

# CORPORATE COMPLICITY: ISRAELI INTERVENTIONS IN INDIAN AGRICULTURE

Apoorva Gautam<sup>1</sup>

Over the last decade, Israel's presence in India's agriculture sector has increased exponentially. Especially in south India 'Israeli technology' has been bandied about as the panacea<sup>1</sup> for the entrenched agrarian crisis even though neither its salient features nor its benefits are clearly evidenced. Yet Israeli agencies and agribusiness corporations are expanding in India through projects and government tie-ups, and the most important purpose they serve is to help greenwash<sup>2</sup> Israel's colonisation of Palestinian lands and its violations of Palestinian human rights.

In this paper, we will look at both Israel's colonisation of Palestinian lands, and the ways in which Israeli corporations have expanded in the Indian agriculture sector. The interventions in Indian agriculture play out by creating the myth of Israel 'seeing' India from its agrarian crisis—a notion both patently wrong and racist. Crucially, such myths serves Israel's PR machinery by providing a cover up for its war crimes, occupation, and apartheid against Palestinians—a veneer for the everyday injustices meted out to Palestinian farmers.

## DISMANTLING PALESTINIAN AGRICULTURE

Land is at the heart of Israel's seven decades long occupation and colonialism against the Palestinian people, and consequently agriculture is a recurrent theme and a constantly evolving paradigm of control, displacement, and violence. Israel was established by large scale ethnic cleansing of indigenous Palestinian Arabs; making 800,000 people refugees and destroying hundreds of villages and towns. One of the most ruthless lies still peddled by Israel is that it made 'the desert bloom'. Historically, Palestine was an agriculturally rich and diverse place.

*"Palestinians have cultivated the land for centuries. Palestinian agriculture was sustainable and the 'fertility of Palestine was unsurpassed'. By 1930, all areas 'which could be cultivated by Palestinians, were already farmed by them'. The areas of Gaza, Jaffa, Hebron, Nablus, Galilee, and others were all 'intensively cultivated' and became reputed for different crops such as watermelons, tobacco, wheat, citrus, grapes, olives, and cotton. Palestine was blooming long before the founding of Israel."*

---

1 'Karnataka: Here's how this Indo-Israel collaboration is helping farmers in Kolar District', India Today, February 05, 2019 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/video/karnataka-here-s-how-this-indo-israel-collaboration-is-helping-farmers-in-kolar-district-1449075-2019-02-05>

2 'Israeli Greenwashing', Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, August, 2018 [https://www.cjpme.org/fs\\_210](https://www.cjpme.org/fs_210)

*Israeli Greenwashing, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, August 2018*

The journey from kibbutzim (collective community based on agriculture) to illegal settlements represents the progressive colonization of Palestinian lands and destruction of its rich agriculture, carried out along with ethnic cleansing and occupation. The much hailed 'socialism' of the kibbutz system<sup>3</sup>, since its inception, was part of the militant Zionist movement and has eventually taken the form of agrobusiness corporations in many instances, as is the case<sup>4</sup> of Netafim—the Israeli agrobusiness company with large operations in India. Netafim<sup>5</sup> is among the corporations that provide services to illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and directly profit<sup>6</sup> from Israel's settler colonialism.

Sixty per cent of land in the occupied West Bank is designated<sup>7</sup> as Area C, i.e. a military zone under direct control of Israel. This includes<sup>8</sup> over 60 percent of Palestinian agricultural land and resource rich parts. Ninety per cent of the water sources in West Bank, including the Jordan river, are controlled by Israel, thereby enforcing a water apartheid. Many Palestinian farmers have to buy water from Israel's water agency, Mekorot, to irrigate their fields, and their own wells and water storage systems are routinely destroyed by the Israeli military. The heavy

restrictions on movement, checkpoints and barriers deny farmers the right to cultivate their own lands. Palestinian farmers are also met with violence by Israeli forces and fanatic settlers, who also often destroy olive trees and burn crops.

