



NETAFIM IN INDIA: GREENWASHING APARTHEID

Brief Study of Netafim's Operations in Pollachi, Tamil Nadu

BDS India, in consultation with All India Kisan Sabha

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Cover Image: Coconut farm of a respondent in Pollachi, Tamil Nadu.

Field work facilitated by Mookambika Rathinam, social activist from the region.

Your Struggle Is As Much Ours As Our Struggle Is Yours

The peasants' movement in India has a long history of solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for liberation. As I write this, tens of thousands of farmers are mobilising to oppose the exploitative neoliberal economic policies pursued by the authoritarian, right-wing BJP Government led by Narendra Modi. India is witnessing systematic attacks on the rights of farmers, workers, students, women, oppressed sections, minorities and civil society activists by an increasingly authoritarian Government. Parliamentary opposition was denied even the right to debate or vote on resolutions and eight lawmakers were suspended as the Government pushed through three anti-farmer, [pro-corporate legislations](#) that would remove all control over the market and threaten the price support system as well as public procurement; provide freedom to corporate agribusinesses to hoard essential commodities like foodgrains, pulses, oilseeds, potatoes and onions moving towards dismantling public stockholding; open the doors for corporate contract farming allowing for gradual takeover of farm land.

This moment was long in making, as successive pro-corporate regimes dismantled state backing to agriculture- the primary occupation of this vast country. In the 90s, as the economy was opened up for the global market, foreign corporations swooped in to profiteer from this productive economy built on the labour of farmers and workers. One of the earliest examples of the model of contract farming for the benefit of foreign corporations is the 'Kuppam model'. In the late 90s, the Andhra Pradesh government invited a [consortium](#) of Israeli agribusiness companies including Netafim to implement a contract farming model. Farmers were made to produce gherkins, a vegetable not consumed by people locally, and were tied to this contract for a period of five years. Highly subsidised expensive system for drip irrigation and fertigation was provided by the Government to farmers initially. Farmers who briefly benefited in terms of increased incomes soon found that they were denied remunerative prices on different pretexts, saw incomes fall and debts rise threatening their land rights too. Many were converted to labourers at the bidding of the Company Supervisors on their own land, forced to grow crops as dictated by the Company.

An [independent study](#) by agriculture experts found this experimental model unsustainable and even destructive for the local community and economy. They found that "Farmers are enslaved to the corporate farm managers" and their rights "totally suppressed". Yet it was hailed by the then Chandrababu Naidu government in the State as a success. With these new legislations, this very unsustainable, destructive and pro-corporate model is set to become the norm, if not opposed.

What connects this struggle to Palestine is the fact that the very same company that first brought in the disastrous contract farming model as part of a consortium, Netafim is also responsible for the theft of resources and disenfranchisement of Palestinian farmers. Companies like [Netafim](#) profit from colonialism, as they provide services to the illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. The Zionist State in Israel now plans to annex these settlements, an act of gross illegality. As this report details, Netafim in its origin and in its present form, has been furthering and profiting from Israel's apartheid regime. It should be listed among the companies in the UN database of businesses complicit in Israel's settlement enterprise, and has in fact received a [warning letter](#) in this regard.

The role of Israeli agribusiness companies in India is tied to the overall neoliberal regime, which for the last three decades has wreaked havoc in the lives of farmers. Progressively, corporations have been given more and more control of land and other resources, leaving farmers at the mercy of the market. The COVID 19 pandemic exemplifies this crisis where hardworking farmers who have toiled through these months of lockdown have nowhere to sell their produce, and are now sought to be turned into captive suppliers of corporate supermarkets.

All India Kisan Sabha which is the biggest organisation of the peasantry in India started in 1936 and was in the forefront of the anti-feudal, anti-imperialist struggle. It has continued to support struggles against imperialism, fascism, racial discrimination and stood for peace. In 2017, the All India Kisan Sabha joined the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in solidarity with the struggle for freedom and justice in Palestine- an article of faith for many of us in India. Our support for the BDS movement emerged also from an overlap in the systems that we are fighting.

