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Tells the Facts, Names the Names

Journalism, Pro-GMO Triumphalism And Neoliberal Dogma In India

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Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar is a senior Indian journalist. He is also a Research Fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington. The Cato Institute has a strong association with the billionaire Koch brothers (who have [links to the pro-GMO lobby](#)) and describes itself as a public policy research organisation dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace: in other words, it is driven by neoliberal ideology.

On the Times of India website, Aiyar recently penned a pro-GMO puff piece peppered with the usual predictable unsubtle claims and smears that many of us have come to expect from the GMO lobby.

Aiyar states that India must move people out of agriculture into industry and services. He then asserts GM crops will raise yields but they have been opposed by various NGOs on pseudo-scientific grounds. According to Aiyar, the introduction of GM mustard to India will raise yields by 20-30% and will also reduce India’s dependence on imported edible oil.

He argues that farmers’ leader Chengal Reddy says GM mustard and GM brinjal could replicate the stunning success of GM cotton and says the impact of GM cotton in the last decade has been stunning.

Aiyar then goes on to argue that Bangladeshi farmers are already growing GM brinjal, getting higher yields and incomes, while using less pesticide.

In a rhetorical fanfare, Aiyar says:

“For the sake of consumers as well as farmers, let the GM revolution spread fast and wide.”

He then rounds on critics of GM by saying that well-funded NGOs like Greenpeace have enormous budgets and claim GM foods are unsafe. However, Aiyar says this is flatly disproved by the simple fact that in the US, which grows a wide variety of GM foods, over three trillion meals have been eaten without any adverse consequences. He claims activists seek to delay GM

crops by using the courts and rented mobs financed partly by dollar inflows. As a consequence, they have increased approval time in many western countries.

By referring to lobbyist Patrick Moore in his piece, Aiyer seems to think he can strengthen his argument. He notes Moore is seeking funding to prosecute Greenpeace and other NGOs for what he calls “crimes against humanity” for supposedly depriving farmers and hungry people of the benefits of GM crops.

Parroting pro-GMO neoliberal dogma

As someone associated with the Cato Institute, Aiyar certainly promotes the kind of politically-motivated, irrational, pro-neoliberal ideology that one might expect.

Perhaps he would like to answer this: with GDP growth slowing and automation replacing human labour, where are the jobs going to come from to cater for hundreds of millions of agriculture sector workers who he would like to see removed from the agriculture sector? Jobless ‘growth’ is a global phenomenon.

While underinvesting in and deliberately running down agriculture has become the norm and part of the neoliberal project in India, the corporate-industrial sector has failed to deliver in terms of boosting exports or creating jobs, despite the massive hand outs and tax exemptions given to it (see this and this). The number of jobs created in India between 2005 and 2010 was 2.7 million (the years of high GDP growth). According to International Business Times, 15 million enter the workforce every year (see here).

Although Aiyar attempts to depict his views as being in the interests of India, as previously outlined the type of sentiments he expresses part of the push towards privatised, commercialised, industrial agriculture at the behest of private capital and Western agribusiness interests channeled through the World Bank, WTO and the US-India Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture.

Part of this agenda is the promotion of GM. In its fully-referenced report of September 2014, Food & Water Watch rejects the type of implication Aiyar and others like him make: the pro-GMO lobby has science on its side and opponents indulge in pseudo-science. This issue has also been addressed previously and is shown to be baseless, ideological and politically motivated.

In India’s case, Aiyar implies that (better yielding) GM Mustard is required to cut down on edible oils imports. But consider that India was almost self-sufficient in edible oils by the mid-1990s. Its farmers met 97% of domestic need. However, its edible oil import bill has increased dramatically since then. By 2013, India was the world’s second biggest importer of edible oils.

Aiyar’s argument is little more than a smokescreen to divert attention from the deliberate running down of the indigenous edible oil sector, which stems from neoliberal trade policies driven by the vested interests of global agribusiness. Readers may consult this article that outlines the cynical nature of the argument being put forward: that the indigenous edible oil sector exhibits low productivity and GM mustard is required to increase productivity. It’s not low productivity but trade policies that are the real issue. GM is offered as a bogus solution.

Desperation time

That Aiyar would try to convince his readers of his case by referring to Chengal Reddy displays a certain desperation. Reddy is not a ‘farmers’ leader’. Reddy’s (lack of) credentials and background can be read about [here](#), where it states: “Pro-GM lobbyists describe Reddy as speaking “on behalf of small-holder farmers,” but he actually lobbies for Andhra Pradesh’s big commercial farmers. And although Reddy sometimes presents himself as ‘a farmer’, in interviews he has admitted to knowing little about farming having never farmed in his life.”

The fact he cites Reddy and not the [50 farmers’ unions](#) that oppose GM mustard speaks volumes. These unions issued a statement that pitched for the promotion of already available “feasible alternatives that are safe, affordable and farmer-controlled”:

“In the case of mustard, for instance, there are non-transgenic hybrids already available in the market, in addition to high-yielding mustard varieties. Further, new agro-ecological approaches like System of Mustard Intensification are out-yielding these unsafe solutions significantly, ensuring vastly-increased profitability for farmers, if yield is a concern.”

Let Aiyar scientifically back up his claim that three trillion meals containing GMOs have been consumed without adverse consequences. His assertion is pure rhetoric. Since GMOs entered the US ([fraudulently](#)), various illnesses [have spiked](#) and, as with the tobacco industry before GMOs, the pro-GMO lobby employs similar tactics by saying ‘prove it’ (GMOs are harmful) and attempts to roll out ‘studies’ like ‘[three trillion meals](#)’ to confuse the issue. Pinpointing the specific health impacts of a cocktail of [pesticides](#), [fungicides](#) and [GMOs](#) can be difficult, but there is growing evidence as to which causes what illnesses.

