

Countering Hypocrisy: GMO Agribusiness and Nuclear Energy in India

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Scientists and groups that express serious concerns about GM and nuclear energy technologies are frequently accused of possessing a culturally backward mindset and waging a reactionary war against science and progress. GM-industry man Shanthu Shatharam, writing in India's Deccan Herald newspaper this week (1), forwarded such a notion and described opponents of nuclear power and GMOs as often possessing vague ideas about the safety and utility of modern technologies based on cuddly feelings for all things natural.

Admiral L Ramdas, former Chief of Naval Staff of the Indian navy, could not easily be described as someone possessing vague ideas or cuddly notions of 'all things natural'. In his recent letter to PM Mohanman Singh, the retired admiral, a long standing opponent of nuclear energy in India, expressed deep concerns about the Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu and spoke of the mounting evidence about safety and allegations of corruption.

He went on to say that nuclear power plants must have (currently lacking) multiple safeguards before commissioning. An accident at Koodankulam or any other nuclear plant site could be catastrophic. The growing allegations of graft and widespread involvement in the supply of sub standard materials by the Russian equipment suppliers does not augur well for building public confidence among the people who are likely to suffer most. The Peoples Movement against Nuclear Energy has consistently stressed this in countless submissions, documents and depositions.

Dr EAS Sarma, former Union Power Secretary for the Government of India, has written to the PM expressing similar concerns. He states that if there is an iota of doubt about the safety, a prudent option would be to close down the project, as the lives of the people are more valuable than the cost of closure. Dr A Gopalakrishnan, former Chairman of India's Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, has also raised some urgent issues.

Prominent physicist Dr Helen Caldicott has over the years set out at length her well-reasoned opposition to nuclear power (2). Far from her demonstrating a 'backward mindset' or engaging in a 'reactionary war' against progress, she describes the US Nuclear Energy Institute as constituting the propaganda wing for a damaging, profit-driven, taxpayer-subsidised nuclear industry and as having spent millions of dollars annually to engineer public opinion. Whether it is Professor Seralini in France who has raised serious misgivings about the health impacts of GMOs, or whether it is people who are highly qualified to speak on nuclear energy matters, their views and the concerns of millions around the world are unworthy of cheap insults or smears.

As far as the biotech sector is concerned, it is already clear that agribusiness cannot provide

real solutions to the agrarian problems it has created. According to writer Gautam Dheer (3), agriculture in Punjab (the 'Green Revolution's' original poster boy) is facing an inevitable crisis, in terms of pesticide use causing cancer, falling crop yields and groundwater depletion. And now evidence is mounting that the Green Revolution's second coming can't provide genuine solutions to the problems it has created through its GMOs either.

A recent report in Business Standard (4) stated that Bt cotton yields have dropped to a five-year low. India approved Bt cotton in 2002 and within a few years yields increased dramatically. However, Glenn Davis Stone, Professor of Anthropology and Environmental Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, has noted (5) that most of the rise in productivity had nothing at all to do with Bt cotton. It was down to other factors.

What's more, since Bt has taken over, yields have been steadily worsening. According to the article, bollworms are developing resistance. Stone says when Bt cotton arrived in India, farmers were told all they had to do was plant the seeds and water them regularly. They were told that, as the genetically modified seeds are insect resistant, there was no need to use huge amounts of pesticides. The opposite is true.

Stone says that yields started dropping after 2007/8. After 2006/7, the number of Bt hybrid seeds being offered to farmers jumped from 62 to 131 to 274; by 2009/10 there were 522. Despite this, farmers' yields are steadily dropping. And the way forward - more of the same. The failing technology can always be replaced with more technology that tries to offer a short-term fix. It's all good for profits though. And this against a backdrop of reports of widespread collapsed Bt-cotton yields in Maharashtra at the end of last year (6).

Given the bogus claims about GMOs, the health concerns concerning GM foods and that 8,456 legitimate protestors (by late January) have been charged with sedition in Koodankulam, it begs the question just who is really benefiting from these two so-called 'frontier' technologies? With the US having sanctioned the opening up of India's nuclear energy sector and, in return, its agribusiness and retail giants having actively shaped the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, India is proving to be a financially lucrative proposition for international retail, agribusiness and nuclear technology companies.

Everybody is entitled their opinions, but not to their own facts. Scientific evidence must prevail. That much is true. Such a pity then that democratic debate is sidelined for brute force in Koodankulam; such a pity too that certain major biotech companies have a track record of releasing fake 'scientific' data, bribery, environmental pollution, devising retaliatory lists, smear campaigns and misinformation.

Those who claim to be 'scientific' and democratic in their approach but who then go on to smear their opponents as being backward, unscientific or as waging a war on science may wish to put their own houses in order first.

Public trust in private corporations, science and policy makers has to be earned. The hijacking of governmental bodies for commercial gain alongside mendacity should have no place in policy making or in attempting to shape scientific discourse. Neither should they have any place in pushing some profit-driven notion of 'progress' onto the public.

Notes:

1) <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/329096/whipping-up-hysteria-over-scientific.html>

- 2) <http://www.helencaldicott.com/articles/>
- 3) <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/309654/punjab-transformation-food-bowl-cancer.html>
- 4) http://www.business-standard.com/article/markets/bt-cotton-losing-steam-productivity-at-5-yr-low-113020601016_1.html
- 5) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/harvest-of-hypocrisy-farmers-being-blamed-for-gmo-crop-failures/5322807>
- 6) <http://gmwatch.org/latest-listing/51-2012/14479%E2%80%93maharashtra-reports-massive-bt-cotton-failure>



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