of a 'helping hand' from the West, a sentiment that persists today and something we will return to later in the book.

Scholars and activists, such as Bhaskar Save and Vandana Shiva, have been vocal critics of the Green Revolution's chemical paradigm. Save, a farmer and environmentalist, emphasised the harm to soil fertility and biodiversity caused by chemical-intensive farming. Vandana Shiva has extensively documented how such practices undermine traditional knowledge, poison the environment and lead to farmer indebtedness and suicides.

The heavy reliance on synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, exemplified by the practices promoted by companies like Union Carbide, has created a vicious cycle of ecological damage: soil degradation, loss of indigenous seed varieties, water pollution and declining resilience of farming systems.

Union Carbide's 'Hand of God' campaign encapsulates the ongoing hubris that believes technology and chemicals can overcome systemic socioeconomic challenges and conquer nature—and too often the poor and the marginalised pay the price, whether small-scale farmers or, as in this case, the urban poor.

Justice denied

In February 1989, the Supreme Court of India directed a final settlement of \$470 million for all Bhopal litigation. However, this amount was based on a severe underestimation of the actual number of victims. For instance, the settlement assumed approximately 3,000 deaths, whereas by March 2003, official figures revealed more than 15,180 awarded death claims. Similarly, the initial estimate of 100,000 injured contrasted sharply with over 553,015 actual injury claims by 2003.

A critical ethical lapse in the settlement process was its negotiation and agreement without any consultation with the Bhopal survivors themselves. This exclusion contributed significantly to the deep-seated perception of justice denied from the outset. The

compensation disbursed averaged around \$500 per victim, with many receiving as little as Rs 25,000. Most of these meagre funds were reportedly used for immediate healthcare needs and repayment of loans, failing to provide long-term support for the chronic health issues and economic hardships endured by the victims.

A major setback for victims occurred when the Supreme Court of India dismissed the Government of India's curative petition, which had sought over \$1 billion in enhanced compensation. This decision effectively brought an end to a long-standing legal avenue for increasing the original settlement amount. This ruling further entrenched the perception among victims and activists that the formal legal system has failed to deliver comprehensive justice.

Despite the civil settlement, a criminal case against Dow Chemical, as the successor to Union Carbide Corporation, has been pending for nearly 40 years. Dow Chemical made its first appearance in a Bhopal court in October 2023, after reportedly ignoring six previous summonses over 17 years. This appearance, however, has not led to a substantive engagement with the charges.

In 2010, seven former UCIL employees were convicted of causing death by negligence but received only two-year jail terms and nominal fines. Most were granted bail immediately, and none served significant prison time. The Indian government's decision to settle early and forego harsher criminal prosecution effectively denied survivors their right to full justice. The courts' reluctance to apply more stringent charges such as culpable homicide not amounting to murder further compounded this injustice.

Dow Chemical consistently asserts that Indian courts lack jurisdiction over the US firm. The company argues that it acquired UCC 17 years after the disaster (in 2001) and that UCC remains a separate corporate entity, implying no transfer of criminal liability.

This legal strategy aims to avoid substantive engagement with the criminal charges by challenging the court's authority over the company.

The prosecution, represented by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), counters Dow's arguments by contending that jurisdiction is determined by the location where the crime occurred—undisputedly India. The CBI is actively seeking Dow's business integration plan to ascertain the amount of UCC's assets that were transferred to Dow, a crucial step in piercing the corporate veil and establishing a link to the original liability.

Victims of the gas tragedy assert that the Madhya Pradesh High Court had already resolved the jurisdiction issue in 2012, and therefore, Dow Chemical should be formally named as an accused in the case. The dismissal of the curative petition, coupled with Dow's persistent legal manoeuvres to evade jurisdiction, highlights the profound systemic challenges in holding powerful multinational corporations accountable for historical environmental and human rights abuses, particularly across international legal boundaries.

Survivor groups and their supporters are driven by five core demands: the comprehensive cleanup of contaminated soil and groundwater to international standards, a proper compensation payment to each Bhopal survivor, the criminal prosecution of Dow Chemical, the development of standardised practices for healthcare and research related to the disaster and the provision of monthly pensions for all widows of gas victims.

The Bhopal tragedy is a stark illustration of the risks inherent in transferring dirty or dangerous technologies to the Global South, where multinational companies often apply lower safety standards than in their home countries. This highlights a pattern where the pursuit of profit in low-income nations comes at the irreversible

expense of human lives and well-being, facilitated by a disregard for environmental and human rights.

The victims were overwhelmingly from the poorest and most marginalised communities, including lower castes and those living in informal settlements adjacent to the Union Carbide plant. These groups bore the brunt of the disaster, suffering immediate death, long-term health effects and deepened poverty due to disability, loss of employment and inadequate compensation.

The drive for profit was evident in the substandard safety measures, including poorly maintained equipment, inadequate worker training, a glaring lack of emergency response measures and poor communication protocols. Cost-cutting at the plant prioritised corporate interests over worker and community safety.

The aftermath further highlighted deep-rooted inequities: poor victims struggled to access legal representation and adequate compensation, while Union Carbide (and Dow Chemical) leveraged its resources to limit liability and accountability.

The tragedy's legacy is a stark indictment of power abused and justice denied, resulting in a humanitarian disgrace.

Chapter Four

Comforting Myth in a Dispossessed Reality

Bhopal shows how easily lives can be sacrificed to some warped notion of ‘development’. But every system of harm sustains itself through stories that soothe. This chapter turns from industrial crime to national narrative: how the comforting story of independence can mask new forms of dependency and how the symbols of freedom are used to quiet the unease of recolonisation.

As India celebrated its 78th Independence Day on 15 August 2025, the tricolour fluttered proudly across the nation. Speeches echoed the triumphs of freedom, resilience and progress. But beneath the patriotic fervour lay an uncomfortable truth: independence means little if the nation’s food, land and farmers are being surrendered.

In the book *Food, Dependency and Dispossession* (2022), I present India as a frontline in the global struggle for food sovereignty. That book reveals how multinational corporations, backed by neoliberal policy frameworks and international financial institutions, are reshaping India’s agricultural landscape—threatening farmer livelihoods and the very essence of democratic control over food systems.

Power Play: The Future of Food (2024) describes how India’s agriculture is being systematically corporatised. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has signed memorandums of understanding with global giants like Bayer, Amazon and Syngenta.

These deals, made without public debate or transparency, pave the way for AI-driven farmerless farms, carbon credit schemes that

commodify land, genetically modified and herbicide-tolerant crops and digital platforms that dictate farming practices. Although this is promoted as modernisation, it is more akin to recolonisation.

India's small and marginal farmers—who make up 85 per cent of the farming community—are being pushed to the brink. Rising input costs, debt and lack of guaranteed prices are driving them off their land. The loss of traditional knowledge, biodiversity and rural resilience is also taking place. This displacement is not accidental but engineered and part of a broader neoliberal playbook.

The 2020–21 farmers' protest was a powerful stand against this. Millions mobilised to resist three farm laws that threatened to accelerate neoliberal shock therapy and facilitate corporate control over agriculture. Though the laws were repealed, the underlying agenda remains intact. The government continues to promote policies that favour agribusiness over agrarian communities, often under the guise of technological innovation and efficiency.

We can already see the results of 'innovative' technological meddling via Green Revolution ideology and practices. For instance, modern rice and wheat varieties have lost up to 45 per cent of their nutritional value, and arsenic levels in rice have also surged. Rice accumulates higher levels of inorganic arsenic than many other food crops, especially when grown in flooded paddies with arsenic-rich irrigation water, and modern rice varieties, particularly those bred during the Green Revolution, can absorb more arsenic than traditional varieties.

Additionally, agrochemical exposure and the spread of industrialised ultra-processed food are linked to increased levels of obesity, diabetes and cancer.

Yet Bayer—whose products include glyphosate and other toxic herbicides—is being welcomed into India's agricultural institutions.

Herbicide-tolerant basmati rice, developed through mutagenesis to bypass GMO regulations, threatens both human health and export markets.

Initiatives like AgriStack, developed in partnership with tech corporations like Microsoft, aim to digitise land records and farmer data—often without consent. Precision agriculture, carbon farming and platforms like Amazon’s farm-to-fork model are sold as solutions to various crises (perceived or otherwise), but they are tools of control.

Traditionally, farmers could be described as ethno-engineers: they used indigenous knowledge and practical innovations to manage local environments, soil, water and crops in sustainable ways. These farmers developed complex systems such as terracing, water harvesting, composting, mulching and mixed cropping, tailoring them to various climatic and geographical conditions.

Bayer believes this to be ‘backward’ and in need of its humanity-saving insights and miraculous technologies. Farmers enrolled in Bayer’s Climate FieldView or similar systems are being told what to grow, when to grow it and which inputs to buy. Their data is harvested and their autonomy eroded. Farmers are becoming mere cogs in a corporate machine. As a business model, it works—for Bayer.

But this is not just a technological transformation. Given that most of the population are still involved in making a living from agriculture, it is a civilisational one.

The agrarian crisis and the ongoing farmer protests should not be regarded as a battle between the government and farmers. The outcome will adversely affect the entire nation in terms of the further deterioration of public health and the loss of livelihoods and

more migration to urban centres which themselves sprawl into more and more fertile agricultural land.

Myth making

True independence is not just political—it is economic, ecological and cultural. It means the right to grow, distribute and consume food that is healthy, local and culturally appropriate; farming that works with nature, not against it; and policies shaped by farmers and citizens, not in corporate boardrooms.

India's freedom struggle was against colonial rule. It was for dignity, self-reliance and justice. Today, the struggle continues against digital domination, corporate capture and ecological destruction.

But why does the belief in national independence persist in an age where it is increasingly apparent that hegemonic global capital and globalist neoliberal coercion shape policies rather than national governments—not just in India but also in Starmer-BlackRock's Britain, Sweden, Germany and many if not most countries across the world?

The idea of independence is not merely a big lie rolled out to fool the people. It may be something more than just a case of 'we rule you—we fool you'.

Cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz have shown how nations rely on symbolic narratives to forge collective identity. In this broader sense, 'myth' is not a simple falsehood but a shared symbolic idea that shapes how people see the world and motivates action.

Independence Day, with its flags, speeches and rituals, becomes a ceremony of reassurance, a way to reaffirm a story that may no longer align with material reality.

In other words, within the context of the argument presented here, ‘myth’ is any shared story or symbolic idea that shapes how people see the world and motivates action, even a modern, consciously constructed idea.

Myths offer emotional anchoring even though the reality may be that of recolonisation. Independence is increasingly symbolic (regardless of which country we live in), while actual control over land, food and data slips into the hands of finance capital and transnational corporations.

This is not to say that myths are not used by the powerful to mask systems of exploitation: the myth of independence functions as a kind of false consciousness, obscuring the material conditions of subjugation under global capitalism. The nation state, once imagined as a bulwark against imperialism, now often acts as a facilitator of neoliberal interests, managing populations while outsourcing sovereignty to markets.

Moreover, the idea of independence produces subjects who internalise the idea of freedom. Dependency becomes normalised through the language of progress, modernisation and development. Independence becomes a myth people believe and a disciplinary narrative that shapes how they live and what they are willing to accept.

However, myths are not monolithic. They are not only instruments of control. Throughout history, they have also been tools of liberation when reinterpreted by the people they inspire. Across Latin America, for example, the anti-colonial myth of Bolívar’s liberation has been revived by food sovereignty and land reform movements as a rallying cry against modern corporate control.

In India, elements of the freedom struggle’s Swadeshi ethos have been reclaimed by contemporary seed-saving movements: farmers

resist corporate seed monopolies by promoting indigenous crop varieties, linking self-reliance in seeds to genuine independence.

In this respect, myths are no longer a warm, comforting embrace divorced from reality. They become a tool for confronting and transforming that reality. So, the question is no longer whether independence is real but whether ordinary people—whether in an increasingly authoritarian Britain, in India or elsewhere—are willing to fight for the kind that cannot be outsourced, sold or silenced.

Chapter Five

Toxic Platter for India

Chapter 4 showed how comforting myths are propagated by the state to normalise the reality of dispossession, making systemic theft seem natural or inevitable. But myths alone do not dispossess; they prepare the ground for policies that do.

This chapter follows the struggle over India's food and farming systems, where ideology meets everyday life and where farmers and citizens confront the tangible cost of abstract promises.

India could see an authoritarian central government with subordinate state governments under the control of corporate interests and international finance capital.

So says the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), a coalition of 40+ farmers' unions. It contends that the Union Government of India is proposing to undermine the federal rights of state governments by surrendering India's food security and compromising its national sovereignty under the slogan 'One Nation. One Market'.

In a December 2024 press release, the All India Kisan Sabha (All India Farmers Union, AIKS) called for nationwide protests against attempts to bring back the three repealed farm laws.

The AIKS said that the government has opted not to address any of the serious demands raised by the farmers' movement, including legalising the minimum support price (MSP), increasing public investment in agriculture and boosting pro-farmer credit facilities.

Like the SKM, the AIKS says there is an agenda to dismantle the power of the state governments. Proposed reforms to the agrifood sector seek to encroach upon the rights of state governments over

agriculture, land, industry and markets. These are all areas that fall under individual states as per the Constitution of India.

NPFAM

Pivotal to this plan is the newly introduced draft National Policy Framework on Agriculture Marketing (NPFAM). The SKM states that the NPFAM, if implemented, will erode the federal rights of the state governments and ignore the interests of farmers, agricultural workers, petty producers and small traders since there is no provision to ensure a minimum support price (MSP) and minimum wage for farmers and workers.

The NPFAM essentially marks the return of the three farm laws that were repealed in late 2021 due to a year-long mass protest by farmers. The SKM states that the farmers' movement sees through the plan to withdraw government support from agriculture and hand over farming and public food distribution to corporations led by Adani, Ambani, Tata, Cargill, Pepsi, Walmart, Bayer, Amazon and others.

The main proposal of the NPFAM is a fundamental restructuring of the existing agricultural marketing system, proposing its transformation into a Unified National Market linked to a Value Chain Centric Infrastructure.

The objective is the entry of corporate agribusiness and the conversion and integration (or eradication) of registered state-managed wholesale markets (mandis, overseen by state-regulated Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees, APMCs) and Grameen Haats (rural markets) with Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI).

Reforms suggested in the NPFAM draft include the establishment of private wholesale markets, direct farm gate purchases by corporate processors and exporters, replacement of traditional market yards

with corporate-controlled warehouses and silos and introducing a unified national market fee and trading license system.

The draft proposes that big corporations can purchase produce directly from farmers, bypassing APMC market yards. Additionally, handing over storage infrastructure to private corporations eliminates a critical safety net for farmers during price volatility and may pave the way for corporate exploitation by denying farmers any space for bargaining prices.

The NPFAM aims to integrate agricultural production and marketing in a way that prioritises corporate interests. It will integrate both the private and public sectors through advanced technologies such as blockchain. NPFAM reforms propose deregulation, effectively allowing the private sector — specifically, corporate agribusinesses—to establish dominance over production, processing and marketing.

We could see farmers produce raw materials that enter markets controlled by processing industries, trade houses and exporters, who in turn dictate the prices. The NPFAM fails to address provisions that would hold these corporate forces accountable.

There is no mention of ensuring an MSP for farmers, which was a central recommendation of the National Commission on Farmers chaired by the late M S Swaminathan and currently a key issue in the national political discourse.

That is no surprise because the corporate strategy is to procure produce at the cheapest rate and market it to ensure exorbitant profits.

The stranglehold of big business houses is also evident in the suggestions for deepening financialisation via futures and option markets. This will also permit corporations and international

finance capital to dominate and control the domestic food industry.

The AIKS says that central government is creating a conducive atmosphere for the corporate loot of agriculture. It adds that it will fight tooth and nail the efforts by the government to hand Indian agriculture on a platter to transnational corporations. It demands that the government withdraw the NPFAM and engage in meaningful dialogue with farmers' organisations and state governments.

Dismantling food security

The three repealed farm laws would have facilitated neoliberal shock therapy to India's agrifood sector. If it succeeds, the NPFAM will bring about what the laws intended to do. But first, state-supported infrastructure must be dismantled.

As things currently stand, mandis are state-regulated marketplaces where farmers sell their produce, facilitating direct transactions with buyers and ensuring fair prices through auctions. Managed by the APMCs, mandis play a crucial role in connecting farmers to larger markets and providing essential infrastructure for agricultural trade.

The Public Distribution System (PDS) is a government initiative aimed at ensuring food security for the underprivileged by distributing essential commodities at subsidised rates. Operated jointly by central and state governments, the PDS includes the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), ensuring focused assistance for those in need.

The Food Corporation of India (FCI) is responsible for implementing food policies, including the procurement, storage, transport and distribution of food grains. By procuring grains at an MSP and maintaining a vast network of depots and Fair Price Shops, the FCI

plays a vital role in maintaining food security and nutritional support across the country.

Together, mandis, the PDS and the FCI form a comprehensive state-backed framework for supporting India's agricultural economy and addressing food insecurity.

However, the aim is for the state to withdraw from these areas and to let private interests capture the space left open. Indian agriculture has witnessed gross underinvestment over the years, whereby it is now wrongly depicted as a basket case and underperforming and ripe for a sell off to those very interests who had a stake in its underinvestment.

The aim is to restructure India's agri-food sector for the needs of global supply chains and markets. As independent cultivators are bankrupted, the goal is that land will eventually be amalgamated to facilitate large-scale industrial cultivation. Those who remain in farming will be absorbed into corporate supply chains and squeezed as they work on contracts dictated by large agribusiness and chain retailers.

The FCI has historically been a stabilising force in India's food procurement and distribution system, ensuring that (some) farmers receive fair prices through MSP while maintaining strategic food stocks. Once its role is diminished, the Indian government may find itself purchasing essential commodities from volatile (manipulated) international markets using its foreign exchange reserves; food sourced from the very corporations that have replaced the FCI (see chapters 4–7 of *Food, Dependency and Dispossession*).

Companies like Bayer attempt to depict these developments as 'modernising' Indian agriculture and portray the sector as 'backward'. However, such corporations cynically exploit notions of backwardness and modernisation to promote their financially

lucrative agricultural practices and technologies in a bid to secure control of the sector.

Prominent agricultural scientist M S Swaminathan (referred to earlier) highlighted that farmers' incomes are declining due to inadequate pricing mechanisms and market access, rather than a lack of technological advancements. He advocated for an MSP that is at least 50 per cent above the cost of production to ensure farmers can sustain their livelihoods.

