

Media Attacks Directed against the Critics of Biotechnology and Genetically Modified Agriculture

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Region: [Asia](#), [Europe](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#), [USA](#)

Hot on the heels of a much publicised article in the New Yorker that set out to attack Vandana Shiva comes another on the Scroll.in website (on September 3). Girish Shahane mounts an attack on Shiva and what he believes to be her false and misleading statements about farmer suicides in India (access the article [here](#)). Shahane deems it necessary to question Shiva's qualification as a scientist, claiming she has never been one. He says this could be overlooked if she was scientific in her approach to farmer suicides, but he claims that her approach is anything but scientific.

According to Shahane, Shiva adopts a non-scientific, ideologically-driven, anti-GMO stance, which is symptomatic of the environmentalist movement. Apparently, this approach rests on a conspiracy theory in which “the bad capitalist corporation dominates everything, corrupts everything.”

When it comes to the safety of GMOs, he argues that ‘greens’ reject the scientific consensus out of hand (a non-existent consensus, he might like to make note of, alongside his many other misleading claims). Shahane then proceeds to tarnish ‘the left’ as “irrational” and provides an example of the “irrationalist left” and the folly of its ideology by talking about “one tragic instance of the lunatics taking over the asylum in a large country.”

In what appears to be an attempt to draw a comparison with anti-GMO campaigners’ resistance to science and progress, the instance he refers to is what happened in South Africa under Thabo Mbeki. According to Shahane, 330,000 South Africans perished as a direct result of Mbeki’s crackpot leftist ideas that rejected the established scientific consensus about the cause of AIDS, insisting it was dictated by white corporations bent on exploiting blacks just as colonialists had done.

Shahane argues Mbeki’s misplaced ideological view on AIDS typifies the “irrationalist left.” Apparently, the “irrationalist left” regards science as racist, patriarchal, imperialist, capitalist and anti-nature.

The message from Shahane is that anti-GMO campaigners are irrational, are ignoring scientific consensus on GMOs and are letting their conspiracy theories and ideology stand in the way of progress; if the likes of Shiva and others of her ilk do not ditch their irrational fears and Mbeki-type anti-capitalist lunacy, we are in danger of turning our backs on the potential wonders of GMOs given to us by Monsanto.

The pro-GMO lobby likes to portray environmentalists and anti-GMO campaigners as Luddites, anti-science and as enemies of the poor, while the likes of Monsanto are depicted as working in the ‘public interest’ to bring a frontier technology to the masses.

(At this point, it must be stated that commercial companies exist [are legally obliged] to maximise profit for shareholders. Yes profit not altruism or the public interest is the bottom line. Millions of dollars have been taken out of Indian agriculture and found their way to Monsanto's HQ in St. Louis thanks to the royalties paid by poor Indian farmers on GM patented seeds.)

Shahane also lays into irrational Europeans who supposedly latch onto Shiva's shock-effect statements about GMOs, mass farmer suicides and Monsanto to justify their own phobia about GM food.

I am European. I question the efficacy and health and environmental impacts of genetically modified food. Therefore, according to Shahane, I am exhibiting a phobia. By the way, a phobia is "an extreme or irrational fear of or aversion to something" (oxforddictionaries.com).

And how does Shahane reach this conclusion?

By talking to two of his European 'companions', who appear to be a little confused, according to him, about the nature of farmer suicides in India, which they apparently put down to distress resulting from the introduction of Monsanto's GM crops (cotton). Too much listening to the crackpot ideas of Vandana Shiva seems to be the implication.

Shahane says that Europeans distrust GMOs and that the European fear of "Frankenstein food" is perfectly understandable in terms of the phobia phenomenon. Apparently, 'our' (Europeans that is) attitude to GM food is irrational and our national policies are based on vague fears rather than sound science.

Europeans seek GMO-related horror stories to justify our beliefs or "phobias," according to Shahane. He argues that no other story does the job as well as the tale of poor Indians driven to suicide by the "evil Monsanto corporation." Our irrational fear of GMOs is given added impetus by the scaremongering, anti-capitalist, anti-science stance of Vandana Shiva.

What Girish Shahane should know but appears not to

Europeans do not need to listen to Vandana Shiva to be aware that GMOs constitute a systemic health risk to entire populations. We do not need shock-horror tales of mass suicide to fuel genuine concerns.

