

# Food as Political Weapon

## *International Activist Battles the Tyranny of WTO*

### *Devinder Sharma*



*Devinder Sharma is a journalist, writer, thinker, and policy analyst who plays a crucial role in the global effort to turn back ill-advised neoliberal trade policies and biotechnology. Trained as an agricultural scientist, Sharma served as the development editor of the Indian Express, the largest selling English language daily in India at that time. He quit active journalism to research policy issues concerning sustainable agriculture, biodiversity and intellectual property rights, environment and development, food security and poverty, biotechnology*

*and hunger. He was the founding member of the Chakriya Vikas Foundation (Foundation for Cyclic Development) in India, which promotes sustainable agriculture practices as a means of lifting rural populations out of poverty, and is also is a member of the board of directors of the Asia Rice Foundation. He serves as well on the Central Advisory Board on Intellectual Property Rights of CGIAR — the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.*

*Don't be fooled by the stern or admonitory tone of Sharma's remarks below. He is a warm and pleasant man who happens to be engaged in a great battle against powerful forces that are using his country as a biotech guinea pig and ravaging its farm economy. It's difficult to imagine him being caught up short in a debate, and even harder to imagine him losing one.*

**ACRES U.S.A.** When did India join the WTO?

**DEVINDER SHARMA.** India was a founding member of GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. So obviously when the Uruguay Round and the WTO came into existence in 1995, India was one of the signatories. Before WTO came into existence, India had built up its agriculture to a level of self-sufficiency. Since at least the mid-1960s, India was a net importer of foodstuffs. When the British left India in 1947, India's independence came against the backdrop of

the Bengal famine. India consistently imported food from America — in 1965 we imported 10 million tons, and 11 million tons in 1966. That was the biggest food import ever at that time in history. When food came to India it was called a ship-to-mouth existence. The food would come directly from the ship and go into hungry mouths. India was trying desperately to cover the situation but didn't succeed until the Green Revolution came in, promoted by CGIAR. That was when Norman Borlaug's wheat came in for the first time and India adopted chemical-intensive technology, in the late '60s and

early '70s, and initiated strategies to assure that the technology worked. The wheat harvest went from 12 to 17 million metric tonnes in one year, a record bumper harvest for India. Today India produces about 75 million tonnes of wheat. So look at the growth that has taken place, from 12 million tonnes to about 75 million tonnes of wheat.

**ACRES U.S.A.** That's more than 600 percent!

**SHARMA.** Yes, and this happened because of the technology, of course, but also because India put into place what is called a famine-avoidance strategy. The farmers had no incentive to produce more since they didn't get an assured price, nor did they have an assured market, so India guaranteed both of those things. The government would step in and announce the procurement price for the crops, which would become the floor price. When the crops came to market at the time of the harvest, the prices would slump because the government has already announced a floor price, and whatever became surplus in the markets, the government would mop up. These farmers got an assured market and an assured price and incentive for growing more, and that worked remarkably well. We have moved on from the ship-to-mouth existence — we became self-sufficient, and then a net exporter of whole grains. One of the measures we imposed was border duties, custom duties so that cheaper food could not come into our country.

**ACRES U.S.A.** While this was happening, did the character of India's agriculture change?

**SHARMA.** Not really. When we got our independence in 1947, the average land-holding at that time was about four

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## INTERVIEW

hectares. Today the average landholding size in India is 1.5 hectares. If you want to raise a cow in our part of the world, you need about 10 hectares of land to grow the kind of feed the cow will need. One family is surviving on 1.5 hectares of land in India, year after year. Also, unlike in America, the number of farmers has increased. At the time we got our independence, the percentage of your population in agriculture was about 10 percent, and now it's less than one percent. In India, on the other hand, the number of farmers multiplied. We had about 250 million farmers when we got our independence, out of the 320 million people who existed in India at that time — about three-quarters of the population. That ratio holds today — the number of farmers in India is 600 million. In fact, every fourth farmer in the world is an Indian. If you add the farming population of India and China, half the world's farming population exists in these two countries. There is a contrast that you need to appreciate. The agriculture that exists in the United States and Western Europe is completely different from the agriculture that exists in our part of the world. Most of the other developing countries may not have huge numbers, but they have 60 to 80 percent of the population involved with agriculture. It has not gone to corporate agriculture and so on.

