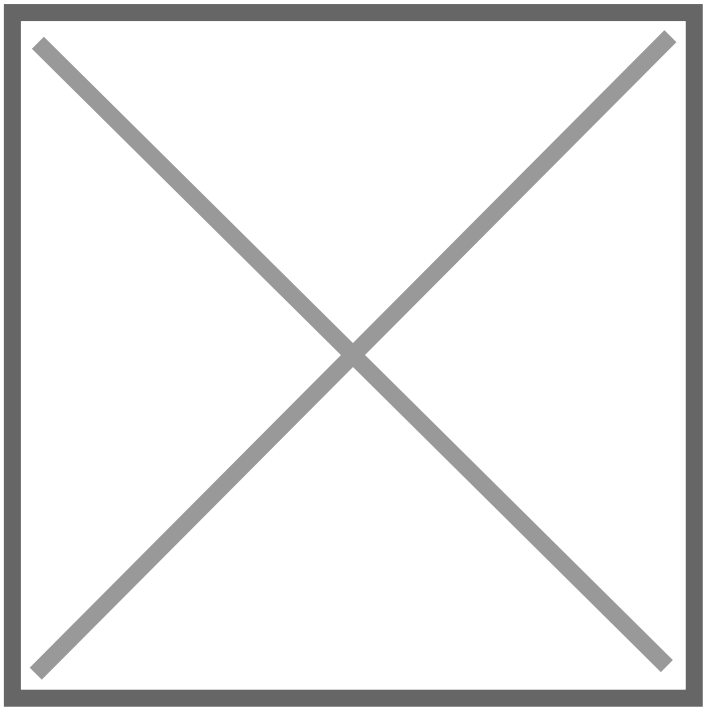
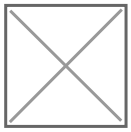
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Need for clarity

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Bt cotton seems to have a unique place among seeds in India. When it had almost faded from public memory after formal approval was granted for its use by the government last March, the campaign against it had subsided. Now a year later, a virulent campaign against Bt cotton has started. The latest episode was the ugly protest by a coalition of opponents from non government organizations (NGOs) led by Greenpeace at Monsanto's research center in Bangalore.

The protests are also fueled by lack of accurate information about the results of the first year's crop yield from Bt cotton. The only definite statement by the government in Parliament indicated that the Bt cotton yields were satisfactory. However, ministers in various states have issued contradictory statements. Cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh have hinted at Bt cotton failure and have even attributed some farmer suicide cases to Bt cotton crop failure. They have even talked about lower cotton yields and increased use of pesticides in Bt cotton crop.

On the other hand, Monsanto, the developer of Bt cotton, is firm that the first year's crop was not a failure. After all, the transgenic seed provides good resistance against the major cotton pest, Bollworm, and does not claim to act effectively against other pests or increase crop yields. Opponents of Bt cotton have demanded compensation from Monsanto to Bt cotton farmers. As public protests and debates continue, the Bt cotton episode has raised some serious issues.

Which is the correct forum to debate what is essentially a scientific issue? The streets or research labs or Parliament? In this case, all these three fora have failed to be on any help. Food policy expert Devinder Sharma laments the fact that the Indian scientific community has so far failed to offer an independent view on the controversy, perhaps weighed by the lack of funding mechanisms independent of the government or private companies. In a country with a functioning legal system, the streets are certainly not the place to debate such a controversial issue. After all, Monsanto has marketed the Bt cotton seed after complying with all regulatory processes and farmers have bought it not under any compulsion. Parliament has yet to debate the issue meaningfully and the blame for this should be placed at the doors of the regulatory agency, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) of the Ministry of Environment. The onus is on the GEAC to share the relevant data with the public and clarify the correct position amidst the claims and counterclaims.

It will be better if the opponents of Bt cotton and other genetically modified products force a debate involving the GEAC and other government agencies such as the Department of Biotechnology and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) who have the expertise on this topic. As public interest is the paramount issue here, the Bt cotton debate could be the forerunner of the government initiative to engage the people in decisions that affect their lives.

Geneticallly engineered products are here to stay. The march of technology can at best be slowed down and not stopped. Let us set an example to the world by debating this issue in a civilized way and not decide these things on the basis of street power.