Shahane's article lacks credibility on many levels, one of which is foolishly resorting to the claim that Europeans exhibit a phobia over GMOs. He might like to acquaint himself with what Europe's approach to GMOs is based on: the precautionary principle. This implies there is a good chance that GMOs may pose widespread harm to the entire population if released for public consumption [1]. There is enough evidence to suggest that this could be the case [2,3,4]. As the risk is systemic, adequate testing should thus be carried out before GMOs are sanctioned.

Europeans and their governments have genuine concerns based on science, not phobias about GMOs fuelled by Vandana Shiva. It is not science per se that anti-GMO campaigners reject, as Shahane would like us all to believe, but the use and distortion of science for commercial gain. If anything, it is the pro-GMO lobby that appears to have scant regard for science.

Shahane seems to be big on 'sound' science, implying that the GMO biotech sector's approach to GM food is based on it, whereas anti-GMO campaigners pick and choose their science to match their ideology. According to the sociologist Robert Merton, science involves research that is not distorted by vested interests, its discoveries should become the common property of all and its findings should be open to rigorous scrutiny (organised scepticism). GMO sector science is seriously wanting in all of these areas.

Shahane should consider that the GMO biotech sector rakes in millions from its GM patented seeds and attempts to control the 'science' around its products by carrying out inadequate, secretive studies of its own, placing restrictions on any independent research into its products and censoring findings that indicate the deleterious impacts of its products [4]. It has also faked data [5], engages in unjustified often personal attacks on scientists who reach conclusions not to its liking [6,7] and carries out (unapproved / illegal) open-field testing, resulting in the contamination of non-GMO crops [8]. Regulatory bodies accept at face value claims from the biotech sector about its products [9] and co-opted politicians or officials spout misleading claims and falsehoods about GM food in order to further the sector's objectives [10,11].

The sector cannot demonstrate that yields are better, nutritional values are improved, health is not damaged or that harm to the environment does not occur with the adoption of GMOs. Given the systemic risk of GMOs, the onus of proof should be on the sector prior to releasing GMOs onto the commercial market.

Independent studies and evidence, not inadequate industry funded or back ones, have indicated yields are often worse and herbicide use has increased [12,13,14], health is negatively impacted [15,16], soil is damaged [17] and biodiversity is undermined [18], among other things.

Shahane thinks people with concerns about GMOs choose only certain studies to suit their stance (as opposed to the GMO sector funding studies to suit its commercial interests?). If the studies I reference (in this and dozens of my other articles on GMOs) show one thing, it is that there is clearly NO scientific consensus on GMOs, despite what he likes to suggest.

He might also like to take note of how the GMO biotech sector has infiltrated regulatory bodies [19,20] is attempting to use the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership to get its unwanted products into Europe via the 'back door' [21] and also weaken current robust regulatory measures [22]. He might also like to know how the notion of 'sound' science is being corrupted and used by the US to stifle debate [23].

Shahane's attack on Shiva, environmentalists and the 'irrational left' is based on the notion that rational debate and science should be paramount. Given the actions of the sector as outlined above, there seems little scope for open debate and scientific discourse. There is no room for Merton's lofty scientific ideals in the world of the pro-GMO lobby. Secrecy, intimidation, the co-optation of officials and the hijack of regulatory bodies take precedence.

Shahane points out the GM food crops are dominant in US agriculture. He seems to mention that in order to force home the point of Europeans having baseless fears about GMOs. In the US, GM food was released onto the commercial market without proper long-term tests. In effect, there is a 'let's hope for the best' approach in terms of the population's health. The argument used to justify this is GM food is 'substantially equivalent' to ordinary food. Again, there is no room for science here: substantial equivalence is not based on scientific reason,

which Shahane seemingly places great store by; it is a trade strategy on behalf of the GM sector that served to remove its GMOs from the type of scrutiny usually applied to potentially toxic or harmful substances [24]).

Actual science shows that GM food is not 'substantially equivalent'; recent studies highlight this in terms of their harmful content [24]. Genetically engineered food is produced by white-coated scientists in a laboratory, and the GMO biotech sector wants a mass release of GM food onto the market more or less at once. It is not gradual but dramatic.

Shahane should know that the reason why the precautionary principle does not apply in the US is not down to 'sound' science but due to the power and political influence of the GMO biotech sector. Now that sector is attempting to force its GM food into Europe and undermine the precautionary principle.