Moreover, the onus should have been on the GMO sector to prove safety prior to the mass release of GM (which it never has) and not on everyone else to play catch up to prove they are not safe. It is a very convenient tactic that the industry employs.

Aiyar seems a little late to the game by bringing up the ‘crimes against humanity’ cliché. He seems to think he can make a valid point by referring to Patrick Moore and his rhetoric (exposed [here](#)). The use of the ‘crimes against humanity’ slur has become tiresome and has been shown to be what it is: an industry-inspired attack that attempts to depict critics of GM as being beyond the boundaries of common decency. Readers can consult [this article](#) that exposes this kind of tactic for what it really is.

Whose influence should we really be focusing on?

It should come as no surprise that anyone associated with the Cato Institute would attack groups that challenge international capital and its neoliberal globalisation project. Indeed, in his piece, Aiyar implies opponents of GM are a bunch of Marxists (or former Marxists). Readers can see more about the institute [here](#), its right-wing ideology, impact on the former Bush administration, links with the Kochs and its privatisation/deregulation agenda.

It should also therefore come as no surprise that Aiyar has nothing to say in his piece about the influence of transnational biotech/agribusiness sector both globally and within India, while he chooses to focus exclusively on the ‘enormous influence’ of anti-GM groups who are supposedly blocking GM. The political clout and influence of critics of GM is dwarfed by that of the pro-GMO industry and associated international private capital in general, which is conspiring to

destroy indigenous agriculture the world over and impose green revolution technology and GMOs on nations and people: look no further than ‘corporate America’ and its infiltration of Africa, facilitated by Bill Gates.

In India, from research institutes, regulatory agencies and decision-making bodies riddled with conflicts of interests to strings-attached trade deals and nuclear agreements and pressure from the World Bank, it is not difficult to see just whose interests are being served.

Aiyar has nothing to say about the smearing and ruining of independent scientists whose credible research highlighted findings that questioned the safety of GM. And he has nothing to say about how the pro-GMO lobby employs unscientific polemics and targets the heart of science to ensure its will prevails, while there is silence about the conflicts of interests and industry links (also see this) of those who carry out these attacks.

So just who is engaging in ‘pseudo-science’ and just who is displaying bought-and-paid-for mob mentality?

The report Seedy Business shows how science is swayed, bought or biased by agribusiness in many ways, such as suppressing adverse findings, harming the careers of scientists who produce such findings, controlling the funding that shapes what research is conducted, the lack of independent US-based testing of health and environmental risks of GMOs and tainting scientific reviews of GMOs by conflicts of interest.

Is “unremitting fraud” and “regulatory delinquency” perfectly fine?

Aiyar is irked by hold ups in the sanctioning of the commercialisation of GMOs in India and elsewhere. He should consider that most consumers in the EU are against GMOs in their food – not because they have been brainwashed by Greenpeace but because they have genuine concerns – and Europe has largely kept out GM on the basis of a precautionary principle based on sound reasoning and science.

But perhaps in India’s case, the pro-GMO lobby in the media is willing to support unremitting fraud and regulatory delinquency.

The decision to sanction the commercialisation of GM mustard has been delayed due to accusations of “unremitting fraud” and “regulatory delinquency.” Further evidence has come to light about the underhand tactics that have been used to fudge and manipulate field trial data under a veil of secrecy.

Should we also ignore four high-level reports advising against the adoption of these crops in India (the ‘Jairam Ramesh Report’; the ‘Sopory Committee Report’; the ‘Parliamentary Standing Committee’ Report on GM crops; and the ‘Technical Expert Committee [TEC] Final Report’)?

The higher yields often attributed to the GM mustard under discussion are not due to GM but to the hybridisation of normal crop genes (ie conventional breeding) and rigged testing. And there lies the crux of the matter. Conventional breeding and traditional seeds and patterns of agriculture developed over centuries are better suited to adverse climatic conditions and Indian

soils than anything that GMOs can offer. So what is the point of GMOs: ‘helping the farmer’ or pure commercial gain for the corporations?

The ‘stunning success’ of Bt cotton

Aiyar claims Bt cotton in India has been a runaway success. However, despite neoliberal ‘free’ market ideologues saying that farmers have overwhelmingly chosen to adopt it, it has been highlighted time and again that GM cotton in India is nowhere near as successful as he claims it to be (for instance, see [this](#) and [this](#)) and that farmers do not necessarily actively choose GM (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

GM cotton in India has been a disaster for farmers in rain-fed areas according to the peer-reviewed paper referred to in [this piece](#), and there is [enough evidence](#) to show that the GM revolution Aiyar calls for may not lead to ‘rich harvests’ but often [human and ecological disaster](#) and the undermining of self-sufficiency and food sovereignty (see [this](#) and [this](#)).

Moreover, if Aiyar is concerned about drought, maybe he should [pay attention](#) to how planting Bt cotton ahead of traditional crops that are better suited to Indian soils has actually contributed to drought conditions.

And as for Bt brinjal in Bangladesh being a success (and GM in general reducing pesticide use – which is [not the case](#)), Aiyar again needs a reality check. [This article](#) addresses similar claims made by the BBC highlights the baseless nature of such statements.

Aiyar’s piece is [standard pro-GMO PR](#). Unfortunately, this type of article is becoming all too common (see [this](#) and [this](#)). Instead of informing the public, this form of ‘journalism’ is designed to misrepresent facts and misinform the public on behalf of powerful commercial interests.