The following study by BDS India is a microscopic view of the problem, where a corporation like Netafim, whose key product is an expensive drip irrigation system, catering only to big farmers and failing even in that, is earning massive profits by being listed in the subsidy list of the state of Tamil Nadu. The region has a long-standing problem of water shortage, which affects all farmers. However, instead of affordable and holistic solutions which reach a majority of farmers across classes, the state encourages the use of Netafim's technology. As the farmers of Pollachi report, it is their own innovation that sustains them, not this unviable technology. Yet, Netafim continues to reap profits- the large section of which is through the subsidy scheme.

Apart from the legitimacy it is afforded, which enables it to greenwash its crimes against Palestinians, Netafim is being heaped with our public money when it has no concrete benefits to show. Why should this continue?

This report tries to raise awareness about the manner in which Israeli companies like Netafim profit from Israel's colonialism, amass public money and PR by being placed in the state subsidy list of Tamil Nadu, and also other states and use this to cover up for its crimes.

Through mobilizations and awareness raising efforts, we will continue to build this campaign across India. The present moment is an urgent one to share this report. As farmers march on the streets in India against corporate exploitation, the same corporations that rob Palestinian farmers of their land, we see that our enemies are the same. But the unity of our struggles has the power to overcome them.

We stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people and your struggle for liberation.

Vijoo Krishnan
Joint Secretary

All India Kisan Sabha

Netafim Drip Irrigation System in Pollachi, Tamil Nadu: A Brief Study

Netafim, an Israeli drip irrigation company, is the world's largest micro irrigation corporation. It is a key player in India where it is part of state subsidy lists and has large scale, ongoing technology transfer projects. The same company operates in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT).

While its services to Israel's illegal settlement enterprise make it blatantly complicit in Israel's settler-colonial and apartheid regime, its operations in India are far from the example of sustainable agriculture it allegedly champions.

In the following sections, we will first detail Netafim's operations in the OPT, followed by its operations in India. We will then share our findings from a study conducted on Netafim's technology in the town of Pollachi and surrounding villages in the state of Tamil Nadu, India.

Netafim in the occupied Palestinian territory:

In 1965, shortly after Israel had concluded the ethnic cleansing of most of the Palestinian Bedouin communities from the Naqab, Netafim [establishe d](#) itself in Kibbutz Hatzerim – an Israeli agricultural settlement located there, to help 'making the desert bloom'. This idea of making the [deser t bloom](#) is linked to the racist Zionist war cry of Palestine being a land without people, which then they inhabited and cultivated. Not only was historic Palestine agriculturally rich, some of its fertile lands were made a desert by ethnic cleansing of its Indigenous Arab population. Indeed the [cor e technology](#) of Netafim's drip irrigation, which then helped finance agriculture for newly established illegal colonies, came from Zionist organizations such as the [Jewish National Fund](#) that have always been instrumental in the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

Netafim is a key player in sustaining illegal settlements on stolen Palestinian land. It work s with several [settlement s](#) to conduct experiments and develop technology on stolen Palestinian lands. It also provides services that help expand agriculture production by illegal settlers. The independent Israeli human rights research center, Who Profits, reveals the facts about the company's operations in settlements in the Jordan Valley, Ariel and Hebron, among others. More recently, Netafim has been borrowing technology from the Israeli arms industry for its precision agriculture technology that was developed to target Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip during the 2014 massacre.

Netafim positions itself as a leader in providing sustainable agriculture technology. In order to [greenwash](#) its complicity in Israel's apartheid, Netafim claims to provide drip irrigation technology in water scarce regions across the world. India is one of its key targets, and through Netafim's place in state subsidy schemes and projects worth millions of dollars, it further cements this PR effort geared towards covering up its criminal activities in the occupied Palestinian territory. This study is an attempt to uncover what lies underneath this greenwashing exercise of providing sustainable technology to the crisis-ridden farming sector in South India.

Netafim in India

In this section, we will share an overview of past and ongoing projects of Netafim in India.

Kuppam project:

In the interior parts of southern and central states of India, rainfall is scanty and irrigation is a perennial problem. In the early 90s, when the Indian economy opened up to market forces, several of these challenges were sought to be resolved by incoming multinational corporations. In the late 90s, as the harbinger of corporate "solutions" to issues of water scarcity and irrigation, the government of Andhra Pradesh, a state in South East of India, invited BHC Agro to manage the 'model farming' Kuppam project.