The failure to implement this has contributed significantly to the ongoing agrarian crisis. This situation has led to widespread farmer distress and suicides, which he attributed largely to economic pressures rather than technological shortcomings.

And this failure is a deliberate policy decision.

Deliberate policy to underinvest

Instead of ensuring that all farmers have reliable access to markets where they can sell their produce at fair prices, improving access to timely and affordable credit to prevent farmers from falling into debt traps and strengthening procurement policies and expanding the mandi, MSP and public distribution systems, we are witnessing a reversal.

Farmers are being displaced through policies that intentionally render farming financially unviable. We also see policies aimed at facilitating the sale and consolidation of land for industrial agriculture and the undermining of rural communities and traditional farming practices.

Additionally, there is a concerning rise in health issues as traditional, nutritious diets are increasingly replaced by unhealthy, ultra-processed foods or less nutrient-dense alternatives.

If people want to see what the future may bring, look no further than countries reliant on the Western agrifood model. From cultivation to retail, a disease-causing system promoted and protected by corporate lobby groups like the International Life Sciences Institute and CropLife embedded in decision-making processes (both are already firmly established in India).

A system that sees international finance firms like BlackRock, Vanguard, State Street, Fidelity and Capital Group investing in the global food giants that sicken and also in the pharmaceuticals sector that supposedly ‘cure’.

A system handed over to agricultural land speculators, toxic agrochemical manufacturers and their proprietary hybridised seeds, global commodity traders and purveyors of junk food.

India is on course to be a subsidiary of global capital at the expense of its local agricultural communities and farmers, its ecosystems, its food security, its (limited) democracy and the overall wellbeing of the population.

Alternatively, MSPs via state procurement of essential crops and commodities could be extended to the likes of maize, cotton, oilseed and pulses. This would not only boost the nation’s health but also increase farmers’ incomes. At the moment, only farmers in certain states who produce rice and wheat are the main beneficiaries of government procurement at MSP.

Instead of rolling back the role of the public sector and surrendering the system to foreign corporations, there is a need to further expand official procurement and public distribution. That would cost around 20 per cent of the handouts (‘incentives’) from the public purse received by corporations and their super-rich owners (based on 2020-21 figures).

During the 2020-21 farmers protest, a video that appeared on social media showed Ayush Sinha, a top government official, encouraging officers to “smash the heads of farmers” if they broke through the barricades placed on a highway.

Since the farmers renewed their protest in early 2024, tear gas and water cannons have been used against farmers to break up protests and prevent them marching to Delhi. The authorities must show international finance and agri-capital that they are being tough on farmers. They need to demonstrate that they remain steadfast in defeating the farmers movement in order to attract FDI (maintain ‘market confidence’) and pave the way for a corporate-financial takeover of the sector.

In late 2021, Bharatiya Kisan Union leader Rakesh Tikait stated that around 750 protesters had died during the year-long struggle.

In summing up the situation, we may paraphrase renowned campaigner and environmentalist Aruna Rodrigues:

It is a detailed horror tale in the making for India, handing over Indian sovereignty and food security to big business. There will come a time pretty soon when India will pay the Cargills, Ambanis, Bill Gates, Walmarts (in the absence of national buffer food stocks) to send us food, and it will finance borrowing from international markets to do it.

Rodrigues foresees a policy shift to cash crops and the end to small-scale farmers, pushed aside by contract farming and GM crops.

What is at stake is the integrity of India’s federal governance structure, its food security, the wellbeing of its farmers and farming communities and the overall health of the population.

Meanwhile, the future remains uncertain for what has become a more fragmented farmers' movement. Its capacity to regain momentum and draw in greater support from consumers and consumer groups against the neocolonial ambitions of global finance and foreign agricultural capital remains in question.

Chapter Six

Big Ag's Humanitarian Propaganda

The corporate conquest of food and land does not advance by force alone. It advances through persuasion—through headlines, classrooms and screens that repeat a single reassuring story: only the powerful can save us.

In this chapter, we look at how public relations, pseudo-science and 'humanitarian' branding manufacture consent for the very systems that impoverish and poison under the names of 'modernisation' and 'development'.

Antonio Gramsci argued that propaganda is the main fabric through which contemporary power asserts itself. For Gramsci, propaganda is central to cultural hegemony; in other words, the dominance of a particular worldview (often that of the ruling class or elite) that is so deeply internalised by society that it becomes 'common sense' and uncritically accepted as natural and inevitable.

There are many reasons why transnational agribusiness has been able to secure its dominance in the global food system, not least its enormous economic and political clout. However, Gramsci's insights, alongside Bernays's 'engineering of consent' and Chomsky and Herman's media propaganda model, help us to understand the sector's dominance on an ideological level.

Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory describes how dominant interests gain control by force or law but more importantly by shaping the cultural beliefs, and narratives of the entire society. Schools, media and science institutions help to preserve

the status quo to ensure that the interests they ultimately serve are experienced as reality itself.

Bernays developed this further, arguing that modern propaganda appeals to irrational emotions and unconscious desires, engineering consent for deeply unjust outcomes. Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model adapts these insights for the media age, revealing how consent is manufactured through selective news, expert testimony, corporate ownership of information pathways and the systematic filtering of dissent.

Deception

The agribusiness–agritech sector exemplifies these theories in action. To secure its hegemony, Big Ag employs a sprawling, coordinated propaganda complex comprising PR giants (such as Ketchum and FTI Consulting), front groups (Genetic Literacy Project, American Council on Science and Health, Cornell Alliance for Science, International Life Sciences Institute) and ideologically aligned third-party specialists who amplify and circulate its worldview as received wisdom.

These networks saturate media, dominate web searches, steer 'educational' content and organise phony grassroots engagement (astroturfing), all aimed at upholding the inevitability and virtue of industrial agriculture while making alternatives rooted in the local, organic and agroecological seem marginal or dangerous.

Techniques include ghost-writing articles and pushing talking points through seemingly independent experts and scientists across various universities, not least Florida and Saskatchewan. Careerists at such institutions who think their credentials can mask or divert attention from the CropLife firms or the Gates Foundation who set their agenda.

True to Chomsky's model, dissent is actively targeted. Industry action plans deploy PR teams in an attempt to neutralise critics such as US Right to Know, GMWatch, journalists and public-interest scientists. These methods have included coordinating attacks on critical comments and commenters in online threads (Monsanto's 'let nothing go' programme), leveraging media connections to exclude critical voices from panels or publications and directly attacking reputations of opponents.

Critics are placed on a 'hit list' and smeared as murderers (condemning millions to starvation for opposing GM), privileged 'First World' ideologues or anti-science extremists, rather than principled advocates for ecological and public health. This reputational assault aims to shape the boundaries of acceptable debate.

Promised salvation

At the same time, the industry attempts to frame itself as the saviour of humanity. Corporate narratives insist that only industrial monocultures, pesticides and biotech can feed the world and solve hunger, a message repeated by company executives like Syngenta CEO Erik Fyrveld, industry-aligned politicians like the now-disgraced Owen Paterson and so-called media science experts such as Patrick Moore, who accused the people at GMWatch of being "murdering bastards" (yes, that 'Patrick Moore' who once claimed on a radio show that glyphosate was harmless to drink but when asked by the host to drink some ran away playing the victim).

The narrative of industrial salvation is perhaps most starkly embodied in the Green Revolution (GR), which has been aggressively championed as the definitive humanitarian achievement of agribusiness ideology. The GR is positioned as a triumph of technology and chemicals, and agribusiness lobbyists

waste no time in telling everyone that it saved millions from starvation and secured the world's food supply. A crucial talking point.

Yet, this account is fiercely contested by those who scrutinise on-the-ground reality. The GR did no such thing in India in terms of actually preventing famine. According to Prof. Glenn Stone, it merely put more wheat in the diet (displacing traditional high-yielding and more nutrient-dense crops), and per capita food consumption might well have decreased during the GR period.

For Big Ag, the metrics of success seem to be less about saved lives and more about market penetration and self-serving historical revisionism. Moreover, organic farmer and GR critic Bhaskar Save went further by denouncing the entire enterprise as an ecological, agronomic and human disaster that traded short-term yield increases for long-term soil health, biodiversity loss, increased farmer indebtedness and deepening dependency on corporate inputs, thereby directly contradicting the promised humanitarian outcome with a legacy of devastation.

The concept of modernisation in agriculture is distorted by agribusiness corporations and industry actors to serve their own commercial and ideological interests. Today, for instance, we see agribusiness executives claiming traditional Indian agriculture is 'backward', inefficient and in need of industrial technology and biotech solutions.

And what do they propose as the solution for 'developing' Indian agriculture? Their industrialised monocultures, their chemical treadmills, their dependency cloud-based platforms, their 'precision' farming, their genetically modified seeds and inputs and their dominance and vision as the only path to progress and food security.

This approach aims to legitimise corporate supremacy while marginalising indigenous knowledge, agroecological practices and smallholder farmers' alternatives. Bayer, as a major player, strategically depicts Indian agriculture as inherently deficient to justify the expansion of its proprietary seeds, agrochemicals and technologies, attempting to create a manufactured consent in favour of industrial agriculture under the guise of modernisation.

'Saviour' appeals try to mask ecological harm, nutritional decline and rural dispossession behind the emotional blackmail of humanitarian necessity and scientific-technological innovation. Any policy or movement that questions their model is depicted as anti-poor, anti-science or recklessly ideological.

Multimillion-dollar lobbying budgets buy access to decision makers, scientific panels and regulatory agencies. Industry-funded science, front group advocacy and managed media events ensure that legal and policy frameworks privilege the industrial model, granting it further legitimacy while branding agroecological and organic movements as unrealistic or anti-progress. Scientific consensus, regulatory authority and media messaging are shaped so systematically that even dissenters often come to believe in the naturalness of corporate dominance.

The agribusiness propaganda assault fully realises the models of hegemony and manufacturing consent laid out by Gramsci, Bernays and Chomsky. The dominant narrative has impacted nearly every key institution so that industry influence is rendered almost invisible and criticism almost unthinkable.

But the mask has slipped. The cracks are laid bare. From mounting scientific evidence of pesticide harm to the deep unsustainability of monoculture farming, the 'common sense' narrative of corporate agriculture is increasingly on the defensive. High-profile scandals and the relentless investigative work of independent journalists and

scientists have exposed the industry's coordinated tactics—the ghost-writing, the astroturfing, the smear campaigns.

In recent years, revealing the propaganda complex has been an essential step towards reclaiming the narrative. At the same time, publicising the genuine success of alternative models is helping to crush the false narrative of industrial agriculture.

These models are not rooted in corporate profit, dependency, chemical dependence or the type of snake-oil 'modernisation' pedalled by the likes of Bayer. With appropriate support, the evidence is clear that alternative models are rooted in genuine ecological resilience, not fake proprietary techno-solutionism, smallholder empowerment, not dispossession and genuine nutritional security. not illness and disease.

Crushing industrial agriculture's false narrative

The report *Forgotten Foods for India's Food Systems Lessons from MSSRF Millet Scaling in Odisha* chronicles the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation's (MSSRF) two-decade-long intervention (2002–2025) to revive millet cultivation and consumption in India.

It provides a compelling case study on how agroecological methods and strong government policy can successfully address challenges related to climate, food security and malnutrition without relying on the high-input industrial agricultural model.

The report frames millets as a 'forgotten food' because their cultivation was marginalised by state policies that have favoured subsidised high-yielding rice and wheat whose nutritional values have fallen significantly since the 1960s. This shift has contributed to widespread micro-nutrient deficiencies. Aside from the falling nutritional values, staples like millets, which are naturally superior in nutrients (iron, zinc etc.), were displaced.

The success of the project debunks the Western agro-industry narrative that large-scale technological fixes are the only way forward; instead, the solution lies in reviving and scaling naturally resilient and nutritious local crops at the community level.

The MSSRF's work focused on tribal communities in the rain-fed areas of Odisha, placing women at centre stage. The project consisted of three multi-year phases.

The initial phase focused on making millets an economically and socially viable crop again. The first hurdle was labour, as manually processing millets was extremely arduous. MSSRF addressed this by introducing adapted machinery: simple processing equipment like threshers and pulverisers managed by women's self-help groups (SHGs). This move drastically reduced the labour burden, transforming the crop's appeal.

Additionally, yields were boosted through participatory plant breeding—combining farmer knowledge with scientific input. MSSRF achieved a significant initial yield increase of up to 160 per cent.

During the second phase, MSSRF introduced the System of Millet Intensification (SMI) that further raised yields by 28 per cent while still relying on low inputs. By this time, the SHGs had taken control of nearly all seed and grain banks, creating robust institutions for managing the entire supply chain.

The third phase was the most transformative. It saw the launch of the Odisha Millet Mission (OMM) in 2017, where the state government formally adopted the MSSRF model. This created a secure and profitable market.

The Odisha state government instituted a decentralised procurement system and dramatically raised the minimum support

price (MSP) for millets, increasing it 11-fold (from a low market rate of Rs 4/kg to Rs 45/kg). This guaranteed price was a powerful economic incentive, eliminating the risk for farmers.

To sustain the high MSP, the government created stable high-volume demand by integrating millets into all major welfare schemes, including the Public Distribution System (PDS), the Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Integrated Child Development Services. This delivered naturally nutritious food to millions of citizens while ensuring farmers' financial security.

The report demonstrates that food and nutritional security are achievable by harnessing local resources and political will, rather than by adopting high-cost, high-chemical inputs or relying on technological fixes like biofortification to remedy the deficiencies created by the monocropping of industrial staples. The project successfully scaled from five villages to impacting 7,500 farmers across 196 villages.

Successful model

What we have seen is a successful food security and nutrition model built on low inputs, naturally rich local crops and decentralised women-led institutions. The report can be viewed as a valuable resource, offering a way forward for securing food security and food sovereignty.

But not everyone might regard it as such. Global agribusiness corporations are expanding their presence in India and would have strong reasons to view this report not as a resource but as a direct threat to their core ideology and business model.

Their aim and that of their lobby organisations like the International Life Sciences Institute (a globally influential body) is to convince politicians, policymakers and the public of the necessity of

industrial agriculture, processed food based on financially lucrative commodity crop cultivation (sugar, palm oil, maize etc.), proprietary inputs and technological solutions like biofortification and genetic engineering.

However, the MSSRF report shows this to be a myth if not an outright lie by showcasing a pathway rooted in agroecology, local seeds and public policy that serves ordinary people, not the bottom line of global conglomerates. This success directly undermines the well-worn industry narrative that chemical-intensive, proprietary technology is essential to ‘feed the world’ and save it from Malthusian catastrophe, which is little more than a fear tactic.

The solution championed by MSSRF is not to fix poor, industrialised crops but to reject the corporate-designed treadmill by reintroducing the naturally nutritious ones that were marginalised in the first place.

The MSSRF model is fundamentally about public control over the food supply: women’s groups manage the seeds and processing, and the state government guarantees the market through high MSPs and welfare distribution.

By demonstrating a viable alternative where local institutions and government welfare programmes drive success, the report limits the space for private capture via patented seeds, high-value inputs and global commodity markets.

In short, the MSSRF report isn’t just about millets; it’s a proof-of-concept for a public-interest food system that achieves better nutritional and environmental outcomes while minimising dependence on the very products and ideologies that industry and its lobby groups promote and defend.

The Odisha millet revival model is highly scalable and adaptable for many other similar crops and a template for state-level food system transformation. Scaling includes identifying the ‘bottleneck’ in processing for a given local crop (e.g., de-hulling for native pulses) and introducing locally managed simple technology to overcome it.

A foundation of the Odisha model has been the empowerment of women’s SHGs and farmer producer organisations (FPOs) to manage the seed systems and processing infrastructure. SHGs and FPOs are already strong across India.

The most critical component lies with the state creating a stable market through guaranteed prices and public demand. Other state governments can adopt the twin policy of a high guaranteed price (MSP) and integration into welfare schemes.

Converting public need (nutrition) into a profitable market for the farmer bypasses volatile private markets and unscrupulous corporate players.

Chapter Seven

The Sour Taste of Modern Development

Propaganda makes power sweet enough to mask reality. Having traced how narratives are engineered to give credibility to the corporate order, in this chapter, we turn to the dining table and what we eat and absorb. It asks what happens when the promise of modernity becomes something we can taste—chemical, hollow and hard to swallow.

The Yuka app is a mobile application designed to help consumers quickly assess the health quality of food and cosmetic products by scanning their barcodes. But it is also a product of a development model that prioritises convenience, technological fixes and market growth over human and ecological well-being. It is the kind of tool industrial modernity creates to patch problems it itself creates.

The app produces a health score ranging from 0 to 100 and provides a colour-coded rating, which categorises products as excellent, good, mediocre or poor for health.

The scoring system is based on three weighted factors: nutritional quality (60 per cent), presence and risk of additives (30 per cent) and organic certification status (10 per cent).

Using frameworks like Nutri-Score and data from the European Food Safety Authority among others, Yuka evaluates calories, sugar, saturated fats, salt, protein, fibre and fruit or vegetable content, alongside toxicological analyses of additives.

It cannot detect the presence of glyphosate or other health-destroying toxic pesticides, but it does give 'organic' a 10 per cent weighting.

The app offers clear, plain-language ingredient breakdowns and suggests healthier alternatives when a scan returns a low rating. It prides itself on independence, refusing brand sponsorship or advertising. The people behind Yuka make their money through premium features that customers pay for.

This seems to be a convenient tool, and it's for good reason that millions around the world are using the app. But food is supposed to be nourishing and life-affirming.

Now we need an app to detect its toxicity.

How did we arrive here?

Behind every barcode scanned lies a vast network of production and distribution shaped by agribusiness monopolies, chemical-intensive farming, processing industries and regulatory frameworks that prioritise market growth and corporate margins over human and ecological wellbeing.

The health hazards Yuka identifies are not accidents but the direct result of a foodscape engineered for shelf-life, profit and convenience rather than nutrition or human need.

The Yuka app offers a convenient, consumer-friendly tool that provides users with clear, colour-coded health scores and ingredient breakdowns to navigate a corporate-dominated foodscape. However, by reducing complex systemic issues to individual choices at the supermarket shelf, for all its good intentions, Yuka individualises responsibility for food health while possibly obscuring the larger political and economic forces behind unhealthy products.

