

Pro-GMO Activism in India: Journalism Gives way to Spin, Smears and “Scientific” Falsehoods

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In a [recent piece](#) for the magazine Swarajya (an online and print publication based in India), its national affairs editor, Surajit Dasgupta, makes it clear that he has no time for any criticisms about the use of GMO technology in food and agriculture. He has even less time for those who voice such criticisms.

He argues that ‘activists’ concerns’ would be valid if a GMO were proved to be not substantially equivalent to its non-GM-derived counterpart and if any negative non-intended consequences of genetic engineering were detected. Although failing to cite any relevant texts, Dasgupta then argues that “Report after report will tell you that the concerns above are but an activist’s red herring.”

This is simply incorrect. There is enough evidence to contest the claim that GMOs are ‘substantially equivalent’ to non-GMO and that negative consequences of GM have indeed been detected.

GM is technically and conceptually different from natural breeding and poses different risks. This fact is recognized in national and international laws and agreements on genetically modified organisms (GMOs). For example, European law defines a GMO as an organism in which “the genetic material has been altered in a way that does not occur naturally by mating and/or natural recombination” and requires the risks of each GMO to be assessed (European Parliament and Council. Directive 2001/18/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 March 2001 on the deliberate release into the environment of genetically modified organisms and repealing Council Directive 90/220/EEC. *Off J Eur Communities*. 2001:1-38).

The [Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety](#), an international agreement signed by 166 governments worldwide that seeks to protect biological diversity from the risks posed by GM technology, and the United Nations food safety body [Codex Alimentarius](#), agree that GM differs from conventional breeding and that safety assessments should be required before GM organisms are used in food or released into the environment.

Dasgupta’s claim is scientifically inaccurate and deliberately misleading. It is not the intention to regurgitate here what has previously been written about the processes of GM. Some readers might benefit from consulting [this](#) to appreciate how GM works and how it is in fact substantially non-equivalent to conventional breeding. They may also consult [this](#), which is (despite Dasgupta’s claims below) supported by peer-reviewed evidence and which demonstrates that GM is not substantially equivalent.

Countering the usual pro-GMO smears and spin with science

By employing all the usual spin of the pro-GMO lobby in an attempt to marginalise critics and criticisms of GM, Dasgupta's attempt to hide behind some kind of veil of 'objective journalism' clearly fails. He calls critics 'Luddites', 'anti-science' and 'half-baked intellectuals' of the internet variety, equipped with misleading information fed by sundry dot org websites run by interest groups in the US - where these activists' ringmasters are curiously inactive.

Really? Groups opposing GM in the US are highly active. But we've heard these type of smears and attacks all before, which are of course merely cheap, lazy PR spin designed by the industry to attack critics and are [utterly bogus](#).

Throughout his piece, Dasgupta tries to convince the reader that the debate on GM is over. In order words: science has won over emotional, ignorant activists. He would do better by keeping an open mind.

For example, hardly some ignorant activist or half-baked intellectual who relies on Google for pseudo-scientific explanations, Dr Michael Antoniou of King's College London School of Medicine in the UK uses genetic engineering for medical applications. However, he [has warned against its use](#) in developing crops for human food and animal feed:

"GM crops are promoted on the basis of ambitious claims - that they are safe to eat, environmentally beneficial, increase yields, reduce reliance on pesticides, and can help solve world hunger."

He adds that:

"Research studies show that genetically modified crops have harmful effects on laboratory animals in feeding trials and on the environment during cultivation. They have increased the use of pesticides and have failed to increase yields."

Dr John Fagan is a former genetic engineer who in 1994 returned to the National Institutes of Health \$614,000 in grant money due to concerns about the safety and ethics of the technology.

Fagan says:

"Crop genetic engineering as practiced today is a crude, imprecise, and outmoded technology. It can create unexpected toxins or allergens in foods and affect their nutritional value. Recent advances point to better ways of using our knowledge of genomics to improve food crops, that do not involve GM."

He goes on to state:

"Over 75% of all GM crops are engineered to tolerate being sprayed with herbicide. This has led to the spread of herbicide-resistant superweeds and has resulted in massively increased exposure of farmers and communities to these

toxic chemicals. Epidemiological studies suggest a link between herbicide use and birth defects and cancer.”

These two scientists are not alone in voicing such concerns. Indeed, there are numerous scientists and prestigious scientific institutes that do not give their support to GM technology and this is also reflected by scientific peer-reviewed literature. See [this](#) fully-referenced report with references which blows apart the claim that there is some kind of consensus on GM within the ‘scientific community’ (for further insight, see [Who says GMOs are safe and who says they are not](#)).

Moreover, both Antoniou and Fagan have backed up their claims in [this report](#) with reference to a wide range of studies that have appeared in peer-reviewed journals, including The Lancet, Advances in Food and Nutrition Research, Scandinavian Journal of Immunology, European Journal of Histochemistry, Journal of Proteome Research and many more.