Moreover, people's attitudes towards the GMO sector's most powerful corporation are not based on ideology but on hard evidence. There are extremely good reasons as to why millions of people do not trust Monsanto. It has a history of criminality, health-damaging cover ups and environmental contaminations that would lead most informed people to regard Monsanto as having less than altruistic motives and even complete contempt for ordinary people [25]. Again, it is not knee-jerk ideology that drives negative depictions of Monsanto: that company's record speaks for itself.

This is not the place to defend Vandana Shiva. She is capable of defending herself. But when Shahane talks of people with genuine concerns about GMOs basing their arguments on irrationality, phobias, ideology, etc, and ridiculously uses MBeki to scaremonger about the 'irrational left' and mass deaths and then somehow draw a link between that and the actions of anti-GMO activists and their hand in a potential genocide by denying farmers an income and hungry consumers food, his reasoning must be held to account.

Shahane's view constitutes a simplistic and misleading representation of those who are concerned about GMOs. He constructs his own straw man position of what he perceives anti-GMO campaigners to be so he can then proceed to knock it down. In doing so he displays his own irrationalism, ideology and lack of informed insight into the issues. He would do well to encourage the GMO biotech sector to engage in open and non-coercive debate and inject some rationalism into his own position. He would also do well to contemplate what the underlying motives of the GMO sector really are when much evidence suggests we do not even need GM food in the first place [26-31].

Notes

1] <http://www.countercurrents.org/todhunter080914.htm>

2] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/potential-health-hazards-of-genetically-engineered-foods/8148>

3] <http://www.gmoseralini.org/republication-seralini-study-science-speaks/>

4] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/gmo-scandal-the-long-term-effects-of-genetically--modified-food-on-humans/14570>

5] <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/Monsanto+%27faked%27+data+for+approvals+claims+its+-ex-chief/1/83093.html>

6] <http://www.gmwatch.org/latest-listing/1-news-items/12715-seralini-vs-fellous-a--gmo-libel-case-over-independent-expertise-and-science>

[7] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/gmo-researchers-attacked-evidence-denied-and-a--population-at-risk/5305324>

8] http://www.naturalnews.com/028585_GMOs_Bayer.html

- 9] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/monsantos-roundup-herbicide-and-regulators-with-something-to-hide/5389977>
- 10] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9733589/Food-minister-Owen-Paterson-backs-GM-crops.html>
- 11] <http://www.gmwatch.org/index.php/news/archive/2014/15308-eu-chief-science-adviser-s-gmo-safety-claims-are-a-lie>
- [12] <http://naturalsociety.com/breaking-new-usda-report-proves-environmental-impact-gmo-questionable/>
- [13] <http://www.alternet.org/food/why-monsanto-wrong-about-gm-crop-promises>
- [14] <http://fieldquestions.com/2013/02/09/bt-cotton-is-failing-blame-the-farmers/>
- [15] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/potential-health-hazards-of-genetically-engineered-foods/8148>
- [16] <http://www.gmoseralini.org/republication-seralini-study-science-speaks/>
- [17] <http://www.psrast.org/soilecolart.htm>
- [18] <http://gmo-journal.com/2011/06/17/loss-of-biodiversity-and-genetically-modified-crops/>
- 19] <http://renew.com/general33/fd.htm>
- 20] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/stench-of-eu-corruption-in-monsanto-gmo-whitewash/5316294>
- 21] <http://corporateeurope.org/trade/2013/05/open-door-gmos-take-action-eu-us-free-trade-agreement>
- 22] <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/news/new-gmo-legislation-would-put-power-hands-biotech-companies>
- 23] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/17/uk-eu-usa-trade-idUSKBN0ES1G920140617>
- 24] http://www.i-sis.org.uk/Substantial_Non-Equivalence.php
- 25] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-complete-history-of-monsanto-the-worlds-most-evil-corporation/5387964>
- 26] <http://tv.greenmedinfo.com/seeds-are-the-original-renewable-resource-until-gmo-corps-gain-seed-patents/>
- 27] <http://earthopensource.org/index.php/reports/gmo-myths-and-truths>
- 28] <http://vivakermani.blogspot.in/2014/07/gm-food-crops-why-india-must-say-no.html>
- 29] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/india-genetically-modified-seeds-agricultural-productivity-and-political-fraud/5328227>
- 30] <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4929-hungry-for-land-small-farmers-feed-the-world-with-less-than-a-quarter-of-all-farmland>
- 31] http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/est/Investment/Agriculture_at_a_Crossroads_Global_Report_IAASTD.pdf

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