

Genetically Modified (GM) Food and Crops. Behind the Mask of Pro-GMO Neoliberal Ideology

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Global Research, March 11, 2017

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

*Professor Shanthu Shantharam recently [wrote a response](#) to Viva Kermani's well thought out [article about](#) injecting some honesty into the debate about **genetically modified (GM) food and crops**. Both pieces appeared the Indian publication *Swarajya*.*

Shantharam's response [is typical](#) of what we have come to expect from him: a mixture of abuse, personal attacks and gross misrepresentation of both issues and facts.

He says of Kermani's piece:

The article seems to be borrowed from the manifesto of the global anti-GM propaganda machinery that has been in vogue for as long as the GM crops have been around.

It is highly convenient that he chooses to ignore the agritech cartel's substantial army of public relations agencies, politicians, scientists and media figures who engage in pseudo-science to promote GM, misrepresent scientific findings, carry out well-planned strategies to attack scientists whose findings are not to the liking of the industry and who produce smear-pieces on prominent figures (see '[Inside the Church of the Pro-GMO Activist](#)'). The industry has rolled-out what has become a very transparent playbook to depict those who express concern about GM as ideologues, ignorant and anti-science.

At the same time, it tries to portray critics as being authoritarian, elitist and undemocratic. This from an industry run by privileged multi-millionaire white men who belong to Fortune 500 companies. A taxpayer-subsidised industry driven by [self-interest, profit and personal gain](#). An industry that uses well-paid figures and career scientists (like Shantharam who makes a living outside of India in a prestigious US university) to do its bidding in the media. And an industry that hides its [corporate science](#) behind the guise of proprietary and intellectual knowledge, while setting out to undermine democratic processes.

Whether it is the [Science Media Centre](#) in the UK, [Jon Entine](#), [Kevin Folta](#), [Tony Trewavas](#), [Bruce Chassey](#) or any other number of individuals or institutions, the façade of independence [has been peeled away](#) and their links to the GMO agritech sector and/or fundamentalist right-wing neoliberal lobby groups exposed.

Shantharam claims that GMOs are safe as determined by all regulatory agencies in charge of assessing the safety of food. He says the safety of GMOs have also been vouched for by leading scientific organisations. The implication being that there is an overwhelming consensus on GM among respected scientific bodies.

A [September 2014 report](#) by Food & Water Watch goes to great lengths to show the backing that Shantharam claims exists only in his mind. He should read the report, which concludes there is no consensus on safety among institutions and independent scientists, nor within the scientific literature.

Moreover, Shantharam seems to assume supposedly independent, evidence-based, public watch dogs are actually doing their job to protect the public. He has nothing to say on how the agritech/agribusiness cartel has [written the rules](#) on intellectual property rights and trade rules, has been the [guiding hand](#) behind the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture in India and has co-opted, colluded with and infiltrated public bodies across the globe, from [the UK, India](#) and [the EU](#) to [the US](#) and [the WTO](#).

Like all good neoliberal/agritech business apologists, he talks much about democracy and choice while saying nothing about how agritech corporations have subverted both, including the [restriction of cotton seed options](#) in India and Monsanto's illegal entry into the Indian market.

The 'free' market and choice exist only in the warped delusions of neoliberal ideologues like Shantharam.

More specifically, in trying to promote the myth that GMOs are equivalent to conventional breeding, Shantharam says:

Kermani must realise that in the 10,000 year history of human effort to grow food, people have artificially modified all that was growing wildly to adapt them to their needs. Therefore, there is nothing natural about agriculture.

Again, this is another industry myth designed to be repeated at every available opportunity in the hope that if said often enough it will become accepted public 'knowledge'. There is enough [evidence](#) (see [this](#) as well) to show that GMOs are not substantially equivalent to conventionally bred crops or food derived from them. Substantial equivalence was an industry ploy designed to avoid proper testing and regulation of GM.

According to Shantharam, GM crops are specially tested in accordance with international food safety standards prescribed by the Codex Alimentarius commission where global scientific experts meet to develop global standards for food safety testing. This is simply not true.

[Steven Druker has demonstrated](#) that such claims are false:

It's evident that the system for regulating GE foods has been, and remains, markedly defective worldwide and that a large number of these products have entered the market absent the kind of safety testing that has been called for by the experts... .

Despite saying, "Scientific literature is awash with thousands of high-class, peer-reviewed literature that testifies to the fact that GM crops are substantially equivalent to their non-GM counterparts, and therefore, they do not present any new unique safety concerns," Shantharam cites no sources. Or perhaps he is relying on big list studies like [Nicolia](#), which

show nothing of the sort in terms of safety.

He also argues that GM crops are being cultivated in almost 30 countries for the past 20 years without a single proven instance of any harm to any human or animal being. Where is his evidence? Can he show the data from any studies to support this claim? It is nothing but PR. And bad PR at that. (see section three of [this report](#)).

Shantharam says:

Kermani must read the scientific opinions of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to ascertain the safety of all GM crops that it has reviewed, and also two gigantic reports of GM safety research funded by the EU for more than 25 years. It is the politics of GM crops in the EU that completely ignores its own funded research reports.

