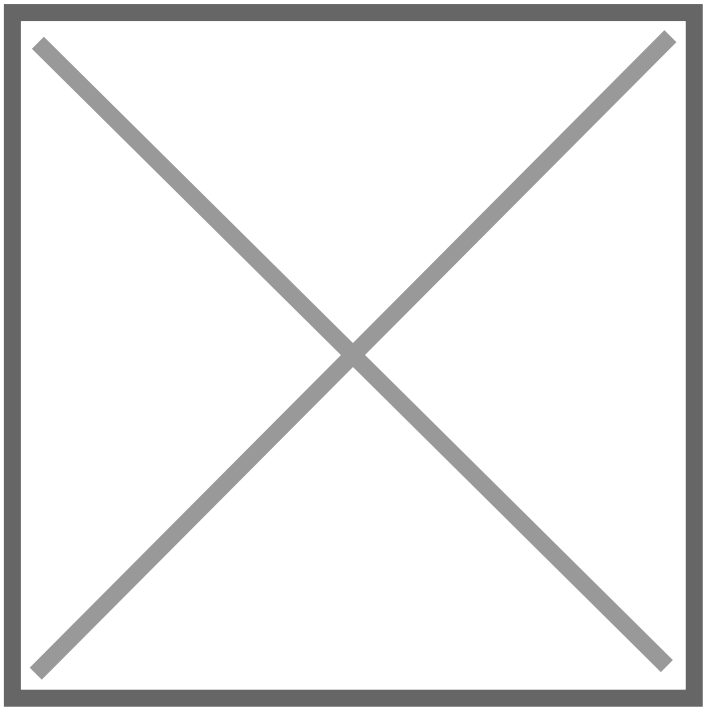
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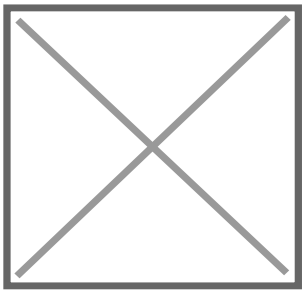
Suicide Trap

24 September 2003 | News



Ninety-five percent of the new science in the world is created in the countries comprising only one-fifth of the world's population. And much of that scienceÃ¢â?¬Â¦neglects the problems that afflict most of the world's people. Ã¢â?¬â? Kofi Annan in Science, Mar 7, 2003

It is a sad reflection on the way modern science has grown. Nothing can be more tragic for the five-sixth of the world's population that has been forced to accept science and technology that has actually not been developed for them. Still worse, what Kofi Annan probably forgot to say was that the biggest tragedy of modern times is the way countries have allowed industries to control and manipulate science.



No, I am not talking about Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's promise of sending an Indian to the moon at a time when 320 million people go to bed hungry, but promoting the sunrise industryÃ¢â?¬â??genetic engineeringÃ¢â?¬â??in the name of science and technology. And still worse, diverting scarce public resources to subsidize an upcoming industry, allowing democratically elected state governments to make available prime land for the new industry and that too at a pittance, announcing tax holidays and other financial relief measures. Well, you should know that subsidy is only a dirty word when the public money is spent for the poor. The rich and elite have an inherent right to government support and knowing that the term subsidy is not politically correctÃ¢â?¬â??they call it an 'incentive' for growth.

Whether it is Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka or Punjab, chief ministers are not only doling out public resources for a risky and unproven technology but are unabashedly promoting such technology parks by diverting public funding and services meant for the poor. There is no dearth of resources for setting up biotechnology parks occupying prime land in the heart of the cosmopolitan cities. However, at some places, a lot many of the original allottees find it a lucrative real estate business.

A majority of biotechnology companies that are coming up are essentially subsidiaries of the foreign companies and institutes or else are serving merely as a service industry for the companies abroad. Like the IT industry, the emphasis on intellectual property is conspicuously missing. As far as agriculture is concerned, where the controversy is at its peak, most of the companies are only trying to duplicate and sell the genetically modified seeds that have been developed outside the country. Such is the great rush for profits that these companies are not even aware of the specific needs of the Indian farmer. All they know is that they need to make a fast buck. Given the blind political support, considering that elections have begun to happen more frequently, these biotech and seed companies find a green pasture in India.

This may however not last long. Every day is not a Sunday and it will be tragic if the biotech industry refuses to see the growing anger and social unrest in the rural areas following the Bt cotton debacle. The industry therefore must redesign its

approach, re-ensure the utility and relevance of its technological products and work on technologies that help farmers move away from the suicide trap into more sustainable farming practices. But before that, the government must stop subsidizing the biotechnology industry in the name of science and technology and set rules and regulations that do not allow these companies to walk away with sub-standard products and public liabilities.

And like Kofi Annan said, the most important question that the biotechnology industry needs to ask is whether the genetic modification technology is relevant to India's farmers and consumers. Merely multiplying and selling GM seeds produced outside the country will for sure pit the industry in direct confrontation with farmers. And that will be suicidal for the industry.