

The political saga of GM crops in India

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Biotech experts Dr Shanthu Shantharam and Dr CS Prakash share their take on the trials and tribulations of Bt cotton in India.

This year the fifth anniversary of Bt cotton commercialization in India, and a look back at the road it has traversed; it can be best described as a success with serious public relations deficit. If one were to believe all the ghastly stories of how Bt cotton has brought doom to the lives of poor farmers in India, then one might as well blame all natural disasters in India on this "dreadful" Bt cotton. Certainly, the anti-GM lobby in India does everything possible, on a daily basis to discredit and disparage agricultural biotechnology, and get lots of traction in the media that does not care to verify facts. In fact, a journalist of a major daily said that "facts" are not news, sensation is. So far, the hapless Bt cotton has been dubbed genocidal and even homicidal. Going by the anti-GM lobby reports, it has killed sheep and goats in thousands, peacocks and cattle in hundreds. Next, it will be the turn of children who labor in the hybrid cotton seed production fields. Bt cotton is supposed to have made women sterile and made young girls attain early puberty; no news about what happened with boys so far. There are sporadic reports of Bt cotton field workers having developed allergic reactions. Thank heavens, no news of blood poisoning so far! A rooky farmer leader was brazen to declare that biotechnology is dangerous than nuclear technology, obviously betraying ignorance of both.

Unwarranted allegations

There has been an unfortunate spate of farmer suicides in the country in the last three to four years. Everybody has an

opinion on why farmers are committing suicide, and so does the anti-GM lobby. According to them, Bt cotton is singularly responsible for suicides among cotton farmers in Vidharbha and Warangal. Ask for evidence, there is none. It is all based on God knows what kind of surveys, opinions and ad-hoc conclusions. The media laps it up merrily and never bothers to verify facts. The government agencies also don't care. But, for the first time ICAR has put out an official report on the performance of Bt cotton, which is on a positive note. No doubt, the anti-GM lobby will not buy this. Good news about Bt cotton is bad news for the anti-GM lobby. If the same ICAR scientists allude anything even remotely negative about Bt cotton, then it is taken as authentic, but if the same ICAR says anything positive about biotechnology or GM crops, then it not kosher for the anti-biotech forces. It is really impossible to verify all these claims and counter claims. The proof pudding is in eating. This year, India has surpassed China in Bt cotton acreage. Does this satisfy the anti-lobby?

When one of us visited Warangal last November, there was no evidence of Bt cotton failure. We could not locate a single shepherd whose sheep had died and no farmer had heard of it. We could confirm from the State Department of Agriculture officials that 90-95 percent of cotton grown in Warangal is Bt cotton that was confirmed by educated farmers and pesticide dealers in town. Yet, the anti-GM lobby does not accept these facts, and continues to spread lies and canards about everything imaginary about Bt cotton.

Politicized issue

The big question is why do all NGOs (we know of only one NGO that supports modern biotechnology and science) are 'such die-hard' opponents of biotechnology and GM crops that is based on some of the best science in the world. The politicization of GM crops technology was complete when Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), a partner in the ruling coalition in Tamil Nadu and the former lady chief minister of the same state have taken a stand against GM crops at the goading of the anti-GM lobby. Otherwise, it is hard to believe that these politicians would have any idea about these modern day cutting edge technologies. This is just the beginning, and should the anti-GM lobby persist in their efforts, they can get more converts among the political parties whose understanding of science and technology is worse than that of NGOs. A ham handed intervention by the agricultural minister of Andhra Pradesh to slash the price of Bt cotton by more than 50 percent, only to be followed by other states smacks of rank political populism to garner farmers votes. This is another brazen political intervention by the political mighty. In this instance, the role of NGOs in misleading the agriculture minister must not be understated. The state government reports on the failures of Bt cotton are bereft of any scientific or empirical evidence, and appear pitiable.

Lopsided views

All these oppositions from the NGO community are coming from ideological opposition to globalization, multi-national corporations, and free market capitalism, all sentiments liberally borrowed from the European greens and socialists. The idea of "re-ruralization" of India by taking back Indian farmers to old fashioned, pre-independence agriculture is a clear indication of technical bankruptcy of what these NGOs would like to accomplish, if they had their way. That is to keep poor Indian farmers poor by adhering to the backward and non-productive agricultural systems. The anti-GM lobby draws lots of inspiration and resources from the European greens, the organic lobby, and anti-globalization lobbies (world social forum) to sustain their activities. Another constant refrain one hears is that Indian GM crops policies are being implemented without proper stakeholder or public consultations. Notwithstanding hundreds of consultations that have been held, the NGOs are not happy because these consultations have not resulted in banning the GM technology. No amount of public consultations will satisfy these NGOs until they get their wish. The latest series of activism against GM crops is unraveling at the grassroots level where the anti-GM NGOs are going from village to village swearing villages to declare themselves GMO-free villages. No one knows what will come out of this GMO-free village campaign, but is an indication how motivated these forces are.

Regarding GM food safety, some NGOs wish that they be tested for next 50 years until they can prove to be safe beyond reasonable doubt. This way, they know that they can tie up the product forever and nothing will come to the market place. All these kinds of scientifically unreasonable demands by NGOs are a clear indication of what they want, and that is to see that the technology is killed in its infancy. Clearly an anti-biotech political agenda.

Who will bell the cat?

What is regrettable is the deafening silence of the great Indian scientific community. Even a scientist headed committee to reform the Indian regulatory system has recommended that GM rice must not be introduced into areas that are known to be centers of origin and diversity, a patently nonsensical idea. This was done just to appease the anti-GM lobby. The quarantining of areas will never work and GM rice will find its way to every nook and corner of the country. The point here is that since such a deployment strategy will not work, then push for total ban on GM rice, and the war cry has already started. There are four academies of sciences in India, and scores of individual science associations, but none dares to take on this anti-GM lobby to inform the public or the media. These academies could have submitted an amicus curiae brief against the case in the Supreme Court of India filed by half a dozen anti-GM activists. But, these academies have gone on AWOL.

(Absent WithOut Leave) on the issue. The science establishment is totally apathetic about this raging anti-biotech and anti-GM controversy, the anti's have a field day, and the media has nowhere to go to verify facts.

This is a political battle, and must be fought at the political level by the combined activism of scientists and technologists. Otherwise, not only the technology deployment will be delayed, but many future products that are in the pipeline may never see the light of the day. Indian agriculture badly needs all the modern technology to upgrade itself and compete at the global level, and these ideological opponents must not be allowed to hijack the agriculture development of the country, and dictate terms to the nation. Opportunity costs are too high of not deploying modern science and technology for India's agricultural development.