**ACRES U.S.A.** What happened after initial success of the Green Revolution in India?

**SHARMA.** The Green Revolution was something that India required desperately at one stage, because of the situation with food imports and famine. For that, it did a remarkable job. But 10 years later, the yields began to plateau, and also the negative impacts of the Green Revolution began to be seen. The damage done by too much fertilizer, all the pesticides, the pumping-out of water — all those began to be seen. Unfortunately, the scientific community refused to accept these challenges and come up with corrective measures that could restore sustainability. They went on advocating more fertilizer, more pesticides, and more pumping-out of water. The result is that the Green Revolution area — which is 30 percent of the country's total agricultural land — is a failure. These are the lands that absolutely require irrigation — fertilizers and pesticides only work in an area that is assured of irrigation. These are the lands now

gasping for breath. These are the lands suffering from second-generation environmental impacts. The impacts are visible now, but the scientists somehow fail to stand up to rectify the mistakes that produced them. Now farmers are using twice the quantity of fertilizer they were using five years back to produce the same size crop, because now if they don't put on fertilizer there's no yield at all. The crop won't grow. We have made everything so bad, against all norms of sustainability. Thirty or 40 years later we realize the Green Revolution has left a kind of frightening scenario that is difficult to address to meet our food security needs.

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**ACRES U.S.A.** Does the 1.5 hectares per farmer provide food security if all is going well?

**SHARMA.** I would say that this 1.5 hectares is still sustainable, it still meets the food needs of the farmers, and all they need is a policy mix from the top that allows them to make agriculture an attractive proposition. Unfortunately, that is not happening. They have begun to shift their focus to corporate farming, and people have begun to believe there is no other way out than to bring corporate agriculture to India. That's the kind of message that comes from international agencies and certain institutions and so on. The policymakers tend to believe that this is

the answer, but I think it is a misplaced priority.

**ACRES U.S.A.** Do the small farmers have a political voice?

**SHARMA.** They have, but their voice is still very unorganized. If they would organize, things would really change. But they are poor, and the poor have no voice in India. Farmers don't organize well anywhere — nowhere in the world.

**ACRES U.S.A.** Since India operates from a position of greater strength than much smaller countries who were not original members of the WTO, how has the corporate, neoliberal agenda been imposed there?

**SHARMA.** GATT wasn't a big problem because they were only trying to frame the rules and regulations. It wasn't a big issue until the WTO came into existence. In the Uruguay Round, which led to the formation of the WTO, agriculture was introduced for the first time. The Uruguay Round negotiations went on for 7.5 years, and agriculture was a contentious issue. Initially, India did put up a very spirited opposition to what was happening. That was the G-77 group, the original non-aligned group. They did try to voice their concerns over what was happening, but somehow, after all the arm-twisting and other things that go on in the trade arena, India became a signatory. Also, there was a kind of dominant thinking in India at that time because nobody truly understood the implications of the WTO agenda. There was a misinformation campaign that still continues in this part of the world, claiming that the developing countries would gain enormously when the subsidies were phased out in the West, and that when the borders were open, more market access would mean more opportunities for farmers to export, and the economic wealth would go up for the farming community, and so on. India, being a major farming region, obviously believed it stood to gain.

**ACRES U.S.A.** But of course WTO in practice bears little resemblance to its workings in theory.

**SHARMA.** Yes — people like me began to analyze the drafts of the WTO and recognize that this was all an illusion, and that we were going to be negatively impacted — terribly negatively impacted.

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## INTERVIEW

My first book was titled *WTO: Seeds Of Despair*. What happened was, a year back the government of India permitted the release a document that said all of the expectations from the agreement on agriculture had been belied. All of these expectations that we had been given, that we would be able to export and all that, all contradicted. We haven't gained, but we have suffered a loss. Farmers are beginning to feel the pinch, because cheaper whole grains, cheaper commodities, and cheaper plantation crops are all getting into India now. All this is displacing farmers. That is why India made a very strong stand at the WTO meeting in Cancun. Along with Brazil and China and other countries, we made the noise that this system is not fair. This did not happen suddenly overnight — farmers in my country have felt a cumulative impact over the past few years. That has translated into public anger and of course public policy. So now the government of India is resisting the complete march of agriculture in the direction that the American and European governments would like.