Of course, we cannot say for sure to which reports he refers to as, again, he cites no sources. Perhaps he means the discredited '[A decade of EU-funded GMO Research](#)' or maybe [GRACE](#), which is also seriously wanting.

He then says:

That the agricultural industry has saved more lives than all pharma industries put together can be asserted by a simple fact that the green revolution saved millions from starvation and death in the middle of the last century. GM crops are being cultivated in almost 30 countries for the past 20 years without a single proven instance of any harm to any human or animal being. How much more proof does one need of its safety?

Again, where is the data to support his claims? Perhaps he should read Raj Patel's [piece](#) before making baseless claims about the green revolution. And maybe he should work his way through Rosemary Mason's [fully-referenced work](#) to understand how agrochemicals are a major contributor to spiralling rates of illness and disease.

And when he is finished there, he might want to look at how the green revolution he cherishes so much and the [geo-politicised](#), globalised system of food production it is wedded to is leading to the worldwide [eradication of the small farm](#) (the [bedrock](#) of [complex cropping systems and sustainable, nutritional](#) food production), [bad food, poor health, rigged trade, environmental devastation, mono-cropping and diminished food and diet diversity](#), the [destruction of rural communities, ecocide, degraded soil, water scarcity and drought, destructive and inappropriate](#) models of development and farmers who live a [knife-edge existence](#) and for whom [debt](#) has become a fact of life.

Shantharam attacks Kermani for advocating organic farming, something he says has led and would lead again to food scarcity and starvation. Perhaps it is too much to expect Shantharam – who is after all only a microbiologist – to grasp [historical](#) and [more recent contexts](#) that have led to starvation, food deficit areas and food insecurity. He promotes the myth that a lack of food productivity led to famines or has led to present-day food insecurity. Maybe Shantharam should [read academics](#) who actually specialise in this area, which he does not.

While he might think a science PhD qualifies him to speak authoritatively on issues beyond

his limited realm of expertise, Shantharam is not an economist, political scientist, trade policy analyst or historian, nor does he possess expertise in any other number of disciplines that would help him to develop a deeper understanding of development issues, history, hunger, malnutrition, poverty and sustainable, productive farming. His only concern is to lobby relentlessly on behalf of his corporate masters for a bogus GM techno-fix.

We just have to look at the outcome of GM technology since GM crops were commercialised over 20 years ago. Has it reduced pesticides use? No. Has it increased yields? No. Have companies who control the technology and its associated proprietary inputs (e.g. Roundup/glyphosate) made a financial killing? Yes (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)).

Despite Shantharam's propaganda about the successes of Bt cotton in India, he might also want to look at how when his cherry-picked data and analysis of the story of GM cotton in India is put to one side, [Bt cotton has been a failure](#) and is a [major contributory factor](#) in farmer distress and suicide.

Monsanto has [sucked over \\$900 million from Indian farmers](#) for a failed technology and has done so [illegally](#). By way of contrast, Monsanto CEO Hugh Grant brought in \$13.4 million in 2014 alone, according to Bloomberg. Yet, Shantharam still tries to spin the message of GM cotton success while poor farmers in India are under pressure from seed company agents and a [pay a high financial and social cost](#).

While lobbying for GM he seeks to denigrate not only critics but [genuine solutions](#). And regardless of Shantharam implying that GM will not be the only route to feeding the world, the very logic of capitalism is to capture markets and destroy competition (by any [foul mean](#) possible) and to impose a certain model of agriculture on the world.

It is a capitalism and a system of agriculture propped up by the blood money of militarism ([Ukraine](#) and [Iraq](#)), 'structural adjustment' and strings-attached loans ([Africa](#)) or slanted trade deals ([India](#)), whereby transnational agribusiness drives a global agenda to suit its interests and eradicate impediments to profit. And it doesn't matter [how much devastation](#) ensues or how unsustainable their model is, 'crisis management' and 'innovation' fuel the [corporate-controlled treadmill](#) it seeks to impose.

Of course, [much of this is being aided](#) and forced through by directives from the likes of the World Bank with its 'grow' campaign or 'enabling the business of agriculture'.

As a microbiologist, Shantharam seems oblivious to the reality of how the world actually functions. In his desperation, he resorts to smears and personal insults. Those who express valid concerns about GM are not to be so easily dismissed as 'ignoramus', 'leftists' or 'anti-GM'. They are pro-democracy, pro-transparency and anti-corruption. People are demanding transparency, genuine independent testing and genuine independent evaluations of the health, social, economic and environmental impacts of GM. They also require fair and open debate.

Instead, what we get from Shantharam is industry-inspired dogma and spin underpinned by his usual pomposity that reaches its zenith by labelling anyone who questions his pseudo-facts, corporate science and PR clichés as "ignoramus."

When you are part of a problem and fuel and benefit from it, you will do your best to attack and denigrate anything or anyone that challenges your interests. It's the usual case of a pro-

GMO scientist-cum-lobbyist being blinded by technology and wedded to ideology.

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