It cannot name the agribusiness conglomerates, highlight the regulatory capture or show the root causes behind global inequities in food access that sustain this harmful system. The app simplifies a profound structural food crisis into a matter of personal consumer decisions, diverting attention from the urgent need to confront the forces and policies that have shaped the prevailing food system.

The modern industrial food system is primarily driven by corporate agribusiness and major food companies whose actions are responsible for a shift towards ultra-processed, nutrient-deficient products that are fuelling epidemics of obesity, diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular diseases worldwide. But this is ‘good for business’ (and GDP ‘growth’), whether the business of the giant agrifood players or the ‘healthcare’ sector.

The expansion of the healthcare industry, often hailed as economic ‘progress’, is in fact a grim reflection of dietary failure—more hospitals, pharmaceuticals and bioscience parks signal rising diet-related diseases caused by the industrial food model. This form of ‘growth’ is a self-sustaining disaster, ignoring dependence on unhealthy commodities and the duplicitous actions of agribusiness and food corporations while obscuring the human cost behind GDP numbers.

This is where development thinking comes in. What we call ‘progress’—more convenience, more apps, more corporate expansion—is part of a model of development that measures success in profits, outputs and technological fixes, rather than in human and ecological flourishing. Yuka is a symptom of that model: a clever, tech-driven response to a problem created by the very system it cannot challenge. It’s like patching a bullet wound with a band-aid.

This perverse cycle contrasts sharply with traditional health philosophies such as Ayurveda in India, which views health as a product of holistic harmony—interwoven connections among body, mind, diet, community and natural environment, underpinned by spiritual awareness.

Ayurveda is preventive, seasonal and local, intimately attuned to people and place. It stands as the antithesis of the dominant biomedical model, which fragments the body into parts, treats symptoms with drugs and ignores toxic food and degraded environments as root causes of illness.

Renowned farmer, writer and campaigner Wendell Berry, whose life's work champions a return to local, small-scale and ecologically responsible food systems, reminds us that “eating is an agricultural act”.

Food is not merely a commodity to be scored; it reflects our relationship with the land, with each other and with time itself. Berry's agrarian philosophy underscores what modern development often ignores: the importance of community, local knowledge, soil health and a long-term, place-based view of sustainability.

The modern reliance on technological ‘fixes’ like the Yuka app is part of a ‘sickening profits’ cycle. Bioscience parks and tech startups promise marvellous techno-solutions to health crises that are themselves products of corporate food systems. These innovations commodify health consciousness resulting in the purchase of some or other app but fail to challenge the roots of the problem.

As bioscience parks expand, encouraged by public subsidies and success measured by profits and growth, they demand ever more land and rollout their stream of ‘innovative’ high-tech healthcare

through genetic engineering, nanotechnologies and biopharmaceuticals.

In the not-too-distant future, once fertile farmland is replaced by sprawling life science parks and solar panels, will food become a synthetic lab product created at the life science park and detached from nature and community? What app will guide consumers then? Perhaps a neural lace fixed at the base of the skull if Sainsbury's has its way (see *Manifesto for Corporate Control and Technocratic Tyranny* – chapter six of *Power Play: The Future of Food*).

Current policies prioritise global markets, industrial agriculture, corporate supply chains, corporate seeds and knowledge and highly processed food at the expense of smallholder farms, territorial markets, local supply chains, indigenous seeds and knowledge, diverse agroecological cropping and nutrient-dense diets.

And when we factor in the plethora of corporate captured international and national policymaking bodies that facilitate all of the above, we have a response to the question asked earlier: this is how we arrived where we are.

Real change requires democratised governance and restoration of culturally rooted, ecologically sound foodways that prioritise holistic health and food sovereignty over commodification and profit. Wendell Berry's vision shows us that development can be measured differently: not by GDP or technology but by thriving soil, nourished bodies and resilient communities.

Scan your 'good' cereal and celebrate your 'excellent' yoghurt, but remain oblivious to the monocropped fields, the degraded soils, the plundered farmers, the land seizures, the pesticide residues, the devastated rural communities and the corporate seeds hijacked from farmers.

No app, algorithm or tech startup will save us from the consequences of an industrial food system we refuse to confront and whose immense health, environmental and social costs we continue to bear.

Genuine food awareness—and genuine development—lies beyond the supermarket aisle. It is found in the soil, the local farm, the seeds preserved by communities and the careful tending of ecosystems that have nourished humans for millennia.

Human consequences: The Bryce Martinez lawsuit

The consequences of industrial food systems are not abstract but manifest in the lives of real people, such as 18-year-old Bryce Martinez from Pennsylvania, whose personal experience vividly illustrates the human cost of a system driven by profit over health.

Martinez has taken a stand against some of the world's largest food corporations, filing a groundbreaking lawsuit against 11 major companies, including household names like Coca-Cola, Nestlé and Kraft Heinz. He alleges that their ultra-processed foods (UPFs) led to his development of Type 2 diabetes and fatty liver disease at just 16.

This legal action brings to light the growing concern over UPFs, which are foods that have undergone multiple processing steps and often contain additives, preservatives and artificial ingredients. These products, ranging from sugary cereals to packaged snacks and soft drinks, have become staples in many households, particularly appealing to children and teenagers.

Martinez's lawsuit argues that these companies have engaged in practices reminiscent of the tobacco industry, prioritising profits over the health of young consumers. His legal team contends that the food giants have exploited children's vulnerability to marketing

and their natural preference for sweet and salty flavours. It argues that these companies have deliberately engineered their products to trigger addictive responses, making it difficult for young consumers to resist or moderate their intake.

The case details Martinez's personal story, describing how he regularly consumed popular UPFs throughout his childhood, unaware of the potential long-term health consequences. His diagnosis with Type 2 diabetes and fatty liver disease at 16 came as a shock, prompting him to investigate the root causes of his health issues.

This lawsuit raises important questions about the food system in the face of rising childhood obesity and diabetes rates. It challenges the food industry's long-standing defence that consumers have free choice in their dietary decisions. Martinez's lawyers argue that when it comes to children, this notion of free choice is compromised by aggressive marketing tactics and the addictive nature of these products.

The case also highlights the growing awareness of the link between diet and long-term health outcomes. Public health advocates have long warned about the potential dangers of a diet high in UPFs, but this lawsuit brings these concerns into the legal arena in an unprecedented way.

The case draws parallels to the landmark tobacco lawsuits of the past, which resulted in significant changes to how cigarettes were marketed and sold. If successful, Martinez's lawsuit could have similar far-reaching implications for the food industry, potentially leading to stricter regulations on food marketing, more transparent labelling practices and a shift in public perception of UPFs.

Moreover, this case may inspire other individuals or groups to take similar legal action, potentially opening the floodgates for a wave of

lawsuits against food companies. This could force coopted governments and the industry to reckon with their role in the global obesity epidemic and other diet-related health issues.

While Martinez's lawsuit focuses on the direct health impacts of UPFs on individuals, it's crucial to understand this case within the broader context of the global food system.

The rise of UPFs is emblematic of a food system shaped by capitalist imperatives. These foods, often laced with harmful chemicals and produced using toxic agrochemicals, are not only detrimental to health but also highly profitable for corporations.

The same companies that dominate the UPF market are deeply intertwined with investment firms like BlackRock and Vanguard, which also hold stakes in the pharmaceutical industry. This dual investment creates a cycle where these firms profit from both the sale of harmful foods and the treatment of diseases caused by these products—a 'win-win' scenario for them but a devastating one for public health.

A complex web of influence shapes global food policies and scientific research. Any talk about corporate influence and lobbying must include the role of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). Despite claiming to be an independent scientific organisation, the ILSI functions as a powerful lobby group for the food industry.

The ILSI plays a crucial role in promoting narratives that benefit its corporate funders, often at the expense of public health. We have a food system where corporate lobbying exerts significant influence over policies and ensures harmful practices remain largely unchecked.

The proliferation of UPFs has been linked to rising rates of non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease. In high-income countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, UPFs account for more than half of total calorific intake, exacerbating these health issues. Yet corporate-backed narratives often downplay these risks or frame them as issues of personal responsibility rather than systemic problems.

High-level ‘experts’ and scientists with ties to major food corporations have argued against demonising UPFs, despite overwhelming evidence linking them to poor health outcomes.

Addressing the harms caused by UPFs requires more than individual lawsuits — it demands a rethinking of how food is produced, marketed and regulated.

Bryce Martinez’s lawsuit against food corporations represents a critical challenge to a system that thrives on ‘sickening profits’. This case is part of a larger struggle against a global food system that prioritises corporate wealth and power over health and food sovereignty.

Whether through legal action or the work of grassroots movements, dismantling and rejecting this harmful system is essential for creating a healthier and more equitable future.

Martinez’s legal challenge is a vivid illustration of how the consequences of industrial food systems reach far beyond supermarket shelves. Whether through lawsuits, grassroots movements or reimagined local food systems, confronting the root causes of unhealthy diets—the profit-driven industrial model, regulatory capture and the commodification of health—is essential.

True food awareness and genuine development, as Wendell Berry and traditional health philosophies remind us, are rooted in soil,

communities and ecosystems, not apps or corporate narratives. Only by addressing the system itself can we hope to move from hollow techno-fixes toward a world of nourishing food, resilient communities, and equitable health.

Chapter Eight

India's Fruit and Vegetable Markets

So, where, then, does the true alternative live? We cannot critique the system without demonstrating viable alternatives. One answer is to be found in the chaotic, efficient life of India's decentralised fruit and vegetable markets.

This chapter explores how small traders, growers and consumers quietly resist the logic of dispossession each day and how the simple act of buying and selling food can still affirm community and reciprocity.

Step into a world alive with bartering calls, the sharp tang of ginger mixing with the sweet aroma of ripening guavas and the colours of stacked produce. Mountains of okra, gourds and greens and pyramids of oranges. These market spaces belong to everyone, their stories can be told by anyone, and they convey an implicit message of the importance of democratic, localised food systems.

And they are not relics of an older India; they are blueprints for a different future—decentralised, self-organising and alive to community need.

They are vital neighbourhood resources that link primary producers in the rural heartlands to urban consumers. Many of the markets cannot be missed. For instance, they stretch along main thoroughfares for hundreds of metres and attract people from across a city or region, like the one on Chennai's NSC Bose Road, near Madras High Court. Permanent features, with the stalls often employing entire families.

Others can be tucked away down back lanes, probably only known to people in the immediate locale. And then there are carts and

one-person pitches that appear on street corners or side streets at certain times of the day. Some people (often women) pitch up on the same spot each day with a limited selection of produce, perhaps supplementing household income.

Regardless of their size or scale, India's streetside fruit and vegetable markets are a vibrant and indispensable part of the urban landscape, representing economic vitality and cultural heritage. They cater to the daily needs of millions while supporting livelihoods for countless vendors. They are a cornerstone of the informal economy, which plays a critical role in India's urban employment.

The informal economy refers to economic activities that operate outside the formal regulatory framework, often characterised by small-scale, unregistered enterprises and self-employment. A 2018 study by the National Association of Street Vendors of India estimated that there are more than 10 million street vendors in India, contributing roughly 14 per cent to India's urban GDP.

Street vendors often operate with minimal capital and resources but play a crucial role in food security and nutrition. They offer a wide array of affordable and nutritious foods, such as leafy greens like spinach and amaranth, legumes like lentils and chickpeas and seasonal fruits like guavas and bananas.

This affordability is crucial in a country where a significant portion of the population depends on such markets for their daily food needs. Streetside markets are often the primary source of fresh produce for low-income households, providing essential nutrients at affordable prices.

Consider too that around 40 per cent of households do not have fridges for storing perishables. By offering fresh fruits and vegetables at lower prices than formal retail outlets, these markets

ensure food security on a daily basis for urban populations while keeping costs manageable for families.

Urban fruit and vegetable vendors source their produce through wholesale markets, local farmers, intermediaries and self-grown supplies. Farmers (some have come together to form co-operatives in particular regions) from nearby villages often rely on street vendors to sell their produce directly to consumers in cities.

This direct connection, cutting out intermediaries, benefits both producers and consumers, creating an efficient system that sustains local agriculture and affordability. These markets also promote the use of fresh, unprocessed ingredients in cooking, preserving traditional diets that are often sidelined by modern processed foods.

Moreover, they generate employment for vendors as well as those involved in ancillary activities such as transport, small-scale farming and logistics. For many marginalised communities and migrant workers, street vending provides a vital source of income, enabling them to support their families. And we must not forget that women play a crucial role in street vending, often leveraging indigenous knowledge to sell nutritious foods.

Research by the Food and Agriculture Organization and initiatives such as Fish4Food highlight the critical role of small-scale traders in urban food security. These vendors are the backbone of ‘territorial markets’—short, local supply chains that help keep urban India fed.

Culturally, streetside markets are deeply intertwined with India’s traditions and social fabric. They trace their origins to the age-old haats—weekly village markets that have evolved into dynamic urban spaces. Beyond commerce, they serve as hubs of social interaction where buyers and sellers engage in informal

conversations. This sense of connection fosters trust and community spirit, making these spaces much more than mere transactional zones.

What looks like chaos to an economist is, in truth, a finely tuned system of mutual dependence and a living critique of the corporate supply chain.

The diversity of produce available in these markets reflects India's culinary heritage. Vendors often showcase regional specialties or seasonal items like hara chana (green gram) or jamun (Indian blackberry), introducing urban consumers to ingredients rooted in local agricultural practices.

Such markets also highlight the seasonality of Indian cuisine, encouraging people to eat fresh and locally grown produce. Mangoes dominate summer markets across India, while winter brings leafy greens like mustard (sarson) in the north. This seasonal rhythm fosters a cultural appreciation for nature's cycles.

India's small-scale local enterprises (whether streetside markets or neighbourhood kirana stores) also serve as repositories of traditional food practices. In Tamil Nadu, for example, millet porridge vendors source grains from local farmers, preserving traditional crop varieties and reducing reliance on industrial rice.

Streetside fruit and vegetable markets are far more than chaotic clusters of stalls—they are living embodiments of India's socio-economic dynamics.

Urbanisation

Although the majority of people in India live in rural settings, the pace of urbanisation is accelerating. Several of the most populous states are now approaching an even 50-50 balance between their rural and urban populations. However, urbanisation isn't a natural

phenomenon; it is part of a deliberate policy agenda and has serious implications in terms of the food we eat, where it comes from, what is in it and who produces it.

Small-scale farmers produce the majority of food in lower-income countries like India and are key to food security. Due to urban encroachment, however, smallholders are losing their land. Mega-cities (in 2025, the population of Delhi metropolitan area is already 32 million or so) increasingly rely on industrial-scale agriculture, highly processed food and supermarket chains, crowding out local food chains.

Cities like Delhi face significant losses in perishable produce due to inadequate cold storage and transport facilities, with up to 30–35 per cent of fruits and vegetables wasted during harvest, storage and distribution. This inefficiency impacts availability in sprawling urban areas. Such problems only intensify as produce becomes further removed (by distance) from consumers.

At the same time, as many perishables are tougher to supply to urban markets, there has been a shift towards growing more chemically cultivated monocultures, affecting diet diversity.

This was noted by farmer-campaigner Bhaskar Save, who 20 years ago argued that the actual reason for pushing the Green Revolution was the narrow goal of increasing the marketable surplus of a few relatively less perishable cereals to fuel urbanisation favoured by the government and a few industries. This was at the expense of a more diverse and nutrient-sufficient agriculture, which rural folk (who still make up the bulk of India's population) had long benefited from.

That being said, smaller cities tend to maintain stronger rural-urban linkages, facilitating faster transport of fresh produce from farms to markets. This proximity reduces transit times and minimises

spoilage, especially for perishables. Protecting and empowering streetside markets and smallholder farmers and advocating for policies that prioritise local over global, while de-prioritising urbanisation, are essential.

This involves shifting focus from rapid city expansion to strengthening rural areas and smaller towns because, as cities have expanded, surrounding sustainable farms have been transformed into concrete real estate developments, commercial chemical-intensive agriculture and industrial parks.

Streetside food markets (and the aforementioned under-threat kirana stores) represent a way of life that values diversity, sustainability and democratic access to food.

In a world increasingly dominated by unhealthy processed foods, spiralling rates of food-related illnesses and corporate food giants that perpetuate a system which divorces people from food production and authentic food cultures, these markets remind us that true progress lies in nurturing local traditions and empowering communities to reclaim control over their food systems.

In this respect, food sovereignty—the right of communities to define their own agricultural and food policies, emphasising sustainable production and consumption of healthy, culturally appropriate food—is key. Urban streetside markets represent decentralised food distribution and reduced dependence on industrialised supply chains. They foster local autonomy and resilience in food systems.

However, as vital as streetside markets are, vendors frequently encounter legal hurdles due to inconsistent implementation of policies such as the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. Harassment by authorities, lack of designated vending zones, competition from organised retail chains and inadequate infrastructure hinder their operations.

In addition, issues like irregular pricing and climatic challenges can make life difficult for small-scale farmers and vendors. For instance, heatwaves can lead to increased spoilage of perishable items, affecting both sellers and buyers.

Furthermore, market dynamics are often influenced by broader economic trends and urban-centric, corporate-devised policy narratives that serve to undermine the livelihoods of small-scale farmers and enterprises. These false narratives try to depict such ventures as residues of a (backward) bygone age. Far from it: they are essential components of prevailing urban food systems.

Like kirana stores, fruit and vegetable markets are facing growing challenges from online quick commerce platforms. The rapid growth of these platforms offering fast delivery and competitive pricing is reducing foot traffic and sales for these traditional markets, especially in large cities.

However, the fresh produce market's reliance on physical selection may provide some resilience.

Chapter Nine

Rhythm of the Lanes and the Repercussions of Progress

While decentralised fruit and vegetable markets are cornerstones of urban food security, the resilience of these markets is rooted in something deeper than mere commerce. This chapter explores how faith, routine and community persist in neighbourhoods that ‘development’ too often seeks to erase.

A lot has been written on the global food system—its industrialisation, ecological consequences and the erosion of cultural, economic and food sovereignty. Despite this onslaught, traditional rhythms and communal resilience continue to flourish in the countryside, especially in countries like India, where cultural practices foster a sense of rootedness. Crucially, these patterns are mirrored in the back lanes of towns and cities.

