

Greenpeace, Dissent and Freedom of Expression in India

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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Before being voted out of office last year, India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance administration sanctioned open-field trials of GM food crops in India and [Monsanto's share prices rocketed](#). This decision prompted Rajesh Krishnan of the Coalition for a GM Free India to state that the government was against the interest of citizens, farmers and the welfare of the nation. He went on to state that the government had decided to work hand in glove with the multinational GM seed industry that stood to gain immensely from the open field trails. Since then, the Modi-led administration has continued the policy to drive GMOs into India.

[Writing in The Hindu](#) last year, Aruna Rodrigues noted that the Technical Expert Committee (TEC) Final Report (FR) is the fourth official report exposing the lack of integrity, independence and scientific expertise in assessing GMO risk (see [here](#)). The four reports are: The 'Jairam Ramesh Report' of February 2010, imposing an indefinite moratorium on Bt Brinjal, overturning the apex Regulator's approval to commercialise it; the Sopory Committee Report (August 2012); the Parliamentary Standing Committee (PSC) Report on GM crops (August 2012) and the TEC Final Report (June-July 2013).

The TEC recommended an indefinite moratorium on the field trials of GM crops until the government devised a proper regulatory and safety mechanism. No such mechanism exists, but open field trials are being given the go ahead, regardless of a history of blatant violations of biosafety norms, hasty approvals, a lack of monitoring abilities, general apathy towards the hazards of contamination and a lack of institutional oversight mechanisms (see [this](#)).

Despite this, the BJP-ruled Maharashtra government recently granted 'no-objection certificates' for GM open-field trials of rice, chickpeas maize, brinjal and cotton. Some regard this as a game changer in the push to get GM crops into India. (Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Andhra Pradesh have given NOCs for field trials of some biotech crops, while states like Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have banned such research activities.)

Aruna Rodrigues argues there is increasing evidence that: GMOs pose health and environment risks; GM yields are significantly lower than yields from non-GM crops; and pesticide use, instead of coming down, has gone up exponentially. Rodrigues moreover argued that in India, notwithstanding the hype of the industry, the regulators and the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), Bt cotton yield is leveling off to levels barely higher than they were before the introduction of Bt.

In her piece in The Hindu, she stated:

"The IAASTD was the work of over 400 scientists and took four years to

complete. It was twice peer reviewed. The report states we must look to small-holder, traditional farming (not GMOs) to deliver food security in third world countries through agri-ecological systems which are sustainable. Governments must invest in these systems. This is the clear evidence.”

The MoA strongly opposed the TEC Committee’s report. This, according to Rodrigues, was to be expected given the conflict of interests:

“The Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) promotes public-private-partnerships with the biotechnology industry. It does this with the active backing of the Ministry of Science and Technology. The MoA has handed Monsanto and the industry access to our agri-research public institutions placing them in a position to seriously influence agri-policy in India. You cannot have a conflict of interest larger or more alarming than this one. Today, Monsanto decides which Bt cotton hybrids are planted and where. Monsanto owns over 90 per cent of planted cotton seed, all of it Bt cotton.”

All the other staggering scams that have rocked the nation have the possibility of recovery and reversal, but, as Rodrigues argues, the GM scam will be of a scale hitherto unknown:

“We have had the National Academies of Science give a clean chit of biosafety to GM crops – doing that by using paragraphs lifted wholesale from the industry’s own literature! Likewise, ministers who know nothing about the risks of GMOs have similarly sung the virtues of Bt Brinjal and its safety to an erstwhile Minister of Health. They have used, literally, “cut & paste” evidence from the biotech lobby’s “puff” material. Are these officials then, “un-caged corporate parrots?”

[Arun Shrivastava notes](#) that as early as 2003, when the first ever Bt cotton crop was harvested in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, Gene Campaign evaluated the performance of Bt Cotton. These studies proved that GE seeds don’t increase yield. He goes on to note that the impleadment to ban GMOs was backed by 6.5 million farmers through their respective associations. It was admitted by the Supreme Court in April 2007 and contains a long list of hard scientific evidence.

Shrivastava states that the Standing Committee on Agriculture in Parliament [unanimously and unequivocally concluded that GE seeds and foods are dangerous](#) to human, animal and environmental health and directed the Government of Manmohan Singh to ban GMOs. The 400-page report was submitted to Parliament in October 2012.

Officials in India are working closely with global biotech companies to force GMOs into fields and onto the public, despite evidence pertaining to the deleterious impacts of GMOs on various levels (for example, see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)). These companies are in fact playing a key role in determining the overall development agenda for India (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)).

Despite the evidence pertaining to the risks and efficacy of GMOs, organisations and activists opposing such crops are being singled out for putting a break on development and growth and for being in the pocket of foreign interests.

An Intelligence Bureau (IB) report, ‘Impact of NGOs on Development’, was leaked in June of last year and had a special section on GMOs. It was clearly supportive of the introduction of

GM crops into India. The IB said foreign NGOs and their Indian arms were serving as tools to advance Western foreign policy interests in various areas, of which GMOs comprise one aspect.

Aruna Rodrigues, Vandana Shiva and Kavitha Kuruganti, who were all mentioned in the report, in [their joint statement](#) noted the report's hypocrisy by saying that the IB was conspiring with global corporate interests to haemorrhage India's agricultural economy. The report even quoted Dr Ronald Herring of Cornell University, who is a known promoter of genetically-modified organisms and Monsanto's monopoly.

Speaking to The Statesman newspaper in India, [Aruna Rodrigues said](#):

"Here is a real foreign hand that informs the IB report. Cornell University, where Dr Herring works, was one of the main forces, along with USAID and Monsanto, behind the making of Bt brinjal in India."