Despite criticisms of GM having strong scientific underpinnings, Dasgupta insists on calling critics ‘Luddite activists’ who can only resort to slander:

“One wishes a scientist dragged them to the court on a charge of libel. No proof required! Ask them to name a particular scientist whose professional integrity can be questioned, and they can’t.”

Yet he has nothing to say on the [smearing and ruining of independent scientists](#) whose credible research highlighted findings that questioned the safety of GM. And he has nothing to say about the [unscientific polemics](#) that were used to attack Seralini and his team and the [targeting of the very heart of science](#) which occurred in an attempt to discredit Seralini’s work. And indeed there is silence when it comes to the politically and commercially motivated agenda that underpins the push to get GM accepted (which I have outlined [here](#)).

The report [Seedy Business](#) shows how science can be swayed, bought or biased by agribusiness in many ways, such as suppressing adverse findings, harming the careers of scientists who produce such findings, controlling the funding that shapes what research is conducted, the lack of independent US-based testing of health and environmental risks of GMOs and tainting scientific reviews of GMOs by conflicts of interest.

And how very convenient to overlook the systematic [subversion of science](#) to promote GM as well as the inadequate, short-term studies and concealed data which is justified on the basis of ‘commercial confidentiality’ (see [this](#)) (Dasgupta churns out a similar argument – citing ‘patent thieves’ – in an attempt to justify the secrecy around GM mustard in India).

Readers are urged to check websites such as [Lobbywatch](#), [Powerbase](#) and [Spinwatch](#), where they will see links between some prominent GM scientist-lobbyists and big agribusiness companies, the ultra-right group the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the [Scientific Alliance](#) (described as a front group for corporate interests) and Bivings Group (a public relations company that worked with Monsanto), among others.

And these connections have resulted in well-orchestrated smear campaigns against individuals and groups (see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)), pro -GM propaganda ([see this about the](#)

[sweet potato](#)) and [dirty tricks](#) (for example, using fake identities to attacks critics of GM).

At the same time, those responsible for such things carefully manage the message that they themselves are the [persecuted victims](#) of ideologically-driven anti-GM campaigners.

And this is the line Dasgupta takes: the GM project is being held back by ‘Luddites’ and ideologically-driven activists who attacking science, smearing individuals and distorting debate.

Doublespeak and hypocrisy are the order of the day.

Flawed pro-GMO advocacy masquerading as objective journalism

He then roles out a brief list of studies/reports/statements/scientists that he alleges support GM and which have no links to big biotech and are thus beyond reproach. Bear in mind that Dasgupta attacks critics of GM for referring to some kind of university of Google and activist-tainted sites to base their claims on and not peer-reviewed science.

So let us see just who Dasgupta cites to support his claims.

First, he makes use of a personal interview (not a peer-reviewed article) he once conducted. But what is perhaps more relevant is that he cites, the statement (again, not an article appearing in a peer-reviewed journal), [Legally mandating GM food labels could mislead and falsely alarm consumers](#) by the Board of Directors of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, dated 25 October 2012.

However, 12 days before California voted on the ballot initiative Proposition 37, for labeling of genetically engineered food, the board of directors of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science released the above statement that GM engineered crops “pose no greater risk than the same foods made from crops modified by conventional plant breeding techniques” and that mandatory labeling of GMOs could therefore “mislead and falsely alarm consumers.”

[US Right to Know has discovered](#) that when the AAAS board released its statement, its chair was Nina Federoff. She was a member of the scientific advisory board of Evogene for five years, an Israeli biotechnology company, and was a long-time member of the board of directors of the biotechnology firm Sigma-Aldrich. In her role as ‘science and technology advisor’ to the State Department and US Agency for International Development, the Pesticide Action Network called her “literally the US ambassador for GE”. She even endorsed a campaign statement by opponents of Proposition 37, offering that she was “passionately opposed to labeling” of genetically engineered food.

Dasgupta then cites S Key, JK Ma and PM Drake’s 2008 paper, [Genetically modified plants and human health](#), which he claims to be a veritable work on both advantages and challenges in GM crops. He claims this is ‘trustworthy’. He conveniently overlooks the fact that this piece contains a [major falsehood and serious factual errors leading to an illogical and invalid conclusion](#) on the safety of GM crops.

Next, he refers to The American Medical Association’s 2012 paper, [Report 2 of the Council on Science and Public Health: Labelling of Bioengineered Foods](#), which he claims explains what no ‘science-illiterate activist’ can.

According to [Food and Water Watch](#), this report was designed to address GMO labelling, not GMO safety. Supporters of GM like to dwell on a quote pertaining to the lack of documented adverse effects on human health from GMOs.

However, GMO advocates choose to misrepresent the AMA council report's full statement, which acknowledges the potential for adverse effects and the need for mandatory, pre-market safety assessments. The final, official AMA policy does not include the quote used by the pro-GMO activists, and it actually notes safety issues.

Dasgupta then cites the United States Institute of Medicine and National Research Council's 2004 paper [Safety of Genetically Engineered Foods: Approaches to Assessing Unintended Health Effects](#) on the basis of its integrity.

