

Trojan Horse Arguments and the GMO Issue: Indian Food and Agriculture Under Attack

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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In 2013, India's former Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar accused US companies of derailing the nation's oilseeds production programme. Similar claims had been made before. For instance, we could revisit the 1998 mustard oil tragedy. At the time, Rajasthan Oil Industries Association claimed that a "conspiracy" was being hatched to undermine the mustard oil trade and charged that the "invisible hands of the multinationals" were involved (see the article ['Monsanto and the Mustard Seed](#)

India was almost self-sufficient in edible oils by the mid-1990s. Its farmers met 97% of domestic need. However, its edible oil import bill has increased dramatically since then. By 2013, India was the world's second biggest importer of edible oils. Food and trade policy analyst [Devinder Sharma notes](#) that between 2006-07 and 2011-12 alone edible oil imports rose by 380%.

Sharma asserts self-sufficiency was not palatable to international financial institutions, and that, under pressure from the World Bank, India began to reduce the import tariffs on edible oils and imports then began to increase. The impact has been felt by millions of farmers. Instead of paying Indonesian, Malaysian, American and Brazilian farmers from where India imports edible oils, he argues the effort should be to support domestic farmers.

India meets more than half its cooking oil requirements through imports, with palm oil shipped from Indonesia and Malaysia and soybean oil from the US, Brazil and Argentina. Notwithstanding the environmental damage resulting from industrial-size mono-crop plantations (see [this](#) on palm oil in Indonesia and [this](#) on soy in Brazil), soybean imports are expected to grow even more and further threaten domestic cultivation.

In an [editorial piece for Kisan Ki Awaaz](#) (National Voice of the Farmers) in November 2015, Kishan Bir Chaudhary highlights the trend to undermine indigenous production by noting the move to completely wipe out India's soybean cultivation. The large-scale import of soybean meal is being contemplated at cheap prices from South America, China and USA, which would flood the Indian market. This is despite there being a more than adequate quantity of soybean meal available from locally produced soybean.

Currently, the import of soybean meal is freely permitted, with a low customs duty. Soybean prices in the exporting countries are between 30% to 40% lower because of huge subsidies. This could leave few outlets for indigenous production.

Although current laws do not permit the import of any GMO-based food or feed item into India, the fear is importers may ship in GMO soybean and soybean meal at cheap rates, which will get cleared at ports without testing for the presence of GMOs.

Chaudhary notes India's soybean farmers are under pressure due to: the import of GM cheap soybean meal; a clamour for the import of soybean itself; the discouragement of soy cultivation by political leaders; and the active involvement of foreign seed and pesticide companies in promoting GM Soy cultivation.

He calls for an immediate ban on soybean imports as well as for customs officers to uphold the law of the land with regard to prohibiting the import of GMOs by carrying out proper checks in government laboratories.

With risks of GM entering India via imports clear, we are also currently witnessing the push to get GM mustard (and other crops) commercialised and grown in Indian fields. The justification being put forward for this is that GM mustard is a high-yielding crop, but, more importantly, it would diminish the reliance on edible oil imports.

These arguments are little more than smokescreens to divert attention from 1) the actual reality of increased import costs and the associated running down of indigenous agriculture, which stem from trade policies driven by the vested interests of global agribusiness, and 2) myths about the efficacy of GM. Such Trojan horse logic is being used to ease the entry of GMOs into India.

And such entry is at risk of being done by [by-passing proper processes and procedures](#) in what Aruna Rodrigues calls a case of "unremitting fraud" and by side-lining four high-level reports advising against the adoption of these crops in India (the 'Jairam Ramesh Report' of February 2010, imposing an indefinite moratorium on Bt Brinjal; the 'Sopory Committee Report' [August 2012]; the 'Parliamentary Standing Committee' [PSC] Report on GM crops [August 2012]; and the 'Technical Expert Committee [TEC] Final Report' [June-July 2013]).

As far as the claim GM producing better yields, Devinder Sharma points out that in the US, crop yields of GM soy have been found 4% to 20% less than non-GM varieties. Whether it concerns soy, mustard or just about any other GM crop, the claims that GM produces increased yields is a myth.

If GM cannot increase yields even in the US, where high-input, irrigated, heavily subsidized commodity farming is the norm, it is irresponsible to assume that it would improve yields in the Global South, where farmers may literally bet their farms and livelihoods on a crop.

The above quote is from the report [GMO Myths and Truths](#), which provides evidence in support of Sharma's claims.

And farmers have indeed 'bet' their farms and livelihoods on a crop – and have lost (see [this report](#) from India's The Statesman newspaper) or are being taken for a ride (see [this](#) on GM cotton, illegal royalties and financial distress).

Where, therefore, is the logic in promoting GM varieties which produce less than existing improved varieties that are not genetically modified?

Improving production should not be based on a supposed GM techno quick-fix, which the pro-GMO lobby would like us to believe in. The answer lies in adopting appropriate trade policies that favour indigenous production and local farmers and which, as Devinder Sharma notes, provides assured procurement and assured prices to farmers.

The fact that GM is [not wanted or required](#), leads us to question why GMOs are being forced into the country (and are in fact [already being consumed](#) in terms of cotton seed oil). But it doesn't take a genius as to why this might be.

Rajesh Krishnan, Convenor of Coalition for a GM-Free India [argues that GM mustard is a backdoor entry](#) for various other GM crops in the regulatory pipeline.

He adds:

GM mustard hybrid has been created mainly to facilitate the seed production work of seed manufacturers whereas farmers already have a choice of non-GM mustard hybrids in the market, in addition to high yielding non hybrid mustard varieties. There are non-GM agro-ecological options like System of Mustard Intensification yielding far higher production than the claimed yields of this GM mustard... This is clearly one more GMO that is unwanted and unneeded and is being thrust on citizens in violation of our right to choices, as farmers and consumers.

Little wonder then that most state governments have been unwilling to take up field trials.

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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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