When walking through the cramped, noisy lanes of Sowcarpet in Chennai (South India), one encounters a vivid narrative of endurance, of communal life and of sacred practice sustained amid the everyday pressures of modern urban existence. The interweaving of commerce, survival and spirituality is striking, resisting the impulse to compartmentalise life into discrete spheres of ‘work’ and ‘faith,’ ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’.

These narrow lanes are the city’s moral undercommons, the very spaces where those excluded from ‘progress’ continue to build community on their own terms.

In this packed area of Chennai, the sacred spills out of temple walls and into marketplaces, shops and alleyways. While societal

structures may evolve externally, fundamental cultural and spiritual values remain deeply entrenched.

Indian urbanism allows for the coexistence of age-old practices (that often have their roots in rural India) with contemporary realities. Shrines rest beside fruit stalls and ritual objects like conch shells, limes and leaves adorn streetside businesses that engage in modern commerce.

These items are religious symbols that serve as markers of cultural identity. For instance, the portrayal of Hindu deities on everyday items like bags of rice reinforces cultural connections within modern contexts. Such representations often feature vibrant artistic styles that blend functionality with cultural significance.

It is a spirituality that permeates the lives of the working-class communities who inhabit these urban spaces, helping to sustain personal and community identity and resilience. This persistence of ritualised meaning in Chennai's lanes invites a broader reflection on agrarian traditions that have long connected livelihood, spirituality and ecology.

What is observed in the lanes of Sowcarpet resonates with some of the themes explored in agrarian writings that note how ancient agricultural societies—from pre-Christian European to Norse and Hindu cultures—regarded farming as a sacred vocation. The soil was alive, and the cycles of planting, growth, harvest and fallow embodied the deepest rhythms of life, death and regeneration.

In the Norse worldview, this was echoed in seasonal rituals honouring gods such as Freyr, linked to fertility and good harvests, while Hindu traditions speak of Bhumi Devi, the earth goddess and the principle of *seva*—selfless service—which frames labour as an act of devotion.

Agrarian philosophy, too, especially that of Wendell Berry, talks about the unity of land, people and cosmos, affirming that right livelihood stems from harmony with natural cycles.

For millennia, deities governed rain and fertility, and communities came together in festivals aligned with solstices and harvests to honour these cycles. Agriculture was more than an economic act. It was a gift exchange with the earth that cultivated gratitude, stewardship and communal solidarity.

Much of this has been lost due to the advancement of industrial agriculture and corporate control. Monocultures and mechanisation have uprooted these cyclical relationships, transforming food production into a depersonalised, profit-driven business that destroys or undermines human health, ecological balance and cultural continuity. The results are stark—dispossession, loss of local food sovereignty, environmental degradation and social fragmentation.

Although in Chennai's urban lanes, the contexts differ—rural fields versus urban alleys—the spiritual element remains strikingly similar. In both, labour and life are imbued with meaning beyond the economic. Whether a farmer tending the soil or a street vendor arranging produce, these workers act within a framework underpinned by a larger cosmic and social order.

The concept of dharma reverberates across the landscape: duty, righteousness and interconnectedness that tie individual actions to the wellbeing of community and environment. Many dharmic traditions emphasise the significance of *seva* (selfless service), with charitable giving—known as *dana* in Sanskrit—considered an essential aspect of one's dharma or religious duty. This practice is perceived not merely as a moral obligation but as a spiritual endeavour that fosters personal growth and good karma.

Communities rely on deep-rooted beliefs and cultural practices that resist the homogenising forces of neoliberalism, capitalist commodification and a narrow consumerist mindset. The artistic kolam patterns drawn by women at entrances, the temple festivals amid urban chaos and the small acts of care, giving and devotion assert spiritual sovereignty and communal belonging.

Such persistence mirrors the seasonal rites of rural life and the earth-honouring rituals preserved in agrarian thought, all of which express a shared understanding that human thriving can only be secured through reciprocal care with the land and with each other.

This persistence, however, is precarious. The forces that threaten rural agricultural traditions—land grabs, seed patenting and the imposition of industrial monocultures—have parallels in the urban domain through gentrification and the destruction of local neighbourhoods, the displacement of street vendors and the homogenisation of thought in an era where aspirations are increasingly shaped by the corporate media and its advertisers.

In this respect, the global market economy's encroachment remakes both rural and urban landscapes, undermining or erasing embedded cultural rhythms and imposing a sanitised, commodified vision of modernity and 'progress'.

For instance, take the industrial food system, driven by monocultures, chemical inputs and a singular focus on profit. This has led to a proliferation of highly processed, nutrient-deficient foods. The direct result of this shift has been a significant increase in diet-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular issues. What is celebrated as economic growth—the expansion of the healthcare industry—is, in reality, a response to the negative health consequences created by another aspect of this same industrial 'progress'.

The industrial food system is driven by monocultures, chemical inputs and profit. It has degraded ecosystems while reshaping bodies and economies. The rise in diet-related diseases mirrors the mechanisation of life itself, where healthcare becomes another profit-driven industry treating symptoms of the very system that produces them.

From a purely economic standpoint, the expansion of the private healthcare sector is considered a positive development, as it contributes significantly to GDP growth. This reflects an increase in spending on medical services, pharmaceuticals and technology, thereby implying economic advancement. This form of ‘progress’ is a perverse reflection of the debasement of what was once a healthy food system based on traditional agronomic practices.

In traditional systems like Ayurveda, health was seen as a product of harmony between the individual, their diet and the natural world, underpinned by a spiritual understanding of existence. This has been supplanted by a biomedical model that views the body as a machine to be repaired, disconnected from its food source and environment.

Healthcare has become a commodified service—a business model thriving on the very illnesses created by the industrial agricultural system. It is becoming quite a well-worn statement in certain circles, but it makes it no less true: we need more family farms based on organics and fewer family doctors.

For centuries, Ayurveda offered a holistic model of health tuned to the rhythms and needs of traditional communities. Its preventive approach was remarkably effective in settings where people ate seasonal, unprocessed foods and they lived lives more closely attuned to nature. Ayurveda taught that health was the product of harmony between body, mind, spirit, diet, community and the environment.

However, whether in the back lanes of towns and cities or out in the fields, there are complementary aspects that challenge dominant narratives of progress, which equate technological acceleration and market expansion with ‘development’. To walk here is to see what official development erases: reciprocity, patience and the slow texture of belonging.

There is a longing for rootedness—both in the land that produces healthy food and in the quest for a sense of place—with reverence for individuals, communities and the natural world.

The sacred is not a relic of an idealised past. Spirituality is enacted daily through ritual, work and community solidarity and serves as a form of reaffirmation that sustains hope and dignity. Asserting these ways involves regenerating food sovereignty, fostering agroecological practices and respecting communal bonds rather than sweeping them aside.

It also demands recognising labour as engagement with life’s cycles and community welfare, not as alienated toil to line the pockets of shareholders who live half a world away.

Whether in furrowed fields or crowded streets, the enduring rhythm of labour, ritual and reciprocity reveals an alternative vision of progress, one grounded not in extraction but in care. To recognise this is to see that the sacred and the sustainable are not opposites but interdependent forms of human flourishing.

Chapter Ten

Beneath the Flyover, Beside the Temple

The endurance of ritual and reciprocity in Chennai's lanes shows that the sacred is not confined to temples or fields but woven into the fabric of ordinary life. Yet these small affirmations of meaning and belonging persist in tension with a dominant order that measures worth in economic terms alone.

The word 'development' is often invoked as a moral good. Corporations and international investors regard it as a massive business opportunity, and politicians sell it as a template for 'progress'.

For decades, development has been framed as the path out of poverty and a holy grail. But there are certain things that are seldom questioned, at least in mainstream narratives: what is development, who defines it, and what does it destroy?

Perhaps we should begin by answering the last question first by turning to India: it destroys the rural by the deliberate running down of agriculture resulting in a decades-long crisis in the countryside.

Veteran Indian journalist P Sainath said in 2018 (The Hindu Newspaper, 16 July):

"The agrarian crises in five words is: hijack of agriculture by corporations. The process by which it is done in five words: predatory commercialisation of the countryside. When your cultivation costs have risen 500 per cent over a decade, the result of that crisis, that process in five words: biggest displacement in our history."

That's what 'development' destroys while indicating who defines it: global capital. A few years ago, influential 'global communications, stakeholder engagement and business strategy' company APCO Worldwide stated that India's resilience in weathering the global downturn and financial crisis of 2008 had made governments, policymakers, economists, corporate houses and fund managers believe that the country can play a significant role in the recovery of the global economy in the years ahead.

In other words, a neocolonial venture aimed at boosting corporate profit by moving into regions and nations to displace indigenous systems of production and consumption, with India being a top priority.

What is happening here echoes what post-development thinkers like Gustavo Esteva have long warned: that 'development' is less a neutral aspiration and more a top-down strategy. As Esteva put it: the very concept of development "has connoted an escape from the undignified condition called underdevelopment, which the West itself created".

So, we have seen accelerated urbanisation, more privatisation and India significantly relaxing its foreign direct investment (FDI) rules, aiming to attract more international capital and integrate deeper into the global economy.

In 2016, the government introduced a comprehensive FDI liberalisation policy. For instance, the civil aviation sector permitted 100 per cent FDI in airport projects and up to 49 per cent in air transport services. The pharmaceuticals sector allowed 100 per cent FDI in greenfield projects and up to 74 per cent in brownfield projects. Retail trading of food products manufactured or produced in India was also opened to 100 per cent FDI under the government approval route.

The business journals and supplements celebrate this as reflecting India's commitment to creating a more business-friendly environment and underscoring the country's strategic shift towards greater 'economic openness' and integration into the 'global market'.

Leaving aside the critique that 'integration' and the 'global market' function as euphemisms for India's subordination to global capital, what these cheerleaders of development fail to mention is the economic, cultural and ecological devastation brought about by a 'development' that systematically undermines the autonomy of people, dismantles their life-worlds and then presents this disruption as progress.

For ordinary people across the world, development manifests as farmers being pushed towards cities because agricultural policies make farming financially non-viable; as rezoning notices; as evictions that cite 'beautification'; as permits withdrawn; as neighbourhood stores shutting up shop due to e-commerce platforms using predatory pricing and fraudulent practices; and as markets relocated and replaced. It manifests in planning documents that treat people's homes as 'encroachments' and in municipal crackdowns that treat self-organised economies as threats to order.

And it is amplified by an ideology that insists that anything informal, unplanned or traditional is by definition backward. The informal vegetable seller becomes an eyesore. The smallholder farmer must 'get big or get out'. The local market, passed down through generations, becomes an administrative problem.

The development paradigm centralises capital, expertise and control in the hands of state institutions and private corporations while marginalising the knowledge, networks and survival strategies of ordinary people. It demands that people surrender their

autonomy in exchange for infrastructure and regulation they did not ask for. And when they refuse, they are criminalised, displaced or simply erased from the picture.

Mainstream development narratives often rely on spectacle to justify themselves. Think of images of slums next to skyscrapers or polluted rivers beside new highways. These juxtapositions allow the viewer to feel momentarily disturbed but secure in the idea that progress is at least happening.

Scant attention is paid to the unremarkable spaces where modernity and rootedness exist together—those informal, sacred and geographically rooted community locations.

Anti-politics

Renowned cultural anthropologist James Ferguson, who passed away this year, in his critique of “development as an anti-politics machine”, notes that development projects often depoliticise deeply political questions like land, labour and justice by framing them as technical problems to be solved. What gets lost is context and the capacity for people to shape their futures on their own terms.

Hundreds of reports have been written over the years that ask how development can be made more inclusive. But they seldom focus on what and who are being erased to make room for the official future.

A future built on conformity, order, glass buildings, wide roads and megaprojects achieved through systematic exclusions and dispossession: pushing people away from the convenience of cash to benefit the surveillance state and finance capital; driving out informal markets in favour of corporate retail; and enforced by

regulations that penalise people for doing what they have always done, not least living together in dense, culturally coherent ways.

Local food systems are not being displaced simply because cities need to grow. Agribusiness and retail giants require access to consumers on their terms. And informal housing is not cleared just for safety or sanitation. It frees up land for investment. Anything that does not conform to the rationalised, monetised, hyper-visible modes of life promoted by urban planning is erased or marginalised.

There are other ways of living, trading, building meaning and are already here. They persist in lanes, in markets, in rituals performed in the shadow of concrete flyovers. And despite the pressures faced by agriculture, they continue to thrive in the fields.

Is all of this merely a yearning about a return to some romantic past? Not at all. It's about a future that does not begin with displacement and a recognition that the dominant development paradigm operates through a slow, systemic and almost invisible 'violence'.

Anthropologist Arturo Escobar argues that people do not simply need development alternatives; they need alternatives to development. Alternatives that rethink what is valuable, what constitutes wealth and who gets to decide. When development experts claim that a community is 'underdeveloped', they are imposing a particular worldview that values corporate planning and economic 'growth' over local traditions or spiritual understandings of land and life.

So, whether it is tribal communities, farming communities or city residents, resisting development isn't just about saying no to a mining project, an industrial corridor, a highway or a dam. It's also about saying our way of life matters and doesn't need validation

from outside experts or trampling on to serve some spurious notion of development.

What, then, is being offered in exchange for the vibrant and meaningful life-worlds that are being dismantled? The official future promises order, efficiency and, most crucially, consumption (in the Western nations, an authoritarian trend towards limited consumption is emerging). But what gives meaning to life once entire communities are gone, a new gadget is no longer new or when food itself is 'optimised' via bio-digital interfaces, patches and implanted neural laces as futurists now envision?

The dominant paradigm has constantly raised the bar on what is considered necessary for a good life. And what has this resulted in? For many, a kind of existential dissatisfaction.

This is where the notion of spirituality in its broadest sense becomes critical, even in the most secular, concrete urban setting. A spirituality that's about people's fundamental need to feel rooted in something that transcends mere monetary value and material ownership.

According to writer, farmer and activist Wendell Berry, rootedness is found in an intimacy with place, a commitment to community and a stewardship of the land.

In the urban realm, this translates into resisting the consumerist definition of the self and finding meaning in the enduring, the non-monetised and the communal. We see this in the persistence of informal markets and shared spaces and in rituals and sacred practices that continue 'beneath the flyover, beside the temple'.

These enduring human connections and attachments to place are the spiritual anchors against the placeless logic of global capital. They demonstrate that meaning is built through shared history and

embedded relationships, something that passive consumption of optimised technologies cannot deliver.

People are too often treated as data on a spreadsheet, as victims in need of rescue or disposable 'assets'. There is no such thing as neutral development. The only question is whether it will continue to serve the interests of the powerful.

Chapter Eleven

Copenhagenising Cities

If the doctrine of development reveals its violence in the countryside through dispossession, displacement and the slow unravelling of agrarian life, it finds its most visible expression in the city. Here, progress is cast in concrete and glass, measured in flyovers, corridors and ‘smart’ infrastructures that promise efficiency while draining the city of intimacy, memory and meaning.

The same forces that enclose land and erase self-sufficient villages also fragment neighbourhoods, replacing lived space with planned space and communities with zones. Beneath the flyover, life endures, but above it, the logic of enclosure takes architectural form.

Indian cities are in crisis. Spend any length of time in a large city there and you will notice the overcrowding, the power and water shortages and, during monsoon, the streets that transform into stinking, litter-strewn rivers. At times, these cities can be almost unbearable to live in. Little wonder then that the concept of ‘smart cities’ is taking hold among policy makers, however flawed the notion might be.

And not least, of course, there is the horrendous traffic chaos and congestion, the choking pollution and the increasing number of massive concrete flyovers: monstrosities that have taken their place among numerous other planning disasters that blight so many Indian cities.

Some years ago, Delhi introduced an ‘odd-even’ traffic policy whereby vehicles with certain registration numbers were allowed on the road only on designated days to try to cut down on traffic

congestion and pollution. But this failed to solve the underlying problem that stems from a model of development that associates a (wholly unnecessary) push for urbanisation and car ownership with progress.

Despite the problems, the greater the urban sprawl and the more road building that takes place, the happier are the real estate, construction and car manufacturing sectors. That's not idle speculation: the documentary *How Big Oil Conquered the World* describes how the car and oil industry criminally conspired to undermine public transport systems in US cities to get the population and urban planners hooked on the car.

As long as urban planners prioritise the car and wrong-headed notions of 'development' governed by powerful players continue, Indian cities will sprawl ever outwards and be defined by traffic congestion and air and noise pollution. Residents will also experience an ever-worsening decline in their quality of life and increasing dependency on motorised transport.

Indian planners might wish to take note that a while back Los Angeles decided against adding lanes to a freeway. Although Andre Gorz noted this back in 1973, planners were aware that building extra lanes merely means more cars, more pollution and journey times increasing. As soon as a highway is built or lanes are added to an existing road, cars show up to fill the available capacity (known as induced traffic demand).

This induced demand imposes costs on us all in terms of degraded public space and serious health risks (recent research shows that a congestion charge in Stockholm reduced pollution and sharply cut asthma attacks in children).

Just as some countries are now realising the folly of widening and building ever more roads and jamming cities with cars, Indian

planners carry on regardless by blighting the urban landscape with ever more huge concrete flyovers and expressways snaking across cities and dividing and destroying communities.

A day before Delhi implemented the second phase of its 'odd-even' vehicle policy, the city announced it wanted to support the construction of more roads to solve congestion by enhancing road capacity via new roads, road widening, elevated corridors, flyovers and underpasses.

One would have thought that smart cities call for smart thinking. Not so in Delhi.

If there is one city that seems to be on the right track, it is Copenhagen. The city believes that cycling should be the foundation for sustainable transport strategies and is key to making cities clean, green and liveable. Copenhagen's urban transport solution gives space to cars but more importantly to bicycles, pedestrians and public transport.

Back in the early 1970s, Copenhagen was just as traffic clogged as anywhere. Now it has around 400 km of cycle paths. The city's 2017 Annual Bicycle Report confirmed that cycling is the preferred mode of transport for the city's inhabitants. Each day, some 62 per cent of Copenhageners used their bikes to go to work or school/college.

Copenhagen has in recent years been voted the 'best city for cyclists' and the 'world's most liveable city'. Throughout the world, there is now a desire to improve public health and combat climate change. As a result, Copenhagen's renowned cycle-friendly policies are serving as a template for some of the world's most congested cities.

Aside from health and environmental considerations, an effective urban transport policy should be democratic. Unlike cars, even the

poorest segments of society can gain access to a bicycle. The bicycle is indeed democratic, not just for those who cycle but also for the rest of the population who are too often impacted by planning blight, pollution and the colonisation of urban space as a result of planning that privileges car users ahead of everyone else.