Kuppam, a town in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, was selected as the location for this project coordinated by BHC Agro, in which Netafim along with another Israeli drip irrigation company, Plastro, [operated](#) the prototype demonstration farm-cum-agricultural training program of "Israeli technology". The project was supposed to demonstrate agricultural practices including drip irrigation for crops such as potato, gherkins, groundnut, etc. Studies found this project to be pushing forth a model of corporate agriculture, contract farming ¹ and

¹ Contract [farming](#) is "agricultural production carried out according to an agreement between a buyer and farmers, which establishes conditions for the production and marketing of a farm product or products."

dispossession of small farmers – which, far from being a solution to the farming crisis in the region, proved to be at the center of the problem.

- Local farmers were displaced in order to consolidate land for the project. The project depended on state investment and the contributions of the farmers, while for the consortium, it was an opportunity to sell its technology. One of the key slogans of the project was ‘awakening the earth and empowering the farmer..... an acre at a time’, belying the fact that the focus of this project were small farmers, with low capacity and inputs, whose lands were consolidated for the project and who did not have a say in the control of the production process that BHC Agro later came to assume. The premises of the company in the region were heavily guarded and inaccessible for visitors and researchers- it is not hard to imagine how inaccessible they must have been for the farmers whose lands the project was running on.
- Later the project moved to tied contracts where the consortium determined the production process as well². The technology implemented through the project was not restricted to drip irrigation. It extended to the use of expensive chemical fertilizers and other inputs, providing a gateway to impose unsustainable paradigms of production. The price at which farmers sold the produce to the company was vastly less than the rate at which the company sold them in the market³.
- A [study](#) of the project by independent agriculture experts found that it was “designed to 'market' unsaleables” as it was fostering unsustainability, inaccessibility and instability in the farming community. It said, “Kuppam model is technically unsound, low in agricultural sustainability, environmentally destructive and economically unviable. The model is denying food production and balanced food (implying crop diversity) to the people. Farmers are enslaved to the corporate farm managers. Rights of the farmers are totally suppressed. If the model is really replicated, it will raise a host of social problems and unrest of uncontrollable nature, if the emerging social problems are unresolved.”

Despite the negative impacts of the project and the control it gave to BHC Agro, the model of contract farming, disguised as technology transfer projects, continues to be supported by central and federal governments.

² This model of contract farming is now being introduced through legislation that provides corporations unlimited access to profiteer off the exploitation of small and marginal farmers. This legislation is being [resisted by farmers](#) across India.

³ “Impact of the Neo-liberal Economic Policies on the Indian Peasantry (A Comparative study of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala 1990-2002)”, 2005, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Vijoo Krishnan, Group of Comparative Politics and Political Theory, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

Ramthal Marol project:

Netafim has an ongoing joint ‘model’ project, in conjunction with Jain Irrigation, in Bagalkot, Karnataka, another state in South India. Despite the failures revealed in the study on the Kuppam project, state agencies continue to impose Israeli technology. The Ramthal Marol [project](#) in Bagalkot covers tens of thousands of acres, involving 15,000 farmers across 30 villages. At the end of the five years project, farmers will have to pay Rs 1330 (\$18) per acre for maintenance of the drip lines and other ancillary equipment to the 35 local Water Users Associations (WUAs). This means that first their land is made part of a project and later they have to pay a relatively significant sum for using the same imposed model on their own land. At the end of five years (starting 2016), the project will be transferred to Krishna Bhagya Jala Nigam Limited (KBJNL), a state department dealing with irrigation. The results and damages of such projects on the land and water quality surface over time, at which point Netafim will not face any accountability having passed on the flawed project on to local state agencies.