*"Even where access is granted, farmers are often prevented from taking tractors, machinery and other tools onto their land. There are reports of Palestinian farmers being prevented from accessing their land to extinguish fires destroying their crops, including when Israeli settlers have set the fires deliberately. Checkpoints and entry restrictions prevent workers from accessing the farmland at which they work, prevent agricultural produce from reaching local markets, increase transport costs, and often cause produce to rot while stuck in transit."*

*Farming Injustice, Palestinian farming and civil society organisations, February 2013*

The situation in Gaza is even worse, given Israel's illegal blockade and absolute restriction on movement of people and goods. Once an agriculturally rich region, 80 percent of the people in Gaza are now dependent on food aid<sup>9</sup>, and agricultural production has been destroyed by not allowing essential goods to enter or the produce to leave. Gaza's fishermen can only access up to 20 nautical miles off the coast, where too they are attacked by Israeli navy which maintains the blockade. Along the northern and eastern periphery of Gaza, Israel has imposed a no-go "buffer zone". Between 30-40 percent of Gaza's farm lands which lie in this buffer zone are now largely abandoned. Those who still try to access their farms in these areas face huge risks including death and injury.

3 Seraj Assi, 'Why Kibbutzism Isn't Socialism', Jacobin, October 8, 2016  
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/kibbutz-labor-zionism-bernie-sanders-ben-gurion>

4 Hatzerim: <https://www.hatzerim.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?426>

5 Netafim: [https://www.netafim.com/en/Netafim-irrigation-company\\_about-us/#top](https://www.netafim.com/en/Netafim-irrigation-company_about-us/#top)

6 'Netafim', Who Profits: The Israeli Occupation Industry <https://whoprofits.org/company/netafim/>

7 Abdul Rahman, 'West Bank: Illegal Settlements and Separation Walls are the Occupiers' Logic of Peace', NewsClick.in, August 10, 2019  
<https://www.newsclick.in/Palestine-Israel-West-Bank-Settlements-Occupation-Separation-Walls>

8 'Farming Injustice: International trade with Israeli agricultural companies and the destruction of Palestinian farming', Palestinian Farming and Civil Society Organisations, February, 2013  
<https://bdsmovement.net/files/2013/02/Farming-Injustice-Briefing-Feb2013-web.pdf>

9 

---

ibid

A recent report by Forensic Architecture<sup>10</sup>, in collaboration with Gaza and Israel based organizations, has revealed that since 2014 Israel has been aerial spraying herbicides in the buffer zone. These crop-killing herbicides have not only destroyed the formerly arable land along the border fence, but carried by wind, they have also destroyed crops and agricultural land hundreds of metres into the rest of the besieged Palestinian territory. The first-hand video testimonies show that before each round of spraying, Israeli military confirms the westerly direction of the wind to ensure that the drift is towards Gaza. The report calls this herbicidal warfare and notes that "this practice weaponises herbicide spraying as a belligerent act, designed to 'enable optimal and continuous security operations'<sup>11</sup>".

## GREENWASHING COLONISATION

While Israel destroys Palestinian agriculture and livelihood of farmers, practices apartheid and colonizes Palestinian lands through its agrobusiness, it sells itself and its agrobusiness industry in the global south as providing solutions for sustainable agriculture. Just like in the defense

10 'Herbicidal Warfare in Gaza', Forensic Architecture, July 19, 2019 <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/herbicidal-warfare-in-gaza>

11 Michael Schaeffer Omer-Man, 'IDF admits spraying herbicides inside the Gaza Strip', +972 Magazine, August 23, 2019 <https://972mag.com/idf-admits-spraying-herbicides-inside-the-gaza-strip/115290/>

## INTERMEDIARIES LIKE SMALL TRADERS IN THE AGRICULTURAL SUPPLY CHAIN WILL QUICKLY BE ELIMINATED AS DIGITAL PLATFORMS TAKE OVER, PUTTING EVEN MORE LIVELIHOODS AT RISK.

sector, India is a key ally of Israel in the agriculture sector. And just like with defense, the Indian government is harming its own farmers and their quest for sustainable agriculture in order to provide a huge market and the legitimacy that comes with it to Israel. Successive governments at the centre and in various states have promoted neoliberal, pro-market agriculture policies for two and a half decades, ever since Indian economy was reformed for liberalization, privatization and globalization. Even as these policies<sup>12</sup> have led to indebtedness, loss of livelihoods, and dispossession linked to farmer suicides (in the words <sup>13</sup> of P.Sainath, "predatory commercialisation of the countryside") the state has systematically withdrawn from the agriculture sector and opened up space for multinational agribusiness corporations. It is within this scheme that Israeli state agencies and agribusiness is being given ever-expanding space and legitimacy.