However, the bicycle is only truly democratic when spatial segregation is limited and bike lanes and appropriate cycle-friendly infrastructure exist to properly connect all areas. Inspired by Copenhagen, Mexico City's bicycle strategy is attempting to address this issue through a comprehensive cycle path network, which aims to create mobility through areas that have been closed off due to previous planning strategies.

The arrogance of space

For cities to fully embrace the bicycle, city planners must stop thinking like motorists or capitulating to powerful lobby groups and plan for the needs of cyclists. In Denmark, for example, the Copenhagen-Albertslund route is the first of a planned network that will comprise 26 Cycle Superhighways, covering a total of 300 km. The network is predicted to reduce public expenditure by €40.3 million annually thanks to improved health.

Consider that in Europe 50 per cent of most city land is dedicated to streets and roads, parking, service stations, driveways, signals and traffic signs. And yet the average European car is parked for 92 per cent of the time. Of the other 8 per cent of time, 1.5 per cent is spent looking for a parking space, 1 per cent in congestion and just 5 per cent is spent driving. There are 30,000 deaths per year on European roads and four times as many disabling injuries. Consider too that an average European car has five seats but carries 1.5 persons per journey.

In Copenhagen, city planners tend to give an adequate proportion of road space to cyclists: proper cycle lanes with curbs that separate cycling space from car space; cycle lanes that are usually also sufficiently wide. After all, why should cars hog so much road space when the majority of road users are cyclists?

In the piece *The Arrogance of Space* by Mikael Colville-Andersen, it says:

“We have a tendency to give cities human character traits when we describe them. It’s a friendly city. A dynamic city. A boring city. Perhaps then a city can be arrogant. Arrogant, for example, with its distribution of space.”

For too long the arrogance of car-obsessed urban planners has degraded our health and our quality of life. But when you have good-quality public transport and the opportunity to cycle thanks to appropriate infrastructure, there is no need to hand over excess space to cars and produce endless concrete sprawl for car parks.

Walk (or cycle) around Copenhagen and you will immediately appreciate there is much less traffic noise and pollution compared with other cities. It is indeed a spatially friendly and a compact city and a less ‘arrogant city’. It is also less hectic and more tranquil than many other cities and, taking things even further, arguably more community oriented.

The slow life

Of course, community-oriented living isn’t just due to transport strategies, although Andre Gorz said in 1973 that to love your place or space, it must first of all be made liveable, not trafficable. He went on to state that the neighbourhood or community should be shaped by and for all human activities, “where people can work,

live, relax, learn, communicate, and knock about, and which they manage together as the place of their life in common.”

In Copenhagen, the municipality encourages outdoor living by offering open-access communal table tennis tables, basketball facilities, well thought out kids’ parks, landscaped parkland and lakes. Even during cold weather, Copenhageners congregate on the streets and in the parks to socialise and embrace the concept of *hygge*, probably best defined as: a conscious appreciation, a certain slowness, and the ability to recognise and enjoy the present. Get to know the city and you will soon realise that *hygge* isn’t just a cliché.

The key word in that definition is ‘slowness’ because from there we arrive at the concept of ‘slow living’.

Writing in 1973, activist and writer Ivan Illich stated:

The use of the bicycle... allows people to create a new relationship between their life-space and their lifetime, between their territory and the pulse of their being, without destroying their inherited balance... In contrast, the accelerating individual capsule [the car] enabled societies to engage in a ritual of progressively paralysing speed.

Modern culture is an advocate of speed, epitomised by car worship. Cars, speed and high-energy living have become essential facts of life. In the process, our communities have become disjointed and dispersed. We have sacrificed ‘slow living’ – in terms of intimacy, friendship and neighbourliness – for a more impersonal way of accelerated living.

Where would be the need for the car when work, school or healthcare facilities are close by? Less need for ugly flyovers or six lane highways that rip up communities in their path. Getting from A

to B would not require a race against the clock on the highway that cuts through a series of localities that are never to be visited, never to be regarded as anything but an inconvenience to be passed through.

Instead, how about an enjoyable walk or cycle ride through an urban environment defined by community and intimacy? An environment free from traffic pollution or noise and where 'neighbourhood' has not been deadened and stripped of its neighbourliness, local stores and facilities.

Clearly, many of the problems associated with modern cities are not just due to cars or transport systems. Urban planning and the colonisation of space mirrors capitalism and the needs of powerful corporations.

By focusing on capitalism and how culture reflects the division of labour, Andre Gorz says in *The Social Ideology of the Motorcar*:

"It cuts a person into slices, it cuts our time, our life, into separate slices so that in each one you are a passive consumer at the mercy of the merchants, so that it never occurs to you that work, culture, communication, pleasure, satisfaction of needs, and personal life can and should be one and the same thing: a unified life, sustained by the social fabric of the community."

Although it would be naïve and misguided to think that the bicycle (and cultural change) could transform the social relations of capitalism, it is at least emblematic of a different form of urban planning and thinking.

Chapter Twelve

The Agrarian Imagination: Iron Cage and the Moral Underground

Copenhagen shows that cities can be designed to prioritise public space, community interaction and human-scale living rather than vehicles and profit. The same values of care, connection and shared responsibility appear in agrarian life, where land, labour and communal rituals structure everyday existence.

In *The Unsettling of America* (1977), Wendell Berry stated:

"A great deal depends upon a right relationship with the soil; the right relationship with the soil is the basis for the right relationship with one another."

However, in today's world, food and land are increasingly dominated by huge corporations and global supply chains. These corporations define anything that stands in their way as 'backward' and in need of 'development', including small-scale, land-connected farming.

Simon Wiebusch, Country Divisional Head of Crop Science for Bayer South Asia, is quoted in *The Economic Times* (2024) that India cannot become a 'developed nation' with 'backward' agriculture'.

Bayer's vision for agriculture in India includes prioritising and fast-tracking approvals for its new products, introducing genetically modified (GM) food crops and increasingly focusing on herbicides, developing them for specific crops like paddy, wheat, sugarcane and maize.

Bayer has a view of what agriculture should look like and is securing control of farmers in various countries by having a direct influence on how they farm and what inputs they use. Its digital platforms are intended to be one-stop shops for carbon credits, seeds, pesticides and fertilisers and agronomic advice, all supplied by the company, which gets the added benefit of control over the agronomic and financial data harvested from farms.

The likes of Wiebusch often refer to ‘modern agriculture’, a deliberately deceptive term: it means a system dependent on proprietary inputs and integrated with corporate supply chains. Anything other is defined as ‘backward’.

On the Bayer India website it says: Simon’s key strengths include unlocking business growth, redefining distribution strategies, driving change management and building diverse teams that drive market share and create business value. Stripped of the corporate jargon, the goal is to secure control of the sector and ensure corporate dependency.

But India has already achieved self-sufficiency in food grains and has ensured there is enough food (in terms of calories) available to feed its entire population. It is the world’s largest producer of milk, pulses and millets and the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, sugarcane, groundnuts, vegetables, fruit and cotton.

However, although India grows much of its food on its own land, it remains dependent on fertiliser, pesticides and oil imports to fuel much of its agriculture. This can only be addressed by shifting towards low-input, high-yielding agroecological methods; something Bayer has no interest in.

Bayer promotes a corporate expansionist development agenda that is self-sustaining and can be described as anything but progressive.

The giant agribusiness corporations that promote the prevailing increasingly globalised system of agriculture are responsible for, among other things, soil degradation, synthetic fertiliser run offs into waterways, the displacement of rural populations and land appropriation, the flight to over-populated cities and proletarianisation (former independent producers reduced to wage labour/unemployment), the massive decline in bird and insect numbers, less diverse diets and a spiralling public health crisis due to chemical-intensive farming.

And yet, it is an inconvenient truth for them that the (low input and impact/low-energy) peasant food web—not industrial agriculture—still feeds most of the world. Another hard-to-swallow truth is that small farms are more productive even though the industrial model sucks up huge amounts of subsidies and resources.

Small-scale, land-connected farming offers a different way forward. Lives rooted in community and the soil provide an alternative to the industrial model that treats food as a commodity and land as something to be extracted and sold. Small farms remind us that food is not simply a commodity. They embody relationships, culture and meaningful human effort.

Historical experiments like the 17th-century Diggers in England, who briefly shared land and farmed collectively, saw land as a foundation for human dignity and rootedness.

The Diggers

The Diggers were led by the visionary Gerrard Winstanley. This radical group emerged during a period of intense social and political upheaval, offering a revolutionary perspective on land ownership and food production that continues to resonate with modern struggles for food justice.

The Diggers, also known as the True Levellers, arose in 1649, a time when England was reeling from the aftermath of civil war. Winstanley and his followers dared to imagine a different world. The group challenged the very foundations of the emerging capitalist system and the enclosure movement that was rapidly privatising previously common lands.

On 1 April 1649, the Diggers began their most famous action, occupying St. George's Hill in Surrey, where they established a commune, cultivating the land collectively and distributing food freely to all who needed it. This act of direct action was a powerful demonstration of their philosophy in practice.

As Winstanley declared:

"The earth was made to be a common treasury for all, not a private treasury for some."

The Diggers began their movement by digging up unused common lands and planting crops. According to Professor Justin Champion, they planted "peas and carrots and pulses" and let their cows graze on the fields.

While the Diggers saw their actions as relatively harmless, local property owners viewed it as a serious threat, likening it to "village terrorism", according to Champion.

The local landowners called in troops to suppress these actions. Despite their relatively small numbers and short-lived experiments, which spread across parts of England, Champion suggests that the Diggers posed a significant ideological threat to the existing social order, challenging notions of private property and social hierarchy.

Winstanley declared:

“Those that Buy and Sell Land, and are landlords, have got it either by Oppression, or Murther, or Theft”.

He added:

“The Work we are going about is this, To dig up Georges-Hill and the waste Ground thereabouts, and to Sow Corn, and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows. And the First Reason is this, That we may work in righteousness, and lay the Foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for All, both Rich and Poor, That every one that is born in the land, may be fed by the Earth his Mother that brought him forth, according to the Reason that rules in the Creation.”

The Diggers faced beatings and arson, forcing them to move from St George’s Hill to a second site in Cobham, until they were finally driven off the land entirely.

Writing in 1972 in his book *The World Turned Upside Down*, Christopher Hill, a prominent historian of the English Civil War period, suggested that the Diggers’ influence was more widespread than just their most famous colony at St. George’s Hill. He argued that from Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire to Gloucestershire and Kent, Digger influence spread all over southern and central England.

While the actual number of people involved in Digger experiments was relatively small (estimated at 100-200 people across England), their ideas spread more widely through pamphlets and word of mouth.

This widespread influence, as described by Hill, suggests that the Diggers’ ideas resonated with people across a significant portion of England, even if actual Digger colonies were few in number.

The Diggers were a radical, biblically inspired movement that practically implemented their beliefs about common ownership of land, provoking strong opposition from the established landowners despite their generally peaceful methods.

The St. George's Hill experiment represented a radical alternative to the prevailing economic and social order. It was an early example of what we might today call a food sovereignty project, emphasising local control over food production and distribution.

In today's era of industrial agriculture and corporate food systems, the Diggers' ideas remain highly significant. Their resistance to the enclosure of common lands in the 17th century mirrors today's struggles against corporate land grabs—and the colonising actions that underpin the likes of Bayer's corporate jargon about the unlocking of 'business growth', 'driving change management', 'driving market share' and 'creating business value'—as well as the privatisation of seeds and genetic resources.

The Diggers didn't just theorise about an alternative society; they attempted to build it by taking direct action, occupying land and implementing their vision of communal agriculture.

Their vision of a world where “the earth becomes a common treasury again” is not a quaint historical curiosity, but a vital and necessary alternative to the destructive practices of those who dominate the current food system.

Agrarian philosophy

Agrarianism, the philosophy behind this way of life, celebrates rural living, small farms and a deep connection with the land. Working the soil is both an economic and a moral activity, cultivating virtues such as self-reliance and cooperation that help nurture resilient communities.

Agrarian thought argues that rural life offers richer meaning than the alienation of urban industrial existence because it is grounded in nature, human labour and interdependence. At its heart lies a commitment to decentralisation: land should belong to those who work and depend on it, rather than to corporations or states.

While agrarianism advocates decentralisation and local autonomy, the modern development narrative emerges from top-down policies prioritising corporate interests. This ‘development’ often ignores or erases local traditions and knowledge, weakening agricultural systems rooted in community and sustainability. It does this for profit, control and so-called efficiency.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber noted that industrial modernity subjects every sphere of life to the cold logic of efficiency and control, the ‘iron cage’ of instrumental reason. In this world, food becomes a statistic, labour a function and land a machine to be optimised and exploited. Moral and spiritual meaning gives way to abstraction and control.

Weber’s insight into the rationalisation of modern life shows how agriculture, labour and land can be reduced to mere functions and commodities. This structural domination is not only economic—it shapes the conditions under which human freedom and meaning can survive. Later in this article, Dostoevsky will illuminate how this same logic affects the human spirit, showing that the consequences extend beyond structures into moral and existential life.

To understand how this world took shape, it helps to separate capitalism, industrial modernity and scientific rationalism, though they are often intertwined. Capitalism is driven by profit and ownership, turning land, labour and food into commodities. Industrial modernity seeks scale and speed, replacing craft and

care with machines and systems designed for output. Scientific rationalism aims to measure, predict and control the world.

Each began with different intentions, but together they have reshaped our relationship with the land. When profit joins industrial efficiency and a mindset of control, soil becomes data and people become functions.

Agrarian life resists this system by restoring a moral and spiritual dimension to labour. Cultivation is more than production; it is participation in the rhythms of life where the land remains a living partner rather than a resource to be exploited.

Yet this vision faces deep obstacles. Land ownership is heavily concentrated: a few corporations, investment funds and wealthy individuals control vast tracts of arable land. Financialisation treats land as an asset to trade and profit from, making it hard for small-scale farmers to enter agriculture, maintain ownership or pass land to the next generation.

Today, every aspect of life is measured, controlled and optimised. In agriculture, corporate and industrial systems extend this same pursuit of efficiency and control to land, food and farming communities, concentrating power and displacing small-scale farmers.

Corporate control

Land, once the basis of culture, sustenance and community life, is now an instrument of speculation and capital accumulation. Wealth goes to those who control property, not those who work it. And communities suffer as farmland is consolidated with local food systems sacrificed for short-term gain.

Corporate-driven development is framed as a moral good, yet it erases much of the rural, emptying out the countryside of people,

culture and beneficial insects in favour of vast expanses of chemical-laden mono-cropped fields. The capitalist commercialisation of agriculture makes traditional farming increasingly unviable, leading to the collapse of rural communities.

Despite this, agrarian principles show alternatives are possible. Shared labour, local decision-making and mutual care restore autonomy and genuine human connection. Communities built on these principles are better able to face economic, environmental and social challenges together, sustained by bonds that industrial modernity dissolves.

While Weber analysed the societal structures that confine human freedom, Fyodor Dostoevsky probed the internal, spiritual consequences of a world governed by calculation and predictability. In *Notes from Underground*, the ‘underground man’ embodies the alienation, despair and moral disorientation that arise when life is treated as entirely controllable, a condition mirrored in industrial agriculture.

The Underground Man is the central character of Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1864 novel. Widely considered the first anti-hero in modern literature, his significance lies in his brutal psychological portrait: a hyper-conscious man who rejects rational society to assert his flawed free will, choosing internal torment over false happiness. He represents the paralysis of modern consciousness—a man who knows what is right but is incapable of acting on it.

Dostoevsky rejected the idea that human existence can or should be fully rationalised, planned or subordinated to efficiency. Every attempt to predict and regulate human behaviour, he argued, risks crushing the moral imagination, individuality and sense of agency.

This existential critique resonates with agrarian life. Farming inherently involves uncertainty: weather, soil conditions, pests and

seasonal rhythms. Like the underground man, small-scale farmers confront forces they cannot fully dominate, cultivating humility and attentiveness. In embracing these uncertainties, agrarian life preserves space for freedom, creativity and ethical responsibility—dimensions industrial modernity seeks to eradicate.

Dostoevsky also exposed how overemphasis on utility and control diminishes human solidarity. In industrial systems, people and land become mere functions or resources, stripped of relational and ethical significance. Similarly, the underground man's alienation reflects the broader social and moral erosion that occurs when calculation replaces care.

Agrarian practices, by contrast, sustain relationships with community, soil, animals and the wider ecosystem, embedding human life within a network of mutual dependence and moral accountability.

In this sense, Dostoevsky provides a spiritual complement to Weber's structural critique. Where Weber charts the 'iron cage' of rationalisation, Dostoevsky illuminates its effect on the human spirit.

Agrarianism enacts a form of resistance to both: it cultivates the moral, relational and imaginative capacities that industrial modernity seeks to suppress. Farming becomes not just an economic or practical activity but a medium through which humans exercise freedom, nurture community and participate in the enduring rhythms of life.

Corporate control of almost everything is edging towards a world of technofeudalism, where people increasingly rely on centralised, technology-based systems. In agriculture, algorithms, cloud platforms, data-driven farming, proprietary inputs, carbon

colonialism, drones and automation further detach people from the land.

Even soil is becoming a proprietary input to be controlled and engineered by corporations. Genetically engineered soil microbes are marketed as biofertilisers, biopesticides or soil conditioners that can enhance nutrient uptake, improve pest resistance or sequester carbon more effectively. These products are often gene-edited or genetically modified to supposedly outperform native microbes, with claims that they can revolutionise farming practices.

These are proprietary genetic technologies that require farmers to depend on corporate-controlled inputs, perpetuating dependency on chemical and biotech giants. Moreover, the ecological risks of releasing GM microbes into soil ecosystems are largely unassessed, and their long-term impacts on native microbial communities and soil health remain uncertain.

In effect, we see an attempt to control farmers and dominate every aspect of nature itself.

Resistance

Sustainable practices such as crop rotation, intercropping, soil care and water stewardship reflect a long-term mindset that industrial agriculture sidelines. Communities that cultivate a close relationship with their land maintain cohesion, cultural continuity and ecological balance.

Tamil Nadu in South India provides a clear example. The Tamil harvest festival of Pongal celebrates the land, the harvest and social and sacred relationships. On the first day, boiling newly harvested rice with milk and jaggery expresses gratitude to the Sun

God for the season's yield, acknowledging that the harvest depends on human labour as well as cosmic and natural forces.