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**ACRES U.S.A.** Could you give us an idea of the extent of the change?

**SHARMA.** Imports of agriculture commodities have increased 400 percent in the last eight years, since WTO came into effect. That's quite a huge quantity. All this is having negative consequences. Edible oil is one of the major commodi-

ties used in India, for our cooking. We are one of the biggest consumers of edible oils in the world — we consume about 10 million tonnes a year. Now about 50 percent of them are being imported, which means about 5 million tonnes a year — not because we can't produce this commodity, but because we have reduced our border tariffs, so cheaper oil is getting in from Indonesia, from Malaysia, from Brazil and so on.

**ACRES U.S.A.** What are the consequences for Indian society? What happens when a farmer is displaced?

**SHARMA.** First of all, he sells off his kidney, then he sells off other parts of his body, all that he can do. Then he can commit suicide. The rate of suicide in Indian agriculture is phenomenally high. The government of India will deny that, but my estimate is that in the last 10 years the number of farmers in India who have committed suicide is more than 16,000. If you go to Uttar Pradesh in south India and pick up a newspaper, every other day you will find reports of a farmer who has committed suicide. He was a cotton grower, or he was a vegetable grower, all kinds of farmers committing suicide. The state governments are saying they can find no reason why farmers should be committing suicide, they think there is something wrong with the psychology of these farmers. So they say we need to send a team of psychiatrists to talk to farmers. There's a lesson here. Also, people are migrating to the urban areas. In 1995 the World Bank did a study which said that the number of people migrating from rural to urban areas in India is going to be equal to twice the combined population of the United Kingdom, France and Germany by the year 2010. Look at the social chaos we are going to have. It is also anticipated that India will have 20 mega-cities in next 10 years. So far we only have four mega-cities. There are people who have estimated that New Delhi, which is 40 percent slums today, will be 80 percent slums by the year 2010. Look at the kind of sad economic growth we are talking about. There is something wrong somewhere.

**ACRES U.S.A.** Then it would be correct to say that India is a country that needs to stay three-fourths rural and agricultural to avoid social chaos?

**SHARMA.** Yes. There are no employment opportunities for these people in the

cities. We have to ensure that they remain on the land. What we need are policies that make agriculture an attractive proposition, a viable proposition for them, so these people can survive and produce food for themselves and for the country. Believe me, we have the capacity to produce food for ourselves. We have the capacity to produce food to sell to the rest of the world as well. But then everything is loaded against us. The poor farmers are getting displaced, and I always say the biggest environmental crisis the world is going to face is the displacement of farmers that the WTO is going to unleash. It's already happening.

**ACRES U.S.A.** How did biotechnology enter the scene in India?

**SHARMA.** Well, the Green Revolution agriculture reached a plateau, and then it began to decline. Since there is no breakthrough coming by way of Green Revolution technology, the focus has been on genetic engineering, on biotech.

**ACRES U.S.A.** When did you first hear about it in India?

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**SHARMA.** About 10 years ago. The research began on various crops in India. We have a huge biotechnology research infrastructure, the universities and others. At the moment we have research going on in rice, eggplant, tomatoes, corn, soya bean, and so on. The only genetically modified crop that has been introduced in India is cotton. We have Bt cotton, which was introduced in 2002.

**ACRES U.S.A.** What happened?

**SHARMA.** The crop failed. In the very first year. That was something that was not said anywhere. We were made to believe that, like China, which has 7 mil-

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## INTERVIEW

lion acres under Bt cotton, India was also going to gain when Bt cotton came into use.

**ACRES U.S.A.** Why did it fail?

**SHARMA.** It failed because the technology was not the right technology for the farmers. If you don't give them the right variety, you don't get the record harvest. Also, the single Bt gene was not what was required for India. The crops now grown all over the world have one Bt gene. The insects have already developed resistance to one kind of Bt gene, although the biotech scientists do not accept it. The reality is that now you have to spray more insecticides for the same crop, which means that insects are developing resistance. Look at China. At first they dropped to seven kilos of insecticide per hectare, back from about 32 kilos. Now they've gone back up to 28 kilos per hectare. A lot of pesticides are used on cotton. If you look at the whole scenario, 55 percent of the pesticides used in India are used on cotton.