12 Vijoo Krishnan, 'A Quarter Century of Neo-Liberal Economic Policies: Unending Distress and Peasant Resistance: Neo-Liberal Economic Policies and Retreat of State From Agriculture', Newsclick.in, November 04, 2019 <https://www.newsclick.in/quarter-century-neo-liberal-economic-policies-unending-distress-and-peasant-resistance>

13 'Agrarian Crisis is corporate hijack of Indian agriculture: Sainath', The Hindu, May 26, 2019 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/agrarian-crisis-is-corporate-hijack-of-indian-agriculture-sainath/article27250480.ece>

As we will see in this section, Israel's growing influence in Indian agriculture is harmful not only as a tool to cover-up or 'greenwash' its near-obliteration of Palestinian agriculture, but also because it is exploitative, unsustainable, and exacerbates the ongoing agrarian crisis in India, hurting millions of farmers here.

By recanting the original lie of 'making the desert bloom', Israel claimed to provide solutions for irrigation in arid regions, mainly in southern India. Israeli agrobusiness' first major entry point was the Kuppam project in Chittoor district, Andhra Pradesh in the late 90s. The Andhra Government brought in Israeli companies, including the drip irrigation company Netafim, for a five-year project in Kuppam district. It was expected to showcase the 'Kuppam model' of efficiency and productiveness, developed within the framework of Israeli agro technology: drip irrigation, use of chemical inputs, contract, and market-oriented farming. It was implemented without involving established technical bodies of the state government. The project was mired in issues of corporate farming, land grab, unsustainability, lack of technology, ecological damage, all of which was exposed<sup>14</sup> in a study by Deccan Development Society. Yet, the so-called Israeli model continued getting promotion from state governments, benefiting from the rampant state support to neoliberal agribusiness.

Along these lines, Netafim has an ongoing project<sup>15</sup> in North Karnataka's Bagalkot district covering 24000 hectares, acquired from farmers. After

five years, the project is supposed to be handed over to the government. There haven't been any independent studies of this project, even as there have been issues of indebtedness and futility surrounding Netafim's products in the region. Like Kuppam, this project too involves taking in land from farmers, implementing packages covering all aspects from sowing to harvesting, and is being hailed as the panacea for solving North Karnataka's farm crisis induced by lack of water.

Netafim is also involved in the Better Life Farming alliance<sup>16</sup>, running in U.P. and Jharkhand. This is a long-term partnership of Bayer, Netafim, IFC (International Finance Corporation) and Swiss Re Corporate Solutions. The project claims to be involved in various aspects of farming from training to resources to access to market. The past record of the entities involved in the project raises serious suspicion about the control and access of inputs as well as the products. Bayer has recently acquired Monsanto, which has a long history of disputes and lawsuits; from inducing indebtedness<sup>17</sup> leading to farmer suicides, to biopiracy<sup>18</sup> through its anti-farmer patenting regime, to producing poisonous herbicides including Agent Orange<sup>19</sup> used by the United States in the Vietnam war. Bayer has not just acquired Monsanto's name, but also its decades of anti-people and anti-environment activities.<sup>20</sup>

16 Better Life Farming Alliance: <https://www.betterlifefarming.com/home>

17 Vandana Shiva, 'The Seeds Of Suicide: How Monsanto Destroys Farming', Asian Age and Global Research, April 5, 2013 <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-seeds-of-suicide-how-monsanto-destroys-farming/5329947>

18 Rosie Spinks, 'How India squared up to Monsanto's "biopiracy"', Ecologist, October 12, 2011 <https://theecologist.org/2011/oct/12/how-india-squared-monsantos-biopiracy>

19 Samuel Osborne, 'Vietnam demands Monsanto pays compensation for Agent Orange victims', Independent, August 26, 2018 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/vietnam-agent-orange-monsanto-victims-compensation-a8508271.html>

20 'Bayer faces skyrocketing US lawsuits over glyphosate', Deutsche Welle, July 30, 2019 <https://www.dw.com/en/bayer-faces-skyrocketing-us-lawsuits-over-glyphosate/a-49797934>

14 Andhra Pradesh Coalition in Defence of Diversity, 'Contract farming: Burden on exchequer', Deccan Development Society, July 2002

<http://indiatogether.org/agriculture/dds/contractfarming.htm>

15 V Rishi Kumar, 'Karnataka gets Asia's largest drip irrigation project with Israeli tech', The Hindu BusinessLine, January 30, 2018

<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/agri-business/karnataka-gets-asias-largest-drip-irrigation-project-with-israeli-tech/article22592938.ece>

Similarly, International Finance Corporation, which is a lending body for the World Bank, has repeated instances of financing land grab<sup>21</sup>, and in February 2019 the US Supreme Court overturned its claim of legal immunity by virtue of it being an international body. In fact, the lawsuit<sup>22</sup> was filed by a fishermen community from Gujarat whose livelihoods and environment were impacted by the Tata Mundra coal-fired power plant financed by IFC.