On the second day, Maattu Pongal honours cattle essential to farming, recognising human-animal interdependence. Sharing the food among family and community reinforces generosity and collective well-being over individual accumulation.

Festivals like Pongal show that ecological mindfulness and social cohesion are lived, embodied practices. Land is life-sustaining and a source of identity. Farming and communality combine survival with ethical and spiritual development, showing that well-being depends on how we produce, relate to the land and care for each other.

Agrarianism and the Diggers' legacy continue to inspire resistance to concentrated control over land, food and technology. Just as the Diggers reclaimed land for communal life, modern movements challenge concentration through grassroots activism and local practice.

Just as Pongal embodies agrarian ethics through ritual and gratitude, the Zapatistas translate these values into political action. Since 1994, in Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, they have defended Indigenous land and built autonomous communities rooted in cooperative farming, local governance and food sovereignty. Like the Diggers, they insist that land should serve people and communities, not corporations or distant elites.

Reclaiming control over seeds represents another aspect of communal and historical foundations of agriculture. Corporate patenting, hybridisation, genetic modification and certification regimes threaten the genetic, cultural and ecological commons. Seeds carry culture, history and relationships. Farmers have been saving, exchanging and developing seeds for millennia.

Planting involves entering a relationship with the land, time and community. Harvest marks a cycle, expresses gratitude and reaffirms connection to nature. Preserving planting knowledge and honouring harvest rituals reconnects communities to deeper rhythms.

Placing human, ecological and spiritual values at the centre of food production, agrarianism offers an alternative vision. It can be seen as both a Weberian and Dostoevskian project of re-enchantment. It restores moral and spiritual aspects that bureaucratic rationality dissolves and reclaims the mystery that utilitarian science excludes. Against a world trapped in the iron cage of control, it points to renewal through labour, fellowship and reverence for the land.

Vision for progress

The Diggers' insistence on shared land, critiques of corporate control and festivals like Pongal show a path to reclaim autonomy, foster resilience and live in harmony with the land. The critique offered by agrarian philosophy is actively lived today.

The international food sovereignty movement, championed by La Via Campesina, a key driver of political agroecology, asserts that people have the right to define their own food systems, directly challenging corporate dominance. Regenerative agriculture, focusing on rebuilding soil health, increasing biodiversity and improving water cycles, translates agrarian principles into practical, science-backed farming practices.

While agrarianism grounds farming in community, ethics and care for the soil, offering a moral and cultural vision of agriculture, political agroecology puts these values into practice, showing how communities can organise farming collectively to support people, the environment and local control over food. It shares agrarianism's

emphasis on decentralisation, cooperative labour and cultural connection to the land, but political agroecology adds tools for systemic change, combining ecological science, grassroots mobilisation and policy advocacy to advance food sovereignty.

Communities practising political agroecology actively protect seeds, maintain diverse cropping systems and strengthen local food sovereignty.

Movements like La Via Campesina, Zapatista communities and regenerative farmers demonstrate that traditional wisdom, ethical values and scientific practices can coexist in resilient, community-centered food systems. Political agroecology, for instance, frames cultural practices such as Pongal as integral to ecological balance and ethical stewardship.

In a world increasingly dominated by corporate control, the synthesis of agrarianism and political agroecology offers a comprehensive vision of genuine progress. By combining historical action (the Diggers), ritual (Pongal) and political activism (Zapatistas), this framework powerfully reminds us that societal health depends on soil health and the freedom of those who cultivate it, thereby fundamentally reframing the meaning of modernity itself.

Chapter Thirteen

The Moral Function of ‘The Impossible’

Having traced the structural and corporate forces that have reshaped land, labour and community and having explored historical and contemporary experiments in agrarian life—from the Diggers to Pongal and the Zapatistas—we arrive at a deeper reflection: why does this vision matter even when its full realisation seems impossible?

The moral and social truths embedded in agrarianism do not depend on immediate success; they persist as standards, ideals and guiding principles.

This chapter turns to this ethical dimension, exploring how agrarian thought functions as a form of witness, a preservation of conscience and a cultivation of moral imagination in a world increasingly dominated by detachment, control and profit.

At its best, writing bears witness to truths that society may not want to hear or that prevailing realities make almost impossible. One peculiar kind of essay depicts a vision of human life where moral, ecological and social ideals flourish. This vision represents what is right, what could be and what must be, yet it remains out of reach.

The *impossible* essay is therefore an act of tragic idealism: the deliberate preservation of an ideal or vision that the author knows can probably never truly be fulfilled.

The weight of such writing lies in this recognition: it upholds knowledge, standards and possibilities even though the present has already failed to meet them. It is an essay written for what may never be, but this writing might be one of the most honest and vital acts a writer can engage in.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's concept of *underground man* provides a literary parallel to the moral stance of the impossible essay. Underground man is painfully aware that the world will never conform to his ideals, but he refuses to surrender his conscience or the integrity of his reflections.

He exemplifies the same tragic awareness that animates writing about a vision for a better world: the recognition that the vision of community, ethical labour and ecological interdependence may be unattainable; however, its preservation remains imperative. Like the impossible essay, underground man bears witness to truths that society ignores or suppresses, asserting the enduring significance of conscience and imagination.

His existence reminds us that moral and ethical awareness does not require success. At the very least, it requires acknowledgment and represents resistance.

Take agrarianism, for example: a philosophy that roots human life in soil, community and ethical labour. It holds that our relationship to the land is inseparable from our relationships with one another.

But modernity, dominated by neoliberal capitalism, global corporations, industrial agriculture and technocratic rationalisation, makes this vision increasingly unlikely, especially in urban-based societies. The soil has already been commodified or buried beneath concrete, small farmers displaced, local traditions eroded and culture dominated by individualism and consumerism. That world seems structurally and culturally opposed to the principles agrarianism embodies.

Agrarianism stands in direct conflict with the logic of development—the dominant narrative that defines progress in terms of immediate gains based on profit, endless GDP growth, mechanisation, scale and the subjugation of both nature and

people. Prevailing notions of development prioritise short-term returns over long-term ecological, social and cultural resilience.

The impossible essay resists this logic by preserving the values necessary for the future. These values remain indispensable for assessing the health of society.

Writing about agrarianism under these conditions is not futile. In fact, it imbues such writing with its moral force. It preserves what should be and becomes an act of reassertion. It insists that human labour, community, ecological interdependence and solidarity are not just nostalgic fantasies. Their absence impoverishes us spiritually and socially.

The purpose of such writing involves witnessing. But witnessing is inseparable from lamentation and memory. To witness is to recognise what is and to articulate what could have been or ought to be. The impossible essay also mourns the loss of viable futures, local economies and ecological relationships. It ensures these losses do not pass unrecorded.

In this way, the essay functions as a literary gravestone, preserving memory as a form of moral resistance. The recognition of the vision's apparent impossibility sharpens its truth, making it a mirror that reflects both the failures of both the present and the past.

Writing the impossible essay also cultivates imagination. Human societies are driven by the ability to imagine alternatives and value relationships beyond immediate utility. Even if a better world seems unlikely under current global conditions, articulating its principles helps readers recognise ways of life built on particular values that capitalist modernity seeks to erode.

Writing, then, becomes less about presenting blueprints for a new world and more about offering an imaginative framework through

which to view the present while presenting practical examples where the seeds of that future still grow, such as the Zapatista movement in Mexico or certain agrarian practices across the world.

Such writing conveys resistance through commitment. Writing about a world that may never be is itself a refusal to surrender to domination or exploitation. It preserves the vocabulary through which we might recognise meaningful alternatives to the current order. So, the impossible essay fights for the preservation of a certain imagination.

Although the vision cannot manifest in the present, writing ensures it endures. Future generations (if there are to be any) will encounter such essays as a repository of values, principles and possibilities. Writing is, in this sense, a gesture of hope that does not rely on outcomes but ensures that the vision will persist.

So, essays that describe what cannot be realised in the here and now have profound purpose. They preserve knowledge of moral and ecological truths, cultivate ethical imagination, resist domination and detachment and serve as vessels for future generations.

They remind us that human life is not reducible to efficiency, utility, ‘the market’ or control and that standards of rightness can endure even in worlds that deny them. Writing becomes an act of refusing to surrender.

The agrarian vision is inseparable from the global narrative of development as promoted by multinational corporations, the media and global institutions. This narrative rests on political centralisation, state-corporate power and control. It prioritises efficiency and mechanisation and transforms land, labour and culture into commodified data points.

Offering an alternative vision confronts the perceived inevitability of development. It critiques the moral and ecological bankruptcy that hides behind slogans like 'modernisation' and 'progress'. To write about sustainable, community-rooted alternatives is to perform a corrective, inviting readers to question the assumptions that underpin modernity and to imagine alternatives.

These alternatives are not utopian roadmaps but standards by which the present can be judged. They plant ethical seeds, preserving a language of possibility. they keep alive the notion that what is right is always necessary.

Chapter Fourteen

Revolution from the Soil in Burkina Faso

The ‘impossible’ vision of agrarianism takes on a practical dimension in Burkina Faso. Here, ideals preserved in writing and thought confront real-world constraints, as communities, policies and agroecological practices strive to reclaim food sovereignty despite structural pressures from global agribusiness.

The country may be regarded as a living laboratory for the tension between aspiration and limitation, showing how ethical principles rooted in the soil can guide action even when full realisation remains out of reach.

Burkina Faso, under President Ibrahim Traoré, has become a focal point for anti-imperialist sentiment and political renewal in Africa. Traoré’s government has taken bold steps to assert national sovereignty, including the expulsion of French military forces, the denunciation of Western interference and the forging of new regional alliances with Russia and Sahelian neighbours.

These actions have resonated across the continent, reigniting hopes for a new era of African dignity and self-determination in the postcolonial age. Traoré’s vision draws inspiration from the revolutionary legacy of Thomas Sankara, whose leadership in the 1980s prioritised food sovereignty, agroecology and the empowerment of rural communities.

The roots of Burkina Faso’s food system stretch back centuries, to societies that developed adaptive, resilient agricultural systems rooted in local knowledge, communal land management and crop

diversity. Millet, sorghum and other indigenous staples formed the backbone of both food security and cultural identity. These systems were not only productive but also sustainable, built on the principles of reciprocity, ecological balance and community stewardship.

French colonial rule, however, upended these systems. Colonial administrators and missionaries imposed new crops and farming methods, often prioritising exports and the needs of colonial urban centres over local food needs. The introduction of market gardening, irrigation schemes and export-oriented production disrupted traditional practices and began a long process of dependency on external inputs and distant markets.

The colonial legacy was not simply one of resource extraction but of profound social and ecological transformation—a legacy that continues to shape Burkina Faso’s food system today.

After independence in 1960, Burkina Faso’s food system remained vulnerable. The country experienced cycles of drought, cereal deficits and reliance on food imports and international aid.

Governments experimented with various strategies, but negative cereal balances and regional disparities in food access persisted.

It was during the revolutionary period of the 1980s, under Thomas Sankara, that Burkina Faso articulated one of Africa’s clearest visions of food sovereignty.

Sankara’s government rejected food aid, promoted agroecology and sought to empower rural communities through mass mobilisation and local production. Sankara famously declared “He who feeds you controls you”, encapsulating the deep link between food and national sovereignty. However, his assassination in 1987 cut short these reforms.

Today, President Traoré invokes Sankara's legacy with ambitious initiatives like the 2023-2025 Fishing and Agropastoral Offensive, a \$981 million plan to boost production of rice, maize, potatoes, wheat, fish, meat, poultry and mango.

The initiative aims to create at least 100,000 jobs for youth, women and internally displaced people and to achieve food self-sufficiency by reducing reliance on imports. Mechanisation, the distribution of tractors and motor pumps and the mobilisation of thousands of young people into farming are central features. The government has also established a food sovereignty fund to support agropastoral actors and encourage local initiatives.

Gates Foundation and AGRA

On the surface, these efforts appear to align with the anti-imperialist vision of national self-reliance. However, a closer look reveals that the underlying strategy is somewhat influenced by the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the Gates Foundation.

AGRA, which has operated in Burkina Faso for more than 15 years, promotes a model centred on commercial seeds, synthetic fertilisers and integration into global value chains. The Gates Foundation, AGRA's principal funder, argues that this is the fastest path to increased yields and food security.

The Gates Foundation, primarily through AGRA, had invested at least \$16.7 million directly into agricultural transformation in Burkina Faso as of 2019, with broader agricultural commitments totalling nearly \$70 million from 2010 to 2018.

As of 2025, the most recent publicly documented figure for Gates Foundation investment in Burkina Faso via AGRA is approximately \$37 million up to 2021.

The Gates Foundation's grants database confirms ongoing support to AGRA, with grants as recent as October 2024. However, these grants are typically for AGRA's multi-country programmes, and the precise allocation for Burkina Faso is not specified in public sources.

AGRA's largest investments have historically gone to countries with bigger populations and agricultural economies (e.g., Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Ghana). While important, Burkina Faso has a smaller population of about 22 million (2024), and its agricultural sector is less diversified and less commercialised compared to AGRA's primary focus countries.

Although the amounts invested in Burkina Faso by Agra may seem modest, given the timescales involved, AGRA and the Gates Foundation often use their funds to catalyse or leverage much larger sums from governments, private investors and other donors. For example, AGRA reports that its \$37 million investment in Burkina Faso helped unlock over \$500 million in additional public and private sector investments.

Much of AGRA/Gates funding is used for pilot projects, technical assistance, policy reform (political influence) and 'capacity building', rather than direct large-scale subsidies or infrastructure.

It must also be noted that AGRA and the Gates Foundation publish only selected financial details. The \$37 million figure is what's publicly documented for Burkina Faso.

Yet, the model of agriculture promoted by AGRA/Gates has come under sustained criticism from African civil society and food sovereignty advocates. Reports by US Right to Know (USRTK) and other watchdog groups have found little evidence that AGRA's interventions have delivered on their promises in Burkina Faso.

USRTK's analysis, based on internal AGRA documents and independent evaluations, reveals that while AGRA's programmes have led to some increases in maize sales, there has been no significant improvement in farmer incomes or food security based on AGRA's activities.

Moreover, across Africa, AGRA's emphasis on commercial seeds and fertilisers has deepened dependency on external inputs, undermining the very autonomy that Traoré's government wants to champion. USRTK's findings are echoed by African civil society groups, faith leaders and food sovereignty advocates, who have called for an end to AGRA funding and a shift toward agroecological, locally controlled food systems.

The Gates Foundation has long partnered with major agribusiness corporations—including Cargill, Bayer, Syngenta and DuPont—to roll out industrial agriculture based on genetically modified (GM) crops, patented seeds and heavy agrochemical use. AGRA's interventions have opened African markets to these corporations, often by influencing national seed laws and agricultural policies to favour commercial, chemical-dependent seed systems over farmer-saved seeds.

This shift undermines the traditional practice, still responsible for more than 80 per cent of Africa's seed supply, of farmers recycling and exchanging seeds and risks consolidating control of seed research, production and distribution in the hands of a few multinationals.

The Gates Foundation's approach is part of a broader neoliberal project: the appropriation of the commons—land, seeds, water and knowledge — transforming them into marketable commodities and driving rural populations off the land.

AGRA and the Gates Foundation frame their interventions in philanthropic terms or position them as ‘development’, when in reality they are enabling the consolidation of Western agro capital, the erosion of biodiversity and the disenfranchisement of smallholder farmers.

The Gates Foundation is not as a benevolent actor; it is driver of a toxic, unjust and dependency-creating food regime.

Seed sovereignty

Both AGRA and the Gates Foundation have actively sought to influence seed laws and policies in Burkina Faso. AGRA’s own strategic documents and external evaluations confirm that it has supported the government of Burkina Faso in developing and reforming seed laws.

AGRA’s 2023–2027 Strategic Plan for Burkina Faso explicitly states its aim to “support the completion of the seed law reforms”, working with government agencies and seed companies to improve the certified seed system and strengthen distribution and production channels.

AGRA played a role in the “re-alignment of our seed law in line with the ECOWAS Seed Regulation,” (Economic Community of West African States) as acknowledged by Burkina Faso’s Minister of Agriculture. This alignment is part of broader efforts to harmonise national laws with regional and international standards, which often prioritise commercial seed systems and intellectual property protections.

Furthermore, AGRA has provided technical and financial support to government ministries and research institutes to advance seed sector reforms and promote the adoption of hybrid seed varieties.

AGRA's stated goal is to create "seed policy and regulatory reforms that enable investment and growth of private sector seed businesses", which typically involves legal frameworks that favour commercial seed companies and restrict the exchange or sale of traditional, farm-saved seeds.

Independent evaluations and civil society organisations have criticised AGRA's approach, arguing that these policy reforms can undermine traditional farmer-managed seed systems, reduce seed diversity and make farmers more dependent on purchasing commercial seeds each season.

AGRA's influence on seed laws is not unique to Burkina Faso but is part of a broader strategy across Africa to promote private sector-led seed systems, often in line with corporate-driven international agreements that strengthen breeders' rights and can restrict farmers' rights to save and exchange seeds.

Who, then, is providing the seeds and agrochemicals that underpin Burkina Faso's current strategy? The supply is coordinated through a combination of government programmes, AGRA-backed seed companies and agro-dealers, international organisations such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the EU and local/regional input suppliers.

AGRA is a central player in strengthening Burkina Faso's seed system, supporting both government and private seed companies to improve the availability and quality of certified seeds for crops like maize, rice, sorghum, cowpea and soybean. The government itself is a major distributor of chemical fertilisers, with recent initiatives allocating substantial quantities to farmers.

AGRA's network of agro dealers also plays a role in distributing fertilisers and agrochemicals alongside seeds. International organisations (FAO, EU etc.) in collaboration with private

corporations provide seeds to vulnerable farmers, especially during food crises, and support local seed multiplication and certification.

It would be naive to think that corporate interests act out of a sense of benevolence here. For instance, some years ago, Prof. Michel Chossudovsky, in his article ‘Sowing the Seeds of Famine in Ethiopia’, argued that international aid and trade policies, particularly those promoted by global corporations and institutions like the WTO, have undermined Ethiopia’s traditional agricultural systems and contributed to chronic food insecurity.

These policies encouraged the dismantling of state programmes, such as emergency grain stocks, seed banks and extension services, paving the way for multinational agribusinesses to introduce commercial and genetically modified seeds into Ethiopia.

