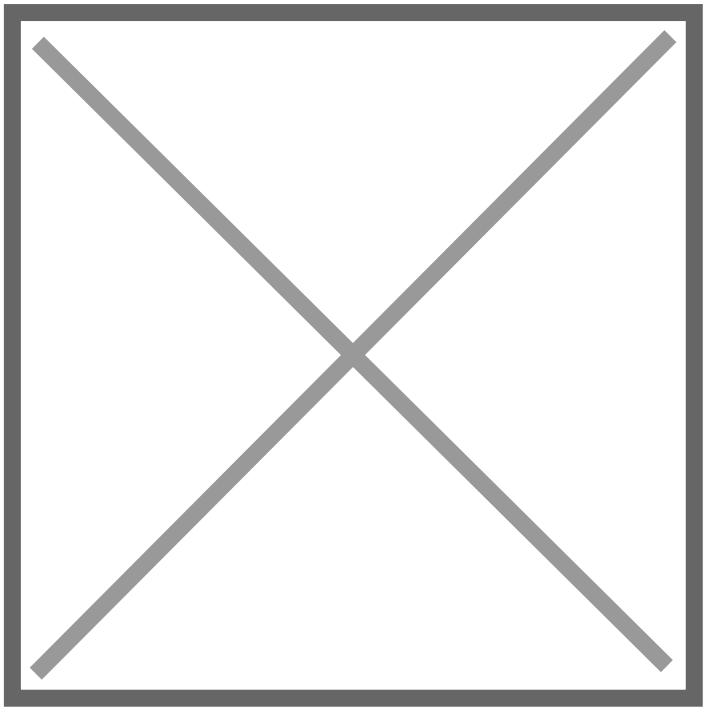


Tide Turns Against Biotech

08 March 2010 | News



N Suresh Despite the economic gloom around the world, India managed to emerge unscathed in 2009 with the growth close to seven percent in what has arguably the worst year in our recent memory. The biotechnology industry too managed to weather the storm and stay afloat with very little collateral damage.

However, as I write this 7th anniversary issue special edit of BioSpectrum, the mood seems to have turned sullen at least for a section of the industry. The Bt brinjal developed by Mahyco is at the heart of the gathering gloom which has turned enormous public attention on biotechnology as a whole unwittingly.

As I had predicted