

# THE ATTACK ON AGROECOLOGY

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

Agroecology is recognised worldwide as a system that enhances fertile landscapes, increases yields, restores soil health and biodiversity, promotes climate resilience and improves farmers' well-being. Its practices are supported by many agricultural scientists, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, farmers' groups and several NGOs. It is therefore surprising that the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences, based on a brainstorming session that included industry representatives, sent a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi opposing Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF). ZBNF, developed and publicised by agro-scientist Subhash Palekar, has been adopted by Andhra Pradesh.

Farming in India, as in most other countries, is largely under the control of powerful lobbies with vested interests and connections to deep pockets. These include fossil fuel, fertilizer and seed companies as well as scientists with funding connections to agribusiness. These lobbies perceive large-scale transitions to agroecology as a substantial threat to their influence on farming systems. If India, a large developing country, shifts to sustainable farming methods, they would all have to look elsewhere for support. The battlelines are drawn and when natural farming, still a small player in the margins, starts to move towards the centre, shrill voices in opposition are likely to get louder.

In Britain, when public hearings were held in the early 2000s to discuss genetically modified (GM) crops, corporations threatened to pull grants from scientists on the committees if they voted against GM. When individual scientists in Europe and the University of California published articles describing how GM foods and crops affected the health of human beings and insects adversely, they were personally attacked and vilified. When glyphosate trials against Monsanto were recently decided in favour of litigants who accused the company of causing cancer, some voices called to have only scientists on such juries, thus opposing the central tenet of "a jury of one's peers".

What hangs in the balance while these battles are being fought is the threat to food systems and biodiversity. As a result of industrial farming, friendly insects are no longer part of the agricultural landscape, water pollution is rampant, depleted soils are commonplace and plunging groundwater tables have become the norm. The opportunity cost incurred from investing only in industrial methods of agriculture is one that has been borne largely by the farming community and the natural systems.

That scientific enquiry and scientists are part of a paradigm of belief systems has been established, at least since Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Support from corporations for research has become part of "normal" science. The problems with this normalisation in medicine, pharmaceuticals and university research have been described in numerous studies. Assessment of an issue by scientists does not by itself guarantee its legitimacy or truth.

The current battle on ZBNF is between those powerfully entrenched and new voices of state and civil society. Mr. Palekar's words too have been jarring on some topics. Quarrels among the powerful in one camp or another have become a clash of egos, where substantive matters are lost in semantics and jargon, often taken out of context. There are many successful agroecology-based methods in India, so mudslinging among groups can also be a distraction.

The most prominent voice for ZBNF is Mr. Palekar's and the developing experiment is showing

success largely because farmers are supporting it. The practice may not be all zero budget, may not be fully successful everywhere and will need to be adapted to India's various agroecological zones. The funds for the Andhra model (16,500 crore) are reportedly going mostly to train farmers. This is small in comparison with huge subsidies for the Green Revolution and the numerous lobbies it has spawned. So, while the enemy is being made out to be Mr. Palekar and his methods, this is a red herring. The real attack is on agroecology, for the threat it poses to entrenched institutions.

We presently have a subsidy-based agricultural system where farm inputs are firmly in the hands of corporations and their elite networks. Agroecology-based farming is not regressive, but rather a technology of the future with a traditional idiom. Farmers appear to be listening to and following Mr. Palekar. If policymakers ignore the posturing and stay focussed on improving soil health and quality of life for farmers, while observing and supporting successes, farmers may even double their incomes and India's food security could sow new beginnings.

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