

GM Foods: Should We Go For It?

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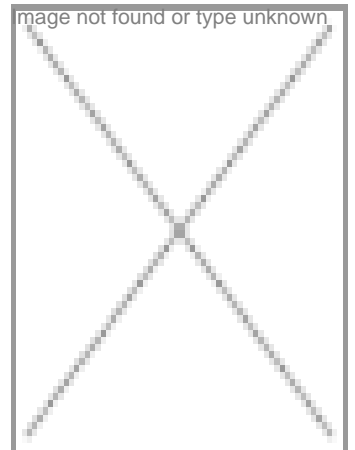
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India is the second largest grower of vegetable in the world just after China with an annual production estimated at 85 million tonnes. Three percent of the nation's land area or approximately 6.2 million hectares are used to grow these vegetables by nearly 12 million farmers. The annual turnover of the vegetable farmers is more than Rs 60,000 crore.

Despite such huge production numbers, India's share of global trade is just 1.4 percent.

Just five crops—potato, tomato, onion, cabbage and cauliflower—account for 60 percent of India's vegetable production. The potential to increase production is very high because more than 42 percent of marketable produce in these five crops is rendered waste by a variety of pests. Nearly half the input costs of a farmer of these crops goes towards buying pesticides. If India's farmers have access to genetically modified (GM) seeds in these crops, like their counterparts in 21 other countries, they will be able to make substantial savings.

BioSpectrum estimates that the savings from the use of GM seeds in these five crops every year will be at least Rs 9,000 crore after expensing for the GM seeds. The effects will be dramatic: It will enhance the income of farmers, reduce prices for consumers and increase nutrition levels, and generate surpluses for exports to meet the growing demand for food all over the world. Researchers in India's public and private institutions are in various stages of testing GM seeds in these 10 crops. A GM brinjal variety is on the verge of regulatory approval unless it is delayed by the vehement oppositions from anti-GM groups.



Should we have long-winded debates on GM foods? Seven years ago, the nation went through elaborate debates and delayed the introduction of Bt cotton by at least five years. And within two years, India's largely illiterate but knowledgeable farmers settled the issue by voting overwhelmingly for the new technology. Over 80 percent of cotton grown in the country is the GM variety. Bt cotton is no longer a debating issue.

Despite all the concerns raised against the biosafety of GM foods, there is no conclusive evidence from anywhere in the world about its side effects since its introduction 13 years ago. It is important to remember that India grows nearly 70 types of vegetables. Only seven of these with prominent ones like brinjal, cucumber, bottle gourd are native to the country. The remaining 63 vegetables were brought to India from South America and Latin America by foreign traders and rulers. Just take the case of potatoes. Its origin is traced to Peru. But today it is an integral part of Indian food. So much so, potatoes account for 25 percent of India's vegetable production and a Rs 20,800 crore economic value accrues to farmers every year from this tuber crop. If we had debated about the entry of potatoes or tomatoes or cauliflower in the earlier centuries, India would have been a loser.

The nation has to place its trust in the integrity and competence of its biotech regulators and agricultural experts should come out of their laboratories and speak their mind on this crucial issue of GM food. The regulatory uncertainty has to be removed. Currently, the introduction of Bt brinjal is stalled due to the need to produce a socio-economic survey on this crop. For pharmaceutical products such a survey is done post commercial production.

Meanwhile, India's strange silence over the need to give all the needy citizens protection against the raging swine flu vaccine continues. While the government is planning to buy a few million doses from even foreign companies, the vaccine is simply not available in sufficient quantities. Smart governments abroad have already placed their orders with all the major manufacturers. India's vaccine manufacturers are awaiting some firm commitment from the Indian government. Let us not wait and get into the panic mode only after the death toll reaches 500 or 1,000 in the oncoming winter flu season.

Funds are not the issue. It is the mindset of the bureaucracy in the health ministry which hopes the issue will just fade away after some time as information fatigue sets in. In fact, swine flu is now off the radar of people as mainstream television news channels have turned their attention to more compelling political drama in the last week of August. India-made swine flu vaccine will not be available before next summer. And there is every indication that the virulence of the H1N1 virus may increase with the onset of winter.

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