The National Academies of Science in the US has cited safety concerns with GMOs for many years, including potential unintended consequences associated with gene manipulation and, according to the paper cited above, the potential for genetic engineering techniques to raise "toxicities, allergies, nutrient deficiencies and imbalances," the negative effects on beneficial, non-target species and the inadequacy of current regulatory safety reviews. Food & Water Watch argues that, at the time, biotech companies like Monsanto and DuPont and the Biotechnology Industry Organization, a trade association, sat on high-level National Research Council boards and their influence may have even weakened the language and conclusions.

Dasgupta also states that 'erudite columnist' Anand Ranganathan put all speculative allegations regarding GM crops to rest in a three-part series. But the pieces he refers to appear on a website, not in a peer-reviewed journal.

It seems critics of GM must only cite peer-reviewed science but he can cite any source, no matter how flawed or irrelevant.

But any astute reader would already appreciate this last point. The publication for whom Dasgupta is national affairs editor recently [published a piece](#) by Shanthu Shantharam that attacked individuals and organisations and was little more than a collection of unsubstantiated slurs and claims. One need look no further to understand that the piece should never have been published because it did not comply with Swarajya's own publication guidelines (points 2 and 4 [here](#)).

It might appear that standards of 'objective journalism' do not apply when it comes to promoting a pro-GM agenda.

Dasgupta then says:

"The rabble rousers better not question the honesty of these scientists and science writers, lest they should be pulled up for defamation. Wild charges levelled on the whole group with no mention of specifics, unfortunately, cannot be stopped."

Well, what we have above are a few specifics. There are serious deficiencies in the sources Dasgupta's cites. By using them, he fails to make the point he set out to and seriously undermines his own argument.

More smears, falsehoods and misrepresentations

What we get from thereon is a good deal of inflammatory writing and ‘rabble rousing’. He claims that critics of GM peddle half-truths and scare-mongering about GM in order to serve their own self interests. Dasgupta churns out the usual falsehood of anti-GM activists in wealthy countries keeping people in poor countries hungry by denying them food. Again, it doesn’t take much to [demolish this lie](#) and to appreciate that a [fraudulent GMO project](#) is being offered as a proxy solution by those with a strident neoliberal ideological agenda for deep-seated [social, political and economic factors](#) that are fuelled by neoliberalism and which drive poverty and hunger around the world.

And he doesn’t stop there. Dasgupta draws a comparison between critics of GM and ‘private websites promoting cults’:

“be it a Christian website damning homosexuality, a Muslim website condemning pork, a Hindu website slamming beef, a maker of tinned vegan dishes cursing non-vegetarian food, a trader’s cartel spreading paranoia about FDI in retail or an indirect player in agriculture forbidding genetic modification of crops.”

And in predictable fashion, he then attacks various people, such as Joseph Mercola, Vandana Shiva, Anuradha Mittal (Oakland Institute) and Devinder Sharma.

It’s extremely shoddy stuff.

He takes aim at organic farming and claims organic does not lead to substantially increased income for the farmers, whereas, sowing GM varieties of seeds would themselves lead to rich harvests. Again, both points are erroneous. For example, GM cotton in India has been a disaster for farmers in rain fed areas according to the peer-reviewed paper referred to in [this piece](#), and there is [enough evidence](#) to show GM does not lead to ‘rich harvests’ but often [human and ecological disaster](#).

Moreover, organic can [lead to increases](#) in farmer incomes and is indeed recommended as a strategy in countries like India for securing a sustainable model of agriculture and food security. The International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development ([IAASTD](#)) was the work of over 400 scientists and took four years to complete. Dasgupta might like to take note that it was twice peer reviewed and states we must look to smallholder, traditional farming to deliver food security in lower income countries through agro-ecological systems which are sustainable.

There is also [this](#), which refers to peer-reviewed papers and various reports to support the claims made about agroecology, not least that increased productivity with fewer external inputs is but one advantage of the model.

Finally, early on in his piece, Dasgupta attempts to justify the secrecy surrounding GM mustard in India by referring to some high-minded notions of commercial confidentiality (patent protection from theives), despite serious allegations that the entire testing trials are based on [regulatory delinquency and unremitting fraud](#). He forwards the ludicrous argument that openness should only occur and relevant documents released once GM mustard is given the go ahead. How convenient.

And he presents a well-established myth in an attempt to justify the entry of GM mustard into farmers' fields. He says that by blocking genetically modified mustard developed, they ('the activists') "will only help foreigners sell their edible oils to us beyond the present level of 70 per cent of our needs."

Of course, this too is another deception. GM mustard is being pushed as a [Trojan horse solution](#) on the basis it can provide better yields and that it can reduce India's imports of edible oils. The fact is that the GM trait will add nothing to yields, and trade policies (not poor agricultural productivity) coupled with the [impact of foreign agribusiness](#) concerns operating in India, have decimated the edible oils sector within the country.

There are various other points in Dasgupta's piece that could be addressed. But the reader will get the point. It is a cheap piece of advocacy based on falsehoods, slurs and misrepresentations born from the frustration of the pro-GMO lobby's failure to force GM food crops into India.

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