This shift pressured Ethiopian farmers to adopt corporate seeds, often at the expense of local varieties and traditional practices, thereby increasing their dependence on external suppliers and making them more vulnerable to market fluctuations and food crises. Such interventions sow the seeds of further vulnerability by eroding local food sovereignty and resilience.

The real power of AGRA, Gates and the global agribusiness interests they are aligned with lies in their ability to shape the rules of the game through seed laws, input supply chains and the global architecture of food trade.

AGRA’s partnerships with these corporations and its role in promoting seed and input systems favourable to their interests mean that Burkina Faso’s food sovereignty strategy may never be too far from the reach of global agro capital.

Technocratic pragmatism

Why, then, does Traoré's government align with a strategy that risks deepening dependency on external actors? Several factors are at play.

First, Burkina Faso faces urgent and severe challenges: widespread food insecurity, displacement due to conflict, climate challenges and a legacy of colonisation. The government is under intense pressure to deliver rapid, visible results.

Mechanised farming, large-scale deployment of youth and the distribution of inputs are seen as ways to quickly boost yields and create jobs. These approaches are easier to scale in the short term than agroecological transitions, which require more time, training and local adaptation.

Second, the dominance of the AGRA/Gates model in African agricultural development means that funding, technical support and international legitimacy are more readily available for input-intensive, market-oriented projects. Agroecological transformation, by contrast, demands significant investment in farmer training, research and institution-building resources that are often lacking or harder to mobilise at scale.

Third, there is a powerful political symbolism in mass mobilisation and mechanisation. Traoré's initiatives, such as recruiting thousands of youth into mechanised farming, serve as rallying points for national pride and unity. These visible, high-impact projects are easier to communicate to both domestic and international audiences than the slower, less tangible gains of agroecological reform.

Yet, the risks of this approach are considerable. By deepening reliance on commercial seeds, synthetic fertilisers and global

players, Burkina Faso risks locking itself into a new cycle of dependency. AGRA's own strategic plan for the country emphasises "crowding in private investment" and scaling up partnerships with commercial banks and microfinance institutions.

At the same time, however, agroecological and community-led approaches are also being piloted in Burkina Faso with promising results. Organisations such as the International Water Management Institute and local NGOs promote integrated farming systems that combine crop diversity, soil health and water management.

Government-led land restoration projects rehabilitate degraded soils using anti-erosion measures and agro-silvo-pastoral systems (combining agriculture, forestry and livestock grazing on the same land, creating a mutually beneficial and sustainable land use approach).

Community cooperatives, such as those supported by the NEER-TAMBA initiative, strengthen local value chains and empower over 1,500 peasant organisations. These models have demonstrated significant socioeconomic and environmental benefits, outperforming conventional input-heavy approaches.

This is highly promising because let's not forget that agroecology under Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso was very successful during his brief presidency (1983–1987), both in immediate outcomes and in its enduring legacy for food sovereignty and environmental consciousness.

Sankara's agroecological reforms rapidly increased food production and achieved self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs. Through land redistribution, the mobilisation of rural communities and the encouragement of local production over imports, Burkina Faso saw wheat yields rise from 1,700 kg per hectare to 3,800 kg per

hectare in just a few years, a remarkable achievement given the country's frequent droughts and technological limitations.

Sankara was influenced by agroecology pioneer Pierre Rabhi and sought to make agricultural ecology a national policy. He supported the establishment of agroecological centres and promoted scientific approaches that integrated agricultural development with environmental regeneration. The 'one village, one grove' programme encouraged every community to plant trees, reviving pre-colonial traditions and embedding ecological stewardship in Burkinabè culture.

To combat desertification and recurring drought, Sankara launched a massive tree-planting campaign, resulting in the planting of over 10 million trees in just 15 months. This grassroots, people-led reforestation effort became a model for environmental restoration and remains a lasting part of the country's social fabric.

Sankara's agroecological vision was deeply participatory and linked to broader social justice goals, including women's empowerment and public health. He created the country's first Ministry of Water and aimed to provide every Burkinabè with "two meals a day and clean water", a radical target in the drought-prone Sahel. His approach to food justice and environmentalism was ahead of its time, emphasising the need for endogenous development and the dangers of dependency on food aid.

While Sankara's reforms were cut short by his assassination in 1987, their legacy endures. Tree planting and ecological consciousness remain embedded in Burkinabè society and organisations such as Terres Vivantes–Thomas Sankara continue to draw inspiration from his pioneering agroecological commitments.

Moreover, crop diversity in Burkina Faso improved significantly under Thomas Sankara's leadership. His agrarian reforms and

agroecology agenda reversed the narrowing of crop diversity caused by colonial and postcolonial emphasis on cash crops.

So, while it is crucial to scrutinise the risks of dependency and the influence of external actors, it's equally important to recognise the significant progress Burkina Faso is making through its ambitious national initiatives and community empowerment projects.

The government's focus on job creation, mechanisation and local value chains is already yielding positive social and economic impacts. Furthermore, the revival of agroecological principles and investment in land restoration demonstrate a commitment to sustainable, locally adapted solutions.

However, for Burkina Faso to truly honour its anti-imperialist rhetoric, it must eventually move beyond the AGRA/Gates model by investing further in agroecological transformation, land restoration and cooperative models that put power and resources in the hands of local communities. It must ensure that its quest for food sovereignty is not compromised by the very forces it seeks to resist.

Chapter Fifteen

Revolutionising the Self

Revolutions in the soil must be accompanied by revolutions within the self. Just as ecological and agrarian principles guide communities toward resilience and justice, cultivating awareness, empathy and self-liberation allow individuals to align their inner lives with these external ideals.

In this sense, personal transformation and societal change are inseparable: the health of the world depends as much on the evolution of human consciousness as it does on the fertility of the soil.

Bindu Art School in Chengalpattu, a couple of hours by road from Chennai in South India, was set up in 2005 in the Bharatapuram leprosy colony. It was started by Austrian artist Werner Dornik and activist Padma Venkataraman.

Werner, a multimedia artist from Bad Ischl in Austria, was 18 on his first visit to India in 1977, when he saw lepers begging on the streets. You can still see that today in Chennai.

After his first visit to India, he began to send donations to a leprosy home and, in 1981, contributed the proceeds of his photo exhibition in Austria to other leprosy homes in India. A chance meeting in 1995 in Vienna with Padma (daughter of former president of India R Venkataraman) eventually set things in motion.

On one of his visits to the Bharatapuram colony, Werner was impressed with the traditional Indian 'kolams' that were being drawn by people whose fingers were deformed and reduced to stubs. Werner thought that using art as a therapy would be a good idea. But as some of the elderly residents of the colony had hands

that looked like claws, Werner taped paintbrushes to their fists and started them out with just two colours, black and blue. At first, the general mood of the painters resulted in art that was dark and depressing.

Werner once told me:

“There’s no teaching here. The aesthetics are all their own. Students start with black and white, before they move on to colours. When they finally get to use all the colours, there’s an unrestrained explosion of life: forests, pink sunsets and even a hospital lined with patients that’s a kaleidoscope of colour and honesty but no pain.”

He added:

“There were no rules or any such thing as good or bad. Nor did I go into any technical details of art. The students were free to paint anything.”

In March 2006, some paintings were exhibited in Chennai.

Things have moved on since that first exhibition. The painters have subsequently had their work shown in trendy galleries from Vienna and London to Washington and Tokyo. Some of the paintings have sold for more than 200 euros. One of the four painters who made the trip to Vienna told an interviewer that he had received so much love and respect there that he almost forgot he had leprosy. Quite a statement for someone who had been labelled for most of his life as an illiterate ‘untouchable’.

The ethos of Bindu Art School is that of communal living, self-help, fellowship, dignity and independence. Werner Dornik’s personal outlook and his own art projects seek to make people aware that capitalism, crass materialism and consumerism are a deadening and ultimately self-destructive burden for humanity.

Werner states that his politics is ‘love’.

In a short film about Bindu Art School, Padmanabhan Krishna, a professor of physics, says the following:

“The real beggar is honest. He puts his hat in front of him and says, ‘I need money. Please give me money, if you can.’ And we are also beggars. But we are dishonest beggars because we have invisible bowls, which we carry around. One bowl says, ‘Give me appreciation.’ Another bowl says, ‘Give me pleasure.’ Third one says, ‘Agree with me... support me.’ Fourth one says, ‘Give me security.’

“And when somebody puts something in that bowl, we say, ‘Friend. Very good man.’ And when he takes out of your bowl, you are angry, you create enemy. When you approach life like that, that means you approach it egotistically, and you will always create enemy.”

What he says encapsulates a fundamental flaw of modern society: an egocentric mindset that drives conflict and rivalry.

Revolutionary acts may take many forms. Bindu Art School being a point in case.

Arguably, the most effective acts often stem from a feeling of empathy, not anger, and camaraderie, not hate. Developing an appropriate mindset is easier said than done, however, especially in today’s world, where much of humanity is at the mercy of an increasingly globalised elite, whose policies of subjugation are driven by ego and fuelled by a relentless pursuit of power and wealth.

Stuck mindset

Humans have developed technologically, but, collectively, our mindset remains stuck. While physical evolution has occurred over

millions of years, psychological evolution is a different matter. The 'ego' or 'self' cannot evolve in the same linear manner as physical forms because it is rooted in conflict and division.

The late Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti believed that an inner revolution is necessary for humanity to realise its full potential and to live in harmony with the totality of life. Individuals need to abandon their past conditioning, ambitions and accumulated psychological baggage. This process allows for a fresh and innocent mind, free from the constraints of previous experiences and societal conditioning.

He argued that total awareness is crucial for freeing the mind from self-imposed limitations. By bringing unconscious patterns to light, individuals can transcend habitual responses driven by fear and insecurity. As a result, humanity's future hinges on its ability to transcend the ego and embrace a collective consciousness that recognises interconnectedness rather than division.

On an individual level, overcoming perhaps decades of conditioning may seem a tall order. It is not impossible, but humanity's future rests with the young.

Jiddu Krishnamurti viewed education not merely as a means to acquire knowledge or skills but as a transformative process aimed at cultivating a deeper awareness of oneself and one's relationship with the world. In effect, education should help students become aware of their conditioning and biases, allowing them to grow without fear and develop their capacities fully.

Krishnamurti emphasised cooperation over competition, arguing that the latter fosters jealousy, conflict, rivalry and a fear-driven mindset among students. When students are pitted against each other, they become more focused on outperforming their peers rather than on genuine learning and self-discovery.

Instead of nurturing individual talents, competitive environments often lead to conformity, where students feel pressured to fit into predefined moulds. Krishnamurti envisioned an education system devoid of competition, where learning is seen as a shared exploration rather than a race for grades or accolades. He believed that such a paradigm would cultivate knowledgeable individuals and compassionate, responsible members of society.

Those who are familiar with the work of Ivan Illich (especially on the issue of 'deschooling society') will probably see similarities here. Both thinkers' discussions often revolved around the nature of education and structures of authority in shaping human consciousness.

Krishnamurti emphasised the importance of understanding and transforming the self to achieve genuine change. He argued that the self is an illusion, constructed through memories and desires, which leads to a hardened identity (a sense of permanence) that perpetuates conflict and suffering. To achieve true transformation, individuals must recognise the impermanence of the self and detach from their identity tied to possessions, beliefs and societal roles.

Social construction

It follows that genuine change can only occur when one understands the nature of this illusion, as it drives self-interested desires that further entrench the individual in a cycle of striving and suffering.

But what are the material underpinnings of this illusion in today's world?

Karl Marx focused on the economic dimensions of power and how they shape individual identities within a capitalist framework. For

Marx, power is primarily exercised through economic relations and class structures, which dictate individuals' experiences and opportunities. This economic power creates a 'fixed capital' mentality where individuals are seen as cogs in a machine, limiting their capacity for self-realisation and transformation.

In developing this line of thought, philosopher Louis Althusser explored the concept of the subjectification of the self. Althusser introduced the idea that individuals are 'hailed' into existence as subjects through ideological processes that prompt them to recognise themselves within a particular identity or social role. For Althusser, this recognition is crucial for the formation of the subject, as it signifies an acceptance of one's position within the social order.

Althusser argued that ideology is not merely a set of beliefs but a material practice that shapes how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others. Ideology operates through institutions such as education, religion and family, which reinforce specific identities, social norms and structures of power.

He challenged traditional notions of self-consciousness by suggesting that the self is not a pre-existing entity but is constructed through ideological processes. The subject is thus seen as a product of external social forces rather than an autonomous individual.

The French Philosopher Michel Foucault looked at disciplinary power. He argued that power is not merely repressive but productive; it shapes knowledge and identities in ways that individuals internalise. This concept implies that individuals actively participate in their own subjection by adhering to societal norms and expectations, which can hinder their ability to transform themselves as envisioned by Krishnamurti.

The interplay between Krishnamurti's insights on self-transformation and analyses of power grounded in everyday material conditions reveals significant barriers to personal change. Power dynamics are internalised within individuals, leading them to perpetuate their own limitations. This internalisation creates resistance against recognising the illusory nature of the self as described by Krishnamurti.

While Krishnamurti advocates for a deep understanding of the self as a means to break free from societal constraints, other thinkers provide critical frameworks for understanding how those constraints operate through economic systems and disciplinary practices.

All very interesting. But as Marx implied, it is not enough to know the world; the point is to change it.

It has almost become a cliché that to change the world we must first change ourselves, free ourselves from conditioning and propaganda and reinvent ourselves. But is that realistic or possible? And what type of material conditions might be best suited for liberating the self and bringing about positive change?

Through this book, light has been shed on these two questions, calling for reestablishing humanity's (spiritual) connection to the land and nature and encouraging communities based on cooperative labour, fellowship, self-determination and local control over productive resources.

Chapter Sixteen

Moving Forward

The preceding chapters have shown that humanity's crises are as much moral and spiritual as they are material. Conventional development too often destroys ways of life, communities and ecological systems that stand in the way of corporate power and profit.

This final chapter asks how we can move forward: how to build systems that serve life and restore the ethical and ecological foundations of society.

Conventional development is based on Western hegemony and has imposed certain ideals on the rest of the world. But there is, in reality, no universal standard as to what development is or should be. Are Western notions of progress applicable everywhere based on top-down, technocratic interventions?

Vincent Tucker does not think so:

“Development is the process whereby other peoples are dominated and their destinies are shaped according to an essentially Western way of conceiving and perceiving the world.”

The dominant notions that underpin economic growth, modern agriculture and development are based on a series of assumptions that betray a mindset steeped in arrogance and contempt: the planet should be cast in an urban-centric, Western-centric model whereby the rural is to be looked down on, nature must be dominated, farmers are a problem to be removed from the land and traditional ways are backward and in need of remedy.

As Vandana Shiva says in *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*:

“People are perceived as ‘poor’ if they eat food they have grown rather than commercially distributed junk foods sold by global agri-business. They are seen as poor if they live in self-built housing made from ecologically well-adapted materials like bamboo and mud rather than in cinder block or cement houses. They are seen as poor if they wear garments manufactured from handmade natural fibres rather than synthetics.”

In a similar vein, Arturo Escobar notes in *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*:

“Development was and continues to be—in theory and practice—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of ‘progress’.”

If history teaches us anything, it’s that humanity has reached its current point through countless struggles and conflicts, many of which could easily have gone another way. There is no single, straight path to development and no universal standard for what it should look like.

The work of Barrington Moore Jr and Robert Brenner challenged the traditional, linear view of history by showing how specific and often violent class struggles have shaped the direction societies take. Both argued that moments of deep social conflict, especially over control of land and agricultural surplus, act as turning points that leave lasting structural legacies.

For Moore, the fate of agrarian class relations—the balance of power between lords, peasants and the bourgeoisie—determined a nation’s eventual political form, whether it developed into a

democracy, fascist regime or communist state. In his view, strong and independent bourgeoisies tended to foster democracy, repressive alliances between landowners and the middle class often led to fascism and successful peasant revolts could pave the way for communism.

Brenner focused on what happened after these struggles. He examined how property relations were settled: whether peasants were dispossessed and forced into wage labour or managed to retain control of the land. Those outcomes, he argued, became the key to whether capitalist economic growth could take root and sustain itself over time.

In short, both showed that the way these conflicts were resolved set societies on particular paths that continued to shape what was possible in the future.

The documentary *How Big Oil Conquered the World* illustrates this idea in a modern setting. It argues that the global system we live under was not the natural result of free markets but the deliberate creation of an oligarchy led by figures such as John D Rockefeller. By controlling energy, this corporate empire influenced governments, suppressed alternative technologies and built an economy centred on car-based transport, pharmaceutical medicine and industrial agriculture. The result was a modern form of global control.

In the end, we have arrived where we are through both chance and design. Much of that design was rooted in colonialism and imperialism. Britain's development, for instance, was deeply tied to the estimated \$45 trillion extracted from India, according to economist Utsa Patnaik.

And now the modern-day East India corporations of agribusiness and the data giants are in the process of 'developing' India again by

helping themselves to the country's public wealth and natural assets.

A right way?

There are other pathways that humanity can take. Anthropologist Felix Padel and researcher Malvika Gupta offer some insights into what the solutions or alternatives to development might look like (*Sacrificing People: Invasion of a Tribal Landscape*, 2012):

“Democracy as consensus politics rather than the Western model of liberal democracy that perpetuates division and corruption behind the scenes; exchange labour rather than the ruthless, anti-life logic of ‘the market’; law as reconciliation rather than judgements that depend on exorbitant legal fees and divide people into winners and losers... and learning as something to be shared, not competed over.”

But what of the outcome of the current development model? What of the so-called ‘developed’ societies?

According to various happiness or well-being surveys over the years, the wealthy Western nations have often ranked lower than some poorer countries. It seems that happiness is often higher in countries that prioritise family and friends, social capital rather than financial capital, social equity rather than corporate power and investment in education, health, self-sustaining communities, local economies and the environment.

Countries reported to be happier also tend to avoid undermining the ability of future generations to prosper. The pursuit of material wealth to the exclusion of all else negatively impacts health and the quality of personal relationships, which are among the most potent predictors of happiness.

Shouldn't genuine development be about well-being and happiness in which co-operative labour, fellowship and affirming our long-standing spiritual connection to the land underpins society? A world that promotes the value of rural society, small farms, widespread property ownership and political decentralisation.