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**ACRES U.S.A.** Was the government squarely behind the Bt cotton effort?

**SHARMA.** Yes. We all know why they were — everybody needs money for elections, and the biotechnology industry has the money. So the crop failed. The parliament set up a committee which looked into the Bt cotton case, and they reported that the crop failed — but they offered no compensation to farmers and invoked no liability clause to see that these companies are charged, so they go on selling more seed. These seeds are expensive, too, so they have made their profits. The farmers have suffered. They have demonstrated in some parts of the country, and some of the

farmers involved committed suicide. The promise was that the additional income you would have from Bt cotton per acre of crop would be 10,000 rupees, and it hasn't happened. They've gone into bankruptcy, they've gone into negative income. Again, nobody in power is really worried about it because the poor have no voice, and the industries can go on pushing these products.

**ACRES U.S.A.** At some point, you have to wonder about the intent behind all this. Do you think the so-called developed nations are pursuing these policies out of greed and self-interest, or do they have a coherent goal in mind? Do they actually want to destroy the self-sufficiency of other nations?

**SHARMA.** To me it is clear that there is a dishonesty prevailing at the international community level, and also at the scientific community level. If you'll recall, when we had the World Food Summit at Rome in 1996, they had all these statesmen there. They said it is scandalous, it is shameful, it is a crime to see that 800 million people go to bed hungry every night when we have more food than we need. Therefore, there is a need for urgency. What urgency was expressed? That by the year 2015, then 20 years away, they would reduce the number of hungry by half — which means they would pull 400 million people out of the hunger trap. But look at the dishonesty. They met again in Rome last year. It was there that I stood up and said, “You know, you don't have to wait until the year 2015. And secondly, 320 million of the world's hungry are in India. If you link up Pakistan, Bangladesh, and some of the other neighboring countries, roughly 45 percent of the hungry are in this region. Yet in 2001 India had a record surplus of 65 million tonnes of grains rotting within the country — at a time when 320 million people are going to bed hungry. Why do you have to wait until the year 2015? There is the food, and there are the hungry. All you have to do is come up and join hands and see that hunger is taken care of.” But nobody came up. There is no urgency. There is no moral justification for what is happening. It is purely greed which is driving this agenda. When they meet at the WTO, when U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick goes on record saying it is the developing countries that are going to suffer, when *The Economist* runs an editorial saying that the developing countries have lost —

they are basically pushing that industrial agenda. But to us the bigger problem is what to do with the hungry. Nobody's worried. It's a shameful paradigm that we are living in today.

**ACRES U.S.A.** What happened to the surplus food in India?

**SHARMA.** Much of it rotted. Of course, the rats grew fatter and the insects got busy. If you put every bag of grain one after the other, you could have easily walked to the moon and come back. That was the extent of the grain that we had in our country. Look at what we have done: Last year we exported 70 million tonnes of food surplus — the storage cost was too heavy, so the government exported it. At a price for which the grain should have gone to the poor, to the hungry, the government exported it. This is the economic paradigm that we live in. We believe that the dollars that we earn will feed the hungry. It has never happened in the past, and it will never happen in the future. You realize that Mahatma Gandhi said, “The earth has enough for man's needs, but not for his greed.”

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**ACRES U.S.A.** You're also fond of quoting Jawaharal Nehru, aren't you?

**SHARMA.** Nehru said that it is humiliating for a country to import food. “Everything else can wait, but not agriculture.”

**ACRES U.S.A.** Can you give me an example of how the developed countries, the members of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development,

## INTERVIEW

attacked the self-sufficiency of the developing nations?

**SHARMA.** Several years back, I think it must be about 10 years back, we had a minister in India named Jagjivan Ram. He was our agriculture minister. He went to meet the UN's FAO chief in Rome. He went with the famous agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan, the father of the Green Revolution in India, who told me what happened in that meeting. The number two guy in FAO is always an American, so Ram went to meet this gentleman. That man told Jagjivan Ram, "You think that you will be able to stop food imports from America? Because you are now self-sufficient, you think that you will now be able to hold off American imports?" Swaminathan recalls that the minister had some papers in his hand, and he threw them at the FAO man's face, and said, "India will remain self-sufficient. Whatever you want to do, you go and do it." And then he walked out of that meeting. That will give you an idea that the effort has always been to insure that the countries which became self-sufficient would have their self-sufficiency base destroyed.

