

Genetically Modified Seeds in India: Faking it on the Astroturf

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According to a [recent report](#) in The Hindu Business Line, India's intelligence agencies are investigating the role of a global investment company and international seed companies in supporting farmers organisation Shetkari Sanghatana (SS) in the distribution of illegally procured genetically modified (GM) herbicide tolerant (HT) cotton seeds. The planting of such seeds is an offence under the Environment Protection Act and Seeds Act.

In May 2019, SS broke the law and freely distributed these seeds. In early January 2020, it broke the law again by distributing second generation seeds. According to the report, a senior intelligence official had told *Business Line* that a global investment company, with investments in seeds and agrochemicals companies, has chosen to support the farmers' organisation.

Business Line reports that the investment company is allegedly putting pressure on the Modi government to ensure that the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee fast tracks the clearance of HT seeds, so the seeds could be legally harvested and sold in the country.

In India, five high-level reports have advised against the adoption of GM crops. Appointed by the Supreme Court, the 'Technical Expert Committee (TEC) Final Report' (2013) was scathing about the prevailing regulatory system and highlighted its inadequacies and serious inherent conflicts of interest. The TEC recommended a 10-year moratorium on the commercial release of all GM crops.

The reason why Bt cotton – to date, India's only officially approved GM crop – made it into farmers' fields in the first place was due to 'approval by contamination'. Bt cotton was discovered in 2001 growing on thousands of hectares in Gujarat. In March 2002, it was approved for commercial cultivation.

The pro-GMO lobby has again resorted to such tactics. The 2010 moratorium on Bt brinjal was implemented because science won out against a regulatory process that lacked competency, possessed endemic conflicts of interest and demonstrated a lack of expertise in GM risk assessment protocols, including food safety assessment and the assessment of environmental impacts.

As we have seen with the relentless push to get GM mustard commercialised, the problems persist. Now, to justify breaking the law, we are seeing unscientific claims and well-worn industry-inspired soundbites about GM crops: political posturing unsupported by evidence to try to sway the policy agenda in favour of GM.

Drawing on previous peer-reviewed evidence, a [2018 paper](#) in the journal *Current Science* by renowned scientists PC Kesavan and MS Swaminathan concluded that Bt crops and HT

crops are unsustainable and globally have not decreased the need for toxic chemical pesticides, the reason for these GM crops in the first place.

We need to look at GM objectively because [plenty of evidence](#) indicates it poses risks or is not beneficial and that non-GM alternatives are a better option. Moreover, many things that scientists are trying to achieve with GM have already been [surpassed by means of conventional breeding](#).

Those behind the distribution and planting of illegal seeds talk about helping the farmer. But the real agenda is to open-up India to GM and get farmers hooked on a corporate money-spinning GM seed-chemical treadmill.

The watchdog GMWatch recently produced an article about how hired public relations agencies and key individuals with firm links to the biotechnology sector are attempting to deceive the public and policy makers. The article's author, Jonathan Matthews, notes that in June 2019 the pro-GMO campaigner [Mark Lynas](#) began [talking up](#) what he [claimed](#) was to be "the world's first pro-GMO protest".

The term 'astroturfing' is the process by which orchestrated marketing and public relations campaigns are presented as emanating from grassroots participants or ordinary members of the public rather than from powerful corporate interests. Lynas, a well-known industry lobbyist, said the 'protest' would involve Indian farmers planting banned GM seeds in what he [called](#) "Gandhi-style civil disobedience". This attention-grabbing campaign was being led by SS, which Lynas [described](#) as "very grass roots".

According to Matthews, SS is not a mass movement of grassroots farmers but an allegedly [well-funded](#) fringe group created by the late [Sharad Joshi](#), a right-wing economist and [member](#) of the Advisory Board of the Monsanto-backed [World Agricultural Forum](#), an organisation whose founder and first chairman was for many years Monsanto's director of public policy.

Joshi was also Chairman of Shivar Agroproducts Ltd, says Matthews, but he is best remembered for his ultra-libertarian ideology, his links to certain farmers [groups](#) and the political party (Swatantra Bharat Paksh) that he founded - all vehicles for promoting his free market fundamentalism.

Matthews says:

"Lynas was not the first to present Shetkari Sanghatana as representing ordinary Indian farmers. A full two decades earlier, the European biotech industry and their PR firm Burson-Marsteller brought some of Shetkari Sanghatana's leading lights to Europe to try and counter the view that Indian farmers opposed GMO crops. To that end, they were toured around five different countries by the industry's lobby group, EuropaBio, which in a [press release](#) presented this free market fringe group, which is largely [confined to the state of Maharashtra](#), as 'the mainstream farmers' movement in India'."

Matthews adds that the US is the biotech industry's chief propaganda hub for promoting wide-ranging fakery to the world. Referring to the illegal planting of HT cotton seeds and SS, he says:

“Among the notable cheerleaders promoting the protesters’ cause were the Gates-backed GMO propaganda outfit [The Alliance for Science](#), which pays [Mark Lynas](#) to lobby for GMOs; [CS Prakash](#) of [AgBioWorld](#), who has long served as a conduit for [Monsanto disinformation](#); [Bayer-consultant](#) and [Monsanto collaborator](#) Kevin Folta, who made a [podcast](#) on the protests with [CS Prakash](#)...”

Matthews piece, '[Fake Farmer Willi part of an international fake parade](#)', provides details of the various characters and strategies involved in faking it for the biotech industry, not just in India but across the world.

As a market for GM proprietary seeds, chemical inputs and agricultural technology and machinery, India is vast. The potential market for herbicide growth alone for instance is huge: sales could now have reached USD 800 million with scope for even greater expansion, especially with the illegal push to get HT seeds planted.

With GM crops largely shut out of Europe and many countries reluctant to embrace the technology, Western agro-biotech conglomerates are desperate to seek out and expand into untapped (foreign) markets to maintain profitability. India presents potential rich pickings. And this is the bottom line: GM is not about 'helping farmers' or 'feeding the masses' (myths that have been deconstructed time and again). It is about hard-nose interests endeavouring to displace existing systems of production and capturing and exploiting markets by any means possible - not least fakery and deception.

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