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FRONTLINE/World **Rough Cut**



Rough Cut  
Seeds of Suicide  
India's desperate farmers

July 26, 2005

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Learn more about the use of pesticides and "miracle seeds" in India.

#### [Behind the Lens: Interview with Chad Heeter](#)

Filmmaker Chad Heeter shares how he first came across the story of the suicide epidemic among farmers in India, his opinions on whether technology is helping or hurting farmers and his path to environmental filmmaking.

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Chad Heeter is a freelance filmmaker and journalist from Lee's Summit, Mo. He's currently completing two master's degrees, in journalism and Latin American studies, at U.C. Berkeley. His next film will be a **FRONTLINE/World** Fellows project about landless workers in Brazil.

### Introduction

Suicide by pesticide: It's an epidemic in India, where farmers try to keep up with the latest pest-resistant seeds only to find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of pesticides that don't work, drought and debt. Since 1997, more than 25,000 farmers have committed suicide, many drinking the chemical that was supposed to make their crops more, not less, productive.

This week on *Rough Cut*, you'll join **FRONTLINE/World** correspondent Chad Heeter in verdant Andhra Pradesh, an agricultural state in eastern India where last summer an average of seven farmers killed themselves every day. In this part of the world, machinery, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and hybrid seeds -- all of which originated in the West -- often spell disaster rather than prosperity. "This is the other side of globalization," says Heeter, a student at U.C. Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism.

The tragedy unfolds from crop failure. Drought, pests, and spurious pesticides are expensive problems that small farmers don't have the means to rectify. In recent years, as Heeter finds in the fields of Andhra Pradesh, crop failure can often be traced to Bt cotton, a genetically modified breed that contains a pesticide that naturally

occurs in soil rather than plants. Bt technology should, in theory, repel bollworm -- cotton's worst enemy -- but some farmers who plant more expensive Bt seeds often wind up worse off than those who don't. One farmer, Pariki, confides that after he fell into debt, his wife killed herself, leaving him to care for their three small children.

In the last seven years, bad seeds, costly pesticide and drought have triggered debt, then suicide for 4,500 farmers in Andhra Pradesh alone, but no one is taking responsibility -- not the government, whose policies encouraged cash crops like cotton; not the developers of genetically modified crops; and not the dealers, who insist that farmers don't follow instructions for their seed. Amazingly, Pariki harbors no grudges. "I'm not angry with anyone because the moneylender has the right to ask for repayment," he says.

Heeter discovers that less expensive, lower-risk organic farming methods might offer a solution for the cotton-growing crisis in India. But without a sea change in agriculture policy and practices, thousands more Indian farmers are likely to take their own lives.

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## REACTIONS

### **Peter Gray - Florence, Vermont**

Same old story, people being exploited by big business. Honesty and integrity are hidden from the greedy business companies. Truth will win out over greed. Excellent story.

### **Faith Graham - Hollywood, FL**

Very distressing report. This is why I choose PBS over CNN. Thanks for the great reporting.

### **(anonymous)**

We have a product proven in the fields of Soy Beans in NC by multiple farmers where drought stricken fields have produced larger crops than before the drought. It has been tested and marketed for years. There are scientific testimonials that will support this "Soy Soap". It makes the plant feel threatened and therefore digs it's roots deeper and becomes more stable. Please look at the website BIOBASED.US for the videos and before and after pictures of the crops. I feel you will see the benefits of this. I am willing to provide samples to farmers and go with them to explain the product. The ultimate plan is to increase food production and end world hunger. Please feel free to contact me at BioEpicurean@aol.com for any questions and to set up samples. Thanks Les Snyder

### **Sherin Jose - cochin, kerala**

The hapless transition of farmers -who bear the hunger of the nation -to the shrivelling victims of poverty and suicide is a real life paradox. This sociological index of anomic suicide is nothing but a reflection of a neo liberal regime, creeping neo imperialism in the shape of Monsanto, the emergence of a fissure-the elite and the non elite India and the gruesome apathy of an indifferent society.

### **Elizabeth Henggeler - Saint Louis, MO**

"These farmers take loans to buy seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. If they follow organic way of farming - they will not need to buy seeds, pesticides and fertilizers from corporations - there are ways in organic farming to make pesticides and fertilizers. This way loans they take would be minimal (mainly for buying cattle for farming), compared to what they are taking today. But someone has to explain to them their benefits. They just see lower productivity in organic way of farming but do not see far lower risk. It's important for them to gain confidence in organic methods of farming." To the above quote - US famers take loans every year to buy inputs (seeds, fertilizer) they are called operating notes. It's just how farming works, inputs are expensive, but necessary, organic or inorganic. I'm interested to know what kind of organic pesticides and fertilizers a farmer could make without buying some kind of resource. They don't originate out of thin air. Also a pesticide is a pesticide organic or inorganic - meaning it kills pests, at least inorganic pesticides are regulated by law, organics aren't. Lots of poisons are "natural" just because they are natural doesn't mean I want them sprayed on my crops. Also to the point about buying cattle for farming. I think a few cattle probably cost a bit more than a year's supply of seeds. Also about organic farming being lower risk, not true either. So if you follow organic practices, your crop won't get wiped out by too much rain or not enough, or by a pest infestation? Farmers deal with risk every day, every minute. It's their choice part of the tradeoff of getting to work outside, on land their fathers farmed and as independent businessmen. You wouldn't expect doctors to use technology that is 50 years old, please don't expect US or international farmers to. While I admire everyone's concern for the horrible farmer suicide rate in India, I would ask people to learn more about both sides of the organic vs. inorganic farming argument.