In 2019, this project was extended to Andhra Pradesh, along with Karnataka, covering a hundred villages at the cost of \$100 million. At this stage, the drip irrigation technology was integrated with digital agriculture systems developed with [mPres t](#), a subsidiary of Israeli Rafael Advanced Defense Systems. This platform uses the command and control software developed for Israel’s Iron Dome- missile system, deployed along Gaza and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, whose use in the 2014 Israeli massacre in Gaza became a [marketing platform](#) (India showed interest in them too and subsequently bought them). Therefore, the project underway in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, claiming to develop community irrigation models, is built on technology that has been used to kill, maim and destroy the livelihood of Palestinians under Israeli military occupation.

Better Life Farming Alliance:

Better Life Farming Alliance is a “long-term partnership” [between](#) Netafim, Bayer, International Finance Corporation (member of the World Bank Group) and Swiss Re Corporate Solutions for marginal farmers in Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. Monsanto,

before being acquired by Bayer, was engaged in a long legal battle against farmers and their organizations over control and patenting of seeds.

This long-term project seeks to create ‘agri-entrepreneurs’ out of smallholder farmers, mostly operating in central India. In the [mode 1](#) being implemented, there are value chains, training programs for increasing production, transfer of technology as well as financial guidance. Other local partners such as popular urban supermarkets, fertilizer companies, etc. are also included in the project.

This model is one of contract farming, an arrangement predicated on corporations controlling the production process and tying up farmers in unfavorable and exploitative contracts. Inputs for production (seeds, fertilizers, irrigation system) are dictated by the corporations running the project. Further, the use of [technology](#) based platforms is a data minefield for corporations, as studies have shown, and the deployment of this data is also determined by the corporations that have a stronghold in the market, such as Bayer.

Corruption charges: Netafim is deeply invested in Telangana state (in South East India), especially in the field of drip irrigation. There are no signs of benefit to the general population but concrete charges of irregularities and corruption against Netafim. In 2016, the Telangana state committee of the national Congress party asked Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao to order a high level [enquiry](#) by India’s top investigative agency into these corruption charges against Netafim.

Netafim in Pollachi, Tamil Nadu: A Brief Study

Pollachi is a town in the district of Coimbatore, on the Western side of Tamil Nadu, bordering Kerala. As a taluk (sub-district) administrative headquarter, it has over a hundred villages and 14 smaller towns under it. Agriculture is a major occupation, and key crops are coconut, jaggery (sugarcane), as well as spices and vegetables. Coconut however takes the clear lead and is maintained as a monocrop, or mixed with vegetables and fruits. Its many commercial benefits attract government support in the region. Coconut is a water intensive crop. Pollachi is rain fed, and also falls within the command area of a dam and canal system. Yet it faces water shortages from time to time. The years 2013 and 2017 saw particularly tough periods of water shortage.

It was during 2013 when, as a response to the drought situation, the state government introduced drip irrigation through its subsidy scheme. This allowed for a 75% rebate on the purchase of equipment for every ten acres or less of land registered under a single beneficiary's name. Netafim, John Deere and Jain Irrigation (now Naandan Jain) were some of the popular companies whose equipment was acquired by the respondents in this period. For the purposes of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with farmers in the villages surrounding Pollachi town (notes from interviews annexed). This region was selected because of its intensive coconut production and dependence on drip irrigation. All the respondents either cultivate coconut monocrops or mix it with vegetables and spices. **Here are some highlights from the study:**

Netafim profits off Indian public money: direct sales, in the region of Pollachi, only make up for 1/5th of Netafim's profits. It earns around 2 crore rupees (20 million rupees) annually by being part of the state subsidy scheme, which in turn is taxpayer money. This enlisting also gives it legitimacy and helps greenwash its role in the colonization of Palestinian lands. The use of India's taxpayer money to secure profits for a company that is complicit in the devastation of poor Indian farmers, operates in illegal Israeli settlements, and entrenches Israel's apartheid and colonialism needs to be condemned and ended. This public money should be directed instead to finding local, organic and viable solutions which farmers are developing despite the existing scheme. Putting Netafim in the subsidy scheme has the negative impact of taking away opportunities from more sustainable solutions from local companies and farmers collectives.