Netafim and Israeli agriculture agencies receive significant endorsement from state agencies in India in the form of Memorandums of Understanding, government projects, and subsidy schemes. A key example of this are the Centres of Excellence. This partnership<sup>23</sup> between Horticulture ministries (state and central) and Israel's MASHAV is part of the Indo Israeli Agriculture Program of 2009, which in turn emerged from an MoU signed by Indian and Israeli ministers of Agriculture in 2006. MASHAV is Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation, and is part of Israel's diplomatic mission to increase its presence and control<sup>24</sup> in the global south. Built on land acquired often from agriculture universities, and with costs borne<sup>25</sup> by the National Horticulture Ministry and State Horticulture Ministries, these centres claim to provide training and resources to farmers. While concrete benefits of these centres are yet to be seen, it is surely accruing PR benefits to Israel as testified in this video<sup>26</sup> and similar news reports.

Across states in South India, Netafim is enlisted in the state's subsidy scheme. In Telangana, the company took a 1000 agriculture officers<sup>27</sup> on a paid trip to Israel in 2017. These same officers are expected to impartially suggest to farmers which company to choose from within

21 'IFC investments implicated in land grabs in Africa', Farmlandgrab.org, July 5, 2017 <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/27259>

22 'Historic Supreme Court Win: World Bank Group Is Not Above The Law', EarthRights International, February 27, 2019 <https://earthrights.org/media/historic-supreme-court-win-world-bank-group-is-not-above-the-law/>

23 'Indo-Israel Agricultural Project (IIAP): A Growing Partnership', Israel in India <https://embassies.gov.il/delhi/Relations/Indo-Israel-AP/Pages/default.aspx>

24 'Defending Palestinian Food Sovereignty Against Occupation and Expulsion', Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign <https://www.stopthewall.org/downloads/pdf/FoodFull.pdf>

25 'The Indo-Israeli Agriculture Project', MASHAV: Israel's Agency for International Development Co-operation [https://embassies.gov.il/delhi/Departments/Documents/Israel percent20- percent20India percent20Agriculture percent20Cooperation percent20\(MASHAV percent20Brochure\).pdf](https://embassies.gov.il/delhi/Departments/Documents/Israel percent20- percent20India percent20Agriculture percent20Cooperation percent20(MASHAV percent20Brochure).pdf)

26 'Karnataka: Here's how this Indo-Israel collaboration is helping farmers in Kolar District', India Today, February 05, 2019 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/video/karnataka-here-s-how-this-indo-israel-collaboration-is-helping-farmers-in-kolar-district-1449075-2019-02-05>

27 Krishna Prasad, '1,000 Telangana officers' Israel junket to cost Rs 25 crore', The Times of India, November 16, 2017 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/1000-telangana-babus-israel-junket-to-cost-rs-25-crore/articleshow/61666434.cms>

the subsidy scheme. This is one among several official trips<sup>28</sup> by bureaucrats and politicians to Israel, which serve to further publicize Israel and its agribusiness in India. In Karnataka, the state government has allocated<sup>29</sup> Rs. 300 crore in the previous financial year and Rs. 140 crore in this financial year's budget under 'Israeli technology/model', the specifics of which are unclear.

All of these enlistments and support from state governments legitimize and help cover up the settler colonial project of Israel's state agencies and agribusiness corporations. For this reason alone, they need to be challenged. Further, Israel is implementing the same corporate model of agriculture in India which has been at the centre of the agrarian distress. It is necessary to investigate these tie-ups and question their utility beyond being a PR exercise for Israel, and urge state governments to reallocate these funds to sustainable agriculture projects that reflect the demands and needs expressed by farmers' movements.

---

28 Anil Urs, 'Karnataka Ministers in Israel to prepare ground for partnerships in agriculture', The Hindu BusinessLine, September 07, 2018

<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/karnataka-ministers-in-israel-to-prepare-ground-for-partnerships-in-agriculture/article24894232.ece>

29 FurquanMoharkan, 'Karnataka Budget 2019: Here are the key takeaways', Deccan Herald, February 09, 2019

<https://www.deccanherald.com/city/top-bengaluru-stories/Karnataka-Budget-2019-Here-are-the-key-takeaways-717353.html>