**ACRES U.S.A.** It was that naked?

**SHARMA.** Yes, it was that naked. This happened. Then came a situation which involved Senator Dale Bumpers from America. Senator Bumpers in the late '80s introduced a bill which said that America should withdraw funding from research in crops that would go on to compete with American exports — it was called the Bumpers Amendment. That was at a time when America was giving a lot of research money for crops such as rice and wheat. So then the American aid was withdrawn, and now America is not supporting research into those crops which would ensure food security of any country if those crops are competing with their exports. It is very clear what the agenda was.

**ACRES U.S.A.** How does the trade negotiating process shape the farm subsidy issue?

**SHARMA.** If you look at the WTO, it was said that the countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) needed to phase out their agriculture subsidies. They brought in a system of boxes — green

box, blue box, yellow box and so on. Which subsidies do they need to protect? They'd put certain subsidies in certain boxes as those they needed to protect, saying they were not "trade-distorting" subsidies. Look at what the trade-distorting subsidies were found to be. In India, for our 600 million farmers, we provide a subsidy of \$1 billion a year. This is an indirect subsidy by way of cheaper fertilizer, cheaper water, cheaper electricity and cheaper seed — there is no direct subsidy. It was considered to be trade-distorting. The subsidies that farmers are paid here in the United States, which are phenomenal, are considered to be non-trade-distorting. Checks written directly to farmers were supposedly not distorting trade. It took a long time, but policymakers finally analyzed these subsidies and decided that they, too, were trade-distorting. These subsidies were therefore to be phased out.

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"One chap says to the other, 'What does WTO stand for?' And the other answers, 'We Take Over.'"

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**ACRES U.S.A.** And were they?

**SHARMA.** Let's look at what happened: In 2002, President Bush needed two more seats for his party in the Senate, and these seats would come from the Midwest. So he announced a package of an additional \$180 billion in subsidies for your farmers. That was your Farm Bill. Out of this, \$100 billion was to be spent in the first three years. He made sure that this benefit was given to the farmers in his own tenure. This was in a time when the subsidies were supposed to be phased out. Look at the European Union — they have gone on adding to their subsidies. Both America and the EU have a protection built in, and it is called the Peace Clause. The Peace Clause was put into what is called the Blair House Accord at the time of the original WTO negotiations. It actually exempted the European Union and America from reducing their subsidies until December 31, 2003. For instance, India cannot take America to the dispute panel, saying that your cheaper food is

destroying our agriculture. At the same time, having built this ring of protection around their own agriculture, they have made sure that the developing countries have phased out their tariff barriers and other protections. So we have no tariff barriers left, and we've become a dumping ground. We have been told, "If you are protecting your agriculture, it is a shame." But I would respond that protecting your agriculture is economic necessity. Look at that paradigm.

**ACRES U.S.A.** What does the trade insurgency at Cancun mean in the scheme of things?

**SHARMA.** I think Cancun is a mere pause in the entire process of takeover. I have a feeling that if the developing countries take a stand and are able to halt or restrict this process, then the world will have to renegotiate the deal. Otherwise we will be destroyed. This reminds me of a cartoon that appeared in my newspaper when the WTO came into existence. It showed two people walking on the streets on Bombay, with the high-rise buildings in the background. The banners on the buildings were Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Cargill and so on. One chap says to the other, "What does 'WTO' stand for?" And the other answers, "We Take Over." I think that's an apt description of the WTO. If the developing countries don't stand up to this process, we will be completely marginalized. Agriculture will be the biggest casualty.