Drip Irrigation excludes small farmers: The use of drip irrigation is limited to big or middle farmers who own 10 acres or above. The majority of land holdings in the state are less than 5 acres- "As per the latest Agricultural Census 2010-11, marginal and small holdings of less than 2 hectares accounted for 92.0 percent of the total holdings and 61.0 percent of the total operated area. They in turn are unsuitable for conventional technology and machinery use to boost agricultural production." (Tamil Nadu Government [Porta 1](#)). The average land holding size for the district of Coimbatore is 1.81 hectare/ 4.4 acre. The investment required to operate the equipment is simply unaffordable for small farmers, who are in a majority and in urgent need of state support.

Netafim's technology is neither sustainable nor sound: issues faced by farmers in

Pollachi are myriad, ranging from droughts, water scarcity to pest infestation. It takes years to recover from a single season of water shortage or damage by pests. The promotion of Netafim's drip irrigation system as a solution is a gross cover up- a technology which only rich farmers can afford and even they reported that the sprinklers get clogged within the year of installation. For many farmers, Netafim's expensive equipment is now just lying idle in their farms, as they have in fact moved on to other, more sustainable methods of irrigation. Netafim's inaccessibility after installation reflects that they see Indian farmers only as figures that help their PR exercise and their unethical profits.

Annexure:

Notes from interviews conducted in villages under Pollachi town in October, 2019:

Meenakshi, 45, Female

Meenakshi manages 32 acres of her family farms where they grow coconut. She employs farm help and also works herself in the fields. The drought in 2013 badly affected the crop and when the subsidy scheme on drip irrigation was introduced, she was among the many farmers opting for it, deploying it on 13 acres of her farm. She chose Netafim's equipment as it was recommended to her. However, after a year of successful operation, the equipment started to develop faults. When she tried to contact the company's agent, she did not receive any response.

Although the Netafim equipment (sprinklers and pipes) is laid out in her farm, they now lie unused. The primary cause of this is the high saline content of the water in the region, which blocks the sprinklers. The desalination equipment is not covered under the subsidy and it is very expensive. While the company is supposedly responsible for maintenance services, Meenakshi did not receive any response from the agents. This led her to introduce an innovation. She removed the sprinklers/bubblers at the end of the pipes and replaced them with micro tubes. She used the already laid out pipes for these micro tubes. This method consumes more water, but ensures that water reaches the roots and is not wasted in transit. Neither does she plan to get the sprinklers repaired anymore, nor is she interested in availing the subsidy for drip irrigation again when she is eligible. Since she depends on hired farm labour, she cannot afford to spend on the drip irrigation equipment anymore.

Selvaraj, 56, Male

Selvaraj owns more than 20 acres of farms where he grows coconut primarily, mixed with spices like nutmeg. His son assists him in farm work and they hire farm workers for daily operations. They recently installed Netafim drip irrigation equipment on all their farms, which was recommended to them by a relative who is also a Netafim agent. They are very satisfied with the equipment's performance and would recommend it to others as well. We discussed the role Netafim plays in occupied Palestinian territories, stealing water from Palestinians and directing it to illegal settlements. While shocked to learn about it, Selvaraj and his family said choosing a company available in the subsidy scheme is a pure economic calculation. For them, it is irrelevant which company it is, as long as its equipment is good and it is available in the scheme.

Balamurali, 43, Male

Balamurali works on his 20 acres of farms where he grows coconut primarily, but also fruits and vegetables seasonally. As a full time farmer, he is keen on trying different techniques and equipment, mixing them up and often coming up with hybrid solutions. He took a subsidy for a 2 acres portion of his farm to see the performance of Netafim's drip irrigation. And he is very disappointed with the results. He also faced the similar problem of clogging of sprinklers. Even though, while installing the equipment, Netafim agents assured him that they would be available for post-installation maintenance, they have not picked any of Balamurali's calls. Due to his long experience of working with techniques and equipment, he is sure that while the basic drip irrigation equipment is good, there is nothing specific or unique about Netafim's technology. And on top of it, it is expensive. In his opinion the same work can be done better by local companies, and those should be enlisted in the scheme. He produced a hybrid using Netafim and local company's equipment which worked better for him though not for drip irrigation.