The joint statement of all three activists went asserted that:

"... the biggest foreign hand by 'STEALTH' and official 'COVER-UP' will be in GMOs/GM crops if introduced into Indian agriculture. All that stands between a corporate takeover of our seeds and agriculture is the committed and exemplary work by the not-for-profit sector... In conspiring with deeply conflicted institutions of regulation, governance and agriculture... to introduce GM crops into India, the IB will in fact aid the hand-over of the ownership of our seeds and foods to multi-national corporations. This will represent the largest take-over of any nation's agriculture and future development by foreign-hands... (and)... will plunge India into the biggest breach of internal security; of a biosecurity threat and food security crisis from which we will never recover.... GM crops have already demonstrated no yield gain, no ability to engineer for traits of drought, saline resistance etc and have some serious bio-safety issues which no regulator wishes to examine."

The statement said that India's Bt cotton is an outstanding example of the above scenario:

"This 'VALUE CAPTURE' for Monsanto which was contrived and approved by our own government mortgaging the public interest has ensured that in a short 10 years, 95% of cotton seeds in the form of Bt cotton are owned by Monsanto... It is Monsanto now that decides where cotton should be planted and when by our farmers... The Royalties accruing to Monsanto that have been expatriated are approximately Rs 4800 Crores in 12 years, (excluding other profit mark-ups)... The IB is thus conspiring with global corporate interests to hemorrhage India's agricultural economy... We call for an investigation on the foreign influence in writing the GMO section in the IB report."

The statement concluded:

"If India's intelligence agencies become instruments of global corporations working against the public interest and national interest of India, our national security is under threat. This IB report is deeply anti-national and subversive of constitutional rights of citizens in our country. It does India no credit."

Apart from attacking those campaigning against GMOs, the report accused Greenpeace and other groups of receiving foreign funds to damage economic progress by campaigning against power projects and mining.

The IB is India's domestic spy service and garners intelligence from within India and also executes counter-intelligence and counter-terrorism tasks. Its report attempted to portray certain NGOs like Greenpeace and critics of GMOs as working against the 'national interest' and being in the pay of foreigners.

Discrediting certain sections of civil society as being 'unpatriotic', by working to undermine some bogus notion of the 'national interest', always sits well with ruling elites that are all too ready to play the nationalist card to garner support. Yet, in this case the report itself sides with powerful foreign corporations and, as far as GMOs are concerned, their agenda to secure control over Indian agriculture.

Those who are exercising their legal right to challenge and protest corporate-driven policies that are all too often based on staggering levels of [corruption and rampant cronyism](#) – and are non-transparent and secretive – are being discredited and smeared. However, this should come as no surprise. Various nation states such as the US and UK have used their intelligence agencies to monitor, subvert and undermine grass-root activists and civil organizations that have (by acting legitimately and within the law) attempted to hold power to account (see [this](#) and [this](#)). Governments the world over have a tendency to dislike genuine democracy and transparency.

Greenpeace India's actions were singled out for particular criticism in the IB report. It [responded by saying](#):

“We believe that this report is designed to muzzle and silence civil society who raise their voices against injustices to people and the environment by asking uncomfortable questions about the current model of growth.”

Since the report, Greenpeace India has experienced a good deal of pressure. After the report described Greenpeace's activities as “a threat to national economic security,” the government has gone on to restrict the organisation's international funding. On 9 April 2015, the Ministry of Home Affairs ordered Greenpeace India's bank accounts to be frozen and its ability to receive funding from abroad to be suspended. [According to Amnesty International India](#), this violates constitutional rights to freedom of expression and association.

The Ministry of Home Affairs said the acceptance of foreign funds by Greenpeace India had “prejudicially affected” public interest and the economic interest of the country.

Ananth Guruswamy, Executive Director at Amnesty International India:

“It is clear that Greenpeace is being targeted because its strong views and campaigns question the government's development policies. The extreme measures taken by the government to disable an organisation for promoting the voices of some of the country's most powerless people will damage and shame India. Intolerance to dissent will only weaken our society.”

Claims that Greenpeace India is acting against public interest have been dismissed by the judiciary twice. In January, the Delhi High Court directed the government to release frozen funds, observing:

“Non-Governmental Organizations often take positions, which are contrary to the policies formulated by the Government of the day. That by itself...cannot be used to portray petitioner’s action as being detrimental to national interest.”

On 11 January 2015, the government prevented a Greenpeace campaigner from travelling to the UK to speak about human rights abuses related to a coal mine in Mahan, Madhya Pradesh. In March, the Delhi High court ruled that the travel restrictions violated fundamental rights, and observed that “contrarian views held by a section of people...cannot be used to describe such section or class of people as anti-national.” The court also noted there was nothing to suggest that Greenpeace India’s activities “have the potentiality of degrading the economic interest of the country.”

Ananth Guruswamy:

“The Ministry of Environment and Forests has agreed that the Mahan coal block is located in a protected forest, where no mining should take place. Instead of dubbing Greenpeace anti-national, the government should focus on the vital issues that it raises. Amnesty International India is particularly concerned about the rights of Adivasis affected by state policies, and urges the government to strengthen protections for these communities.”

Attempts to dampen dissent in India are nothing new. [State repression and physical violence](#), as well as the [structural violence](#) resulting from particular economic policies, affect many regions and impact tens of millions of the country’s poorest and most powerless citizens.

As the current administration seeks to speed up the opening of India’s economy to private interests and to more [fully embrace the tenets of neo-liberal economic doctrine](#), more difficult times may lie ahead for dissenting voices.

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Articles by: [Colin Todhunter](#)

About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy

researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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