**ACRES U.S.A.** Then was Cancun a watershed moment in the history of the developing countries' resistance?

**SHARMA.** We hope so. Can't be sure about it, but it now looks like the developing countries have finally realized their potential, realized that they also have power. And I think that is very important. If you'll remember, at Dohar it was India alone that fought to the last. We were dubbed the bad guy, the rogue state, and we were told that "you are now isolated in global politics." Look at Cancun two years later. The one country that had opposed in Dohar became 21, we became G-21. There is arm-twisting going on

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## INTERVIEW

now, and we know that four or five countries have walked out of the G-21. But be assured that by the time the next ministerial meeting takes place, there will be more countries joining us. And in any case, India doesn't need many countries to join us now. After the failure of Cancun, the draft agriculture document that was separated — the draft that was rejected at Cancun — India has said no, we don't want this draft, we have to negotiate a first draft now, to which Robert Zoellick replied that it was not fair. India said, "It may not seem fair in your scheme of things, but we will have to renegotiate a draft now," because we realize that if we are starting from the same position where we left off, we are not going to benefit in any case.

**ACRES U.S.A.** What is behind these events in terms of politics?

**SHARMA.** This is all happening because the constituency of the political masters of India are standing up and saying no to the WTO. Farmers are their biggest constituency. The government of India right now is conservative, but when the people are rising against this hegemonic process, the government has to take notice because they have to go back to the people — and next year is an election year in India. The government is very worried, just as the American government is worried. We are very hopeful because more and more people are now coming out openly and onto the streets, and even the economists are now coming out against the WTO. India is a country that has shown remarkable resistance all through history, so we are very hopeful that we will be able to stand up to this.

**ACRES U.S.A.** What are your hopes for the next decade, in terms of a goal you hope to see achieved? How would you like to see things structured?

**SHARMA.** In the last 10 years, we have been led to believe that we have practically invented something new called trade. Trade has existed ever since man began to domesticate agriculture. Why now? Why all this just now? I don't think this kind of trade is what we need. What we need is for each country to be self-sufficient. Each country needs to evolve policies that ensure that its people can be fed by food that its own people grow. That's the kind of sustainable model we need, not this kind of corporate agriculture under the

garb of trade. Do you think India was not trading in agriculture 10 years ago? We were trading. When we needed food because we had a shortfall, we imported food. When we needed to export food, we exported food. There was no problem. The problem comes from the way they are

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“Each country needs to evolve policies that ensure that its people can be fed by food that its own people grow.”

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now trying to monopolize trade, forcing this model onto everyone until everyone falls into line. “If you are not with us, then you are against us.” That is the kind of paradigm that is in play today, which I think is very unfortunate. That was a remarkable era for India, when we were protecting our borders, our farmers were self-sufficient, and our country was self-sufficient. There were problems within the country that were tackled within the country. If American agriculture faces a problem, I think you will agree it has to be solved within America. I don't think India has a solution for American agriculture. Similarly, America doesn't have solutions for Indian agriculture. It has to be location-specific. That is what we need to work towards. I am sure we will get there again, and India will be able to resist this new kind of international trade, which is simply a process of takeover.

**ACRES U.S.A.** Another front in the assault on the developing world involves intellectual property rights, such as the recent effort to patent the neem tree, which was repelled by villagers in India who fought back in the courts. A similar fight was recently won over tumeric. What is the significance of corporate moves on the genetic heritage of your country?

**SHARMA.** These are very serious developments in the history of intellectual property rights. What has happened here, again, is the same process. The first requirement of the WTO focus is, first, open borders. Now, having done that, there is still a threat to maximum profits.

India and China have huge public-supported research infrastructures — India has the second-biggest agricultural research infrastructure in the world. We have 40 agriculture universities, and we have 81 national institutes. They are all funded by the public sector. We have 30,000 agricultural scientists in India, a huge bloc of scientific minds. This is something that can always negate the impact of agribusiness investment. Therefore the second requirement of the world trade focus is to destroy this agriculture research sector.

**ACRES U.S.A.** And how would they go about destroying it?

**SHARMA.** They bring in Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights, an agreement under WTO. All it says is that countries need to exercise intellectual property rights over the plant varieties and animal species. Now it has gone still further, and they want to draw up intellectual property rights over the processes of plant breeding or transformation, and also the processes of making products. What they are actually doing is this: because the biotechnology research is in this part of the world — the United States and Western Europe — the genetic makeup of plants is now being mapped, and their genes are being patented. He who has control over the genes will have control over the research.

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