Another issue that he pointed out is that the company is not invested in actually understanding the requirements of the region. There is not metering or any other way to really assess the efficiency of the equipment. The company does not provide any way of testing the moisture content, salt levels, nutrients and other aspects of the soil to determine the volume of water that will be needed. It is a one-size-fits-all approach which is then no different from traditional ways of irrigation.

In Balamurali's understanding, the problem is not just with the company, but more crucially with the government and its approach to agriculture. Coconut palms in Pollachi have been severely affected by whitefly, an invasive pest, since 2016. Balamurali's harvest has reduced to half because of it. He tried many things to get rid of it but to no avail. Tamil Nadu Agriculture University recommended techniques like using a sticky trap but these had no effect. Farmers are still asking

the government to offer a solution but at the moment they are incurring losses repeatedly. The lack of support from authorities, in Balamurali's opinion, reflects the apathy they have towards farmers. Similarly, it is their responsibility to offer inexpensive and effective solutions for irrigation, but instead they are pawning off the issue to foreign companies. He believes that it is only local innovations and cooperation among farmers that are able to provide sustainable relief and keep farming viable.

Thyagarajan, 52, Male

Thyagarajan owns over 30 acres of land. He installed Netafim equipment on them two years ago. But due to clogging they are completely dysfunctional now. As the company agents are not providing any post-installation maintenance, he has to incur the expenses of getting the equipment repaired. As the subsidy covers 75% of the cost, he has already spent a vast sum on the installation itself which is not giving any returns. Like Balamurali, he believes that local and cheap equipment could do the same work and also be accountable to farmers as they are based in the region.

He also incurred losses due to the whitefly infestation, and has approached authorities for help along with Balamurali and other farmers. Coconut is a cash intensive crop. After the 2013 drought, most farmers took years to earn profits from their produce- a long period just went in preventing the palms from drying up and dying. This year again there was a shortage of water. And then the whitefly infestation added to the losses. With all of these pressures, and the cost of expensive equipment which is lying useless in his farms, Thyagarajan wonders if his sons will even be interested in looking after the farms after him. Since he has no other skills, he says, he has no option but to continue with this low-rewarding and expensive enterprise.

Kamala, 58, Female

Kamala owns a total of 25 acres of land where she supervises the cultivation of coconut. In one half of this land, she got John Deere's drip irrigation equipment installed in 2013. She also has a desalination filter on her farm. Most of the work is done by hired farm labour, men and women who have worked on this land for decades. In the section where drip irrigation equipment is installed, the sprinklers are all clogged with salt. This is the situation even when she has a desalinator on her farm. As there was a shortage of water this year and the water table went down, the salt content is higher. Her farms fall at the fag end of the command area of Parambikulam-Aliyar basin. So while it is better placed than other farms further off, it still suffered from severe water shortage earlier in 2019 and had also been affected by the drought in 2013.

Because of the sprinklers being clogged, Kamala has reverted to simple pipe based irrigation. Although it does not distribute water uniformly, and water also gets wasted, they have no way of

being able to fix the sprinklers and go back to using the drip irrigation system. Kamala supplemented the drip irrigation equipment she received under subsidy with buying additional equipment directly from the shop. And yet, the agents have not helped her with the clogging issue. Initially they tried to clear the clogging themselves using a pin, but the salt deposits far too quickly and doing this for each sprinkler is nearly impossible. Presently, she plans to continue with pipe drainage.

Mahesh, 26, Male

Mahesh is a local Netafim agent. He used to help install the equipment some years ago and has now been promoted to a regional agent for the company. He tells us that Netafim arrived in the area in 2008. Around 2012-13, at the time of the drought, drip irrigation became part of the subsidy scheme. Now, among the various methods of irrigation, only drip is covered under the subsidy scheme.

Since it became part of the scheme, Netafim has become very popular in the region. While it was denied by the respondents, Mahesh claimed that the company does provide post-installation maintenance services. For the company, its profits from being a part of the scheme far supersede its profits from over the counter sales. From the scheme it earns around 2 crore (20 million) rupees annually, and from over the counter sales, around 40 lakh (4 million rupees)- 1/5th of the former. He informed us that Pollachi is saturated with Netafim equipment and he is now locating farmers in surrounding areas like Dindigul and Erode.