When we hear talk of a 'spiritual connection', what is meant by 'spiritual'? In a broad sense it can be regarded as a concept that refers to thoughts, beliefs and feelings about the meaning of life, rather than just physical existence. A sense of connection to something greater than ourselves.

The spiritual, the diverse and the local are juxtaposed with the selfishness of modern urban society, the increasing homogeneity of thought and practice and an instrumental rationality which becomes an end in itself.

Having a direct link with nature/the land is fundamental to developing an appreciation of a type of 'being' and an 'understanding' that results in a reality worth living in.

As noted in the previous chapter, humanity's relationship with farming and food and our connections to land, nature and community has for millennia defined what it means to be human.

Take India, for example. Environmental scientist Viva Kermani says in *What modern ecology can learn from ancient Hinduism* (2017) that Hinduism is the world's largest nature-based religion that:

"...recognises and seeks the Divine in nature and acknowledges everything as sacred. It views the earth as our Mother and hence advocates that it should not be exploited. A loss of this understanding that earth is our mother, or rather a deliberate

ignorance of this, has resulted in the abuse and the exploitation of the earth and its resources.”

Kermani notes that ancient scriptures instructed people that the animals and plants found in India are sacred and, therefore, all aspects of nature are to be revered. This understanding of and reverence towards the environment is common to all Indic religious and spiritual systems: Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

The Vedic deities have deep symbolism and many layers of existence. One such association is with ecology. Surya is associated with the sun, the source of heat and light that nourishes everyone; Indra is associated with rain, crops, and abundance; and Agni is the deity of fire and transformation and controls all changes.

The *Vrikshayurveda*, an ancient Sanskrit text on the science of plants and trees, contains details about soil conservation, planting, sowing, treatment, propagating, how to deal with pests and diseases and a lot more.

Humanity has a profound cultural, philosophical and practical connection to nature and food production.

And then there is agrarianism, a philosophy based on cooperative labour and fellowship, which stands in stark contrast to the values and impacts of urban life, capitalism and technology that are seen as detrimental to independence and dignity. Agrarianism, too, emphasises a spiritual dimension as well as the value of rural society, small farms, widespread property ownership and political decentralisation.

The prominent proponent of agrarianism Wendell Berry says:

“The revolution which began with machines and chemicals now continues with automation, computers and biotechnology.”

For Berry, agrarianism is not a sentimental longing for a time past. Colonial attitudes, domestic, foreign and now global, have resisted true agrarianism almost from the beginning — there has never been fully sustainable, stable, locally adapted, land-based economies.

However, Berry provides many examples of small (and larger) farms that have similar output as industrial agriculture with one third of the energy.

But in the cold, centralised, technocratic dystopia that is planned, humanity's spiritual connection to the countryside, food and agrarian production are to be cast into the dustbin of history. What we are seeing is an agenda based on a different set of values rooted in a lust for power and money and the total subjugation of ordinary people.

We are told that the corrosive, divisive values of (post)industrial, (post)capitalist society are normal and that the hundreds of millions who suffer along the way are necessary collateral damage on the road to the promised land. Corporate lobbyists say it is 'progress'.

They say there is no alternative.

Well, they would. As corporations profit, the majority suffer. It is the predictable outcome of what food sovereignty movement La Via Campesina in *A Call to Action for the World's Peoples* (2009) has long warned of. It says that free-market globalisation based on disinvestment, privatisation and the dismantling of national regulatory networks has led:

“...to heightened concentration of power among political and corporate elites, in particular through transnational corporations, with devastating consequences for the world's rural communities and urban workers. Today, almost every country in the world is

witnessing growing anger among its rural and urban working class, who have been systematically marginalised and invisibilised by an economic system that expanded with the blessings of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization.”

Applied human ecology

Mention Gandhi in certain circles and the response might be one of cynicism: his ideas are outdated and irrelevant in today’s world. Such a response could not be further from the truth. Gandhi could see the future impact of large-scale industrialisation in terms of the devastation of the environment, the destruction of ecology and the unsustainable plunder of natural resources.

Ideas pertaining to environmentalism, agroecology, sustainable living, fair trade, local self-sufficiency, food sovereignty and so on were all present in Gandhi’s writings. He was committed to inflicting minimal damage on the environment and was concerned that humans should use only those resources they require and not amass wealth beyond their requirements. People had the right to attain certain comforts, but a perceived right to unbridled luxuries would result in damaging the environment and impinge on the species that we share the planet with.

For Gandhi, indigenous capability and local self-reliance (swadeshi) were key to producing a model of sustainable development.

Gandhi felt that the village economy should be central to development and India should not follow the West by aping an urban-industrial system. He noted that it took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve its prosperity and asked how many planets would a country like India require?

Although there was a role for industrialisation that was not resource- or energy-intensive and which involved, for example, shipbuilding, iron works and machine making, for Gandhi, this would exist alongside village handicrafts.

This type of industrialisation would not make villages and village crafts subservient to cities: nothing would be produced by the cities that could be equally well produced by the villages, and the function of cities would be to serve as clearing houses for village products.

He argued that with new technology even energy could be produced in villages by using sunlight and local materials. And, of course, people would live within the limits imposed by the environment and work in harmony with the natural ecology rather than by forcing it to bend to the will of profiteering industries.

Gandhi offered a vision for a world without meaningless consumption that depleted its finite resources and destroyed habitats and the environment. Given the problems facing humanity, his ideas could serve as an inspiration to us all, whether we live in India or elsewhere.

In the book *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology*, T N Khoshoo says:

“...Gandhiji called the so-called modern society a nine-day wonder. Poverty has been aggravated due to cumulative environmental degradation on account of resource depletion, increasing disparities, rural migration to urban areas resulting in deforestation, soil erosion, loss of soil fertility, desertification, biological impoverishment, pollution of air, water and land on account of lack of sanitation, chemical fertilisers, pesticides and their biomagnification, and a whole range of other problems.”

TN Khoshoo argued that Gandhi's advocacy of an 'non-interventionist lifestyle' provides the answer to the present-day problems. The phrase 'health of the environment' is not just a literary coinage. It makes real biological sense because, as Gandhi argued, our planet is like a living organism. Without the innumerable and varied forms of life that the earth inhabits, without respecting the species we share this place with, our world will become lifeless.

The challenge is, however, how can humanity be persuaded to embark on a road whose values are opposed to those of modern society.

Resist!

Gandhi knew how to connect everyday concerns with wider issues. In 1930, he led a 'salt march' to the coast of Gujarat to symbolically collect salt on the shore. His message of resistance against the British Empire revolved around a simple everyday foodstuff.

His focus on salt was questioned by sections of the press and prominent figures on his side (even the British weren't much concerned about a march about salt), who felt that protest against British rule in India should for instance focus more directly on the heady issues of rights and democracy.

However, Gandhi knew that by concentrating on an item of daily use among ordinary Indians, such a campaign could resonate more with all classes of citizens than an abstract demand for greater political rights.

Even though salt was freely available to those living on the coast (by evaporation of sea water), Indians were forced to purchase it from the colonial government. The tax on salt represented 8.2 per cent of

the British Raj tax revenue. The issue of salt encapsulated the essence of colonial oppression at the time.

Explaining his choice, Gandhi said that next to air and water, salt is perhaps the greatest necessity of life.

The prominent Congress statesman and future Governor-General of India, C Rajagopalachari, understood what Gandhi was trying to achieve. He said:

“Suppose a people rise in revolt. They cannot attack the abstract constitution or lead an army against proclamations and statutes...Civil disobedience has to be directed against the salt tax or the land tax or some other particular point – not that that is our final end, but for the time being it is our aim, and we must shoot straight.”

With the British imposing heavy taxes on salt and monopolising its production, Gandhi felt he could strike a chord with the masses by highlighting an issue that directly affected everyone in the country: access to and control over a daily essential. His march drew not only national but international attention to India’s struggle for independence.

Protest and action against widespread oppression, violence and exploitation must be focused. As in Gandhi’s time, it is again food that is playing a central role in raising awareness and provoking resistance. This time, what is at stake is securing independence from the corporate tyranny of global agribusiness, which has the power to have (seed) laws, (trade) rules and (World Bank/IMF) directives written on its behalf.

In *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, Vandana Shiva draws a parallel between the seed sovereignty movement and Gandhi’s civil disobedience ‘salt march’:

“Gandhi has started the independence movement with the salt satyagraha. Satyagraha means ‘struggle for truth’. The salt satyagraha was a direct action of non-cooperation. When the British tried to create salt monopolies, he went to the beach in Dindi, picked up the salt and said, ‘Nature has given us this for free, it was meant to sustain us, we will not allow it to become a monopoly to finance the Imperial Army ...’ For us, not cooperating in the monopoly regimes of intellectual property rights and patents and biodiversity—saying ‘no’ to patents on life and developing intellectual ideas of resistance—is very much a continuation of Gandhian satyagraha.”

Global capitalism has turned nourishment into a market and the planet into a resource to be consumed. Its logic of endless growth has hollowed out the very systems that sustain life.

Across the world, people are organising to reclaim public goods, resist repression and challenge exploitation. At the same time, in fields, urban markets and villages, communities are sustaining and renewing food systems that uphold dignity and connection. In that persistence lies the seed of another kind of future—one grounded not in extraction and control but in solidarity, reciprocity and renewal.

Sources

Adani Group (2023) *India Is Pulling Back on Coal: For Many, the Damage Is Done*. *TIME Magazine*, October 2023.

Agarwal, B. (1994) *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) (2024) *Press Release on NPFAM and Farmers' Protests*. New Delhi: AIKS.

Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) (2018) *Annual Progress Report*. Nairobi: AGRA.

Althusser, L. (1971) 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by B. Brewster. London: New Left Books, pp. 127–186.

Amnesty International (2024) *Environmental Racism Enabled Forty Years of Injustice for Survivors of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy*. London: Amnesty International.

APCO Worldwide (2009) *India's Resilience in the Global Downturn: Positioning for Global Capital*. Washington, DC: APCO Worldwide.

Bernays, E. (1928) *Propaganda*. Horace Liveright, New York.

Bhaskar Save (2005) *An Open Letter to the Farmers of India*. Dahanu, Maharashtra.

Brenner, R. (1976) 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe', *Past & Present*, 70(1), pp. 30–75.

Bryant, M. (2020) *EU Bailouts and the Financial Crisis Response*. *Investigative Europe*, Brussels.

Bryant, M. (2022) *European Financial Crisis and Lockdown Response*. *Investigative Europe*, Brussels.

Champion, J. (2017) *The Diggers and the English Revolution: Radical Memory and the Commons*. Royal Holloway, University of London.

- Chomsky, N. and Herman, E. S. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon Books, New York.
- Chossudovsky, M. (1985) *Sowing the Seeds of Famine in Ethiopia. Third World Resurgence*, Montreal.
- Colville-Andersen, M. (2018). *Copenhagenize: The Definitive Guide to Global Bicycle Urbanism*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Corbett, J. (2015). 'Episode 310 – How Big Oil Conquered The World' [Video]. *The Corbett Report*.
- Dow Chemical Company (2023) *Court Appearances and Statements on Bhopal Liability*. Midland, MI.
- Escobar, A. (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Esteva, G. (1992) 'Development', in Sachs, W. (ed.) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*. Zed Books, London, pp. 6–25.
- European Commission (2023) *EU-US Task Force on Energy Security: one year on*. 3 April.
- Fabio Vighi (2021) *A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Systemic Collapse and Pandemic Simulation*. Cardiff University, Cardiff.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2019) *The 10 Elements of Agroecology: Enabling transitions to sustainable agriculture and food systems*. FAO, Rome.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2014) *Agroecology for Food Security and Nutrition*. FAO, Rome.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2021) *The Critical Role of Small-Scale Traders in Urban Food Security*. FAO, Rome.
- Ferguson, J. (1990) *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Fish4Food Project (2020) *Fish4Food: Rethinking the Role of Small-Scale Fisheries in Food and Nutrition Security*. Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Penguin Books, London.

Gandhi, M. K. (1909) *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Navajivan Publishing, Ahmedabad.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, New York.

Gehl, J. (2010) *Cities for People*. Island Press, Washington, DC.

GMWatch (2021) *Disgraced MP at centre of UK's lobbying scandal was close ally of GMO lobby*.

GMWatch (2013) *GM crops: is opposition to golden rice wicked?*

Gorz, A. (1980). 'The Social Ideology of the Motorcar'. In: *Ecology as Politics*. London: Pluto Press.

Government of India (2014) *The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014*. Gazette of India, New Delhi.

Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare (2024) *Draft National Policy Framework on Agriculture Marketing (NPFAM)*. New Delhi: Government of India.

Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Lawrence and Wishart, London.

Gruère, G., Giuliani, A. and Smale, M. (2009). 'Marketing underutilized plant species for the poor: A case study of minor millets in Kolli Hills, Tamil Nadu, India', *Food Policy*, 34(4), pp. 403-410.

Helena Paul (2010) *Repression and Displacement in Paraguay*. *Ecos Magazine*, London.

Henry, J. S. (2020) 'Wired to make money': Barclays' private bankers serve ultra-rich, as watchdogs sound alarms, *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)*, 23 September.

ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research) (1985–2005) *Bhopal Gas Disaster Research Reports*. New Delhi: ICMR.

Illich, I. (1971) *Deschooling Society*. Harper & Row, New York.

Jan Gehl (2010) *Cities for People*. Island Press, Washington, DC.

Ketchum PR and FTI Consulting (2023) *Corporate Communication Strategies in the AgriTech Sector*. Ketchum, New York.

Khoshoo, T. N. (1995) *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology*. New Delhi: Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI), New Delhi.

Krishnamurti, J. (1969) *Freedom from the Known*. Harper & Row, New York.

La Via Campesina (2013) *Declaration of the Rights of Peasants – Women and Men*. La Via Campesina, Jakarta.

La Via Campesina (2009) *A Call to Action for the World's Peoples: Declaration of the Vth International Conference of La Via Campesina*. La Via Campesina, Maputo.

Matthews, J. (2022) *Syngenta and the war and hunger profiteers*. GMWatch.

Martinez, B. v. Monsanto Company (2021) *Case Files and Ruling*. Superior Court of California, County of Alameda, Oakland, CA.

Marx, K. (1867) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. Penguin Classics, London.

Moore Jr., B. (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

MSSRF (M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation) (2023) *Forgotten Foods for India's Food Systems: Lessons from Millet Scaling in Odisha*. MSSRF, Chennai.

Padel, F. and Gupta, M. (2012) *Sacrificing People: Invasion of a Tribal Landscape*. Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi.

Patnaik, U. (2017) 'Revisiting the "Drain", or Transfer from India to Britain in the Context of Global Diffusion of Capitalism', in Chakrabarti, S. and Patnaik, U. (eds) *Agrarian and Other Histories: Essays for Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri*. Tulika Books, New Delhi.

Paul, H. (2010) *Repression and Displacement in Paraguay*. *Ecos Magazine*, London.

Press Trust of India (PTI) (2024). 'India cannot become developed nation with 'backward agriculture': Bayer South Asia Prez'. *The Economic Times*, 13 September.

Rabhi, P. (1998) *Le Recours à la Terre: Une Utopie Pratique*. Albin Michel, Paris.

Rajagopalachari, C. (1921) *The Way Out*. Ganesh & Co, Madras.

Reece, T. (2019) *Marx and the Global Working Class*. Brighton Labour Press, Brighton.

Reece, T. (2022) *The Falling Rate of Profit and the Crisis of Global Capitalism*. Self-published paper.

Rodrigues, A. (2021) *GM Crops and India's Food Security*. *The Hindu*, 15 November.

Roy, A. (1999) *The Greater Common Good*. *Outlook India*, 24 May.

Roy, A. (2014) *The Ghosts of Capitalism: The Spectre of India's Poor*. *Outlook India*, 24 May.

Sainath, P. (1996) *Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts*. Penguin Books, New Delhi.

Sainath, P. (2018). 'Agrarian crisis: five words at a time'. *The Hindu*, 16 July.

Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) (2024) *Statement on the National Policy Framework on Agriculture Marketing (NPFAM)*. New Delhi: SKM.

Sambhavna Trust (2018) *Health Studies of Bhopal Gas Victims*. Sambhavna Clinic, Bhopal.

Sankara, T. (1988) *Women's Liberation and the African Freedom Struggle*. Pathfinder Press, New York.

Schumacher, E. F. (1973) *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Blond & Briggs, London.

Shiva, V. (1988) *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London.

Shiva, V. (1993) *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology*. Zed Books, London.

Shiva, V. (1997) *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. South End Press, Boston.

Shiva, V. (2016) *Who Really Feeds the World? The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA.

Shiva, V. (1988) *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, London.

Shiva, V. (2016) *Who Really Feeds the World? The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA.

Shiva, V. (2016) *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*. 3rd edn. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky. Lexington.

Stone, G.D. (2019) 'Commentary: New histories of the Indian Green Revolution', *The Geographical Journal*, 185(2), pp. 248-251.

Sukumaran, C. V. (2020) *The Mirage of Development*. *The Hindu*, 10 July.

Swaminathan, M. S. (2006) *Report of the National Commission on Farmers*. Government of India, New Delhi.

Todhunter, C. (2022) *Food, Dependency and Dispossession: Resisting the New World Order*. Centre for Research on Globalization., Montreal.

Todhunter, C. (2023) *Sickening Profits: The Global Food System's Poisoned Food and Toxic Wealth*. Centre for Research on Globalization., Montreal.

Todhunter, C. (2024) *Power Play: The Future of Food*. Centre for Research on Globalization., Montreal.

Tucker, V. (1999) 'The Myth of Development: A Critique of Eurocentric Discourse', in Munck, R. and O'Hearn, D. (eds) *Critical Development Theory: Contributions to a New Paradigm*. London: Zed Books, pp. 1–26.

Tye, L. (2002). *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and The Birth of Public Relations*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Union Carbide Corporation (1984) *Internal Safety Reports and Memoranda on the Bhopal Plant*. Union Carbide, New York.

US Right to Know (USRTK) (2022) *Corporate Influence in Food and Agriculture Policy: A Review of Bayer, Monsanto and the Gates Foundation*. USRTK, Oakland, CA.

Weber, M. (1905) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Allen & Unwin, London.

WEF (World Economic Forum) (2020) *The Great Reset*. Geneva: WEF.

World Health Organization (1985–2020) *Public Health Consequences of Industrial Accidents: Bhopal Case Studies*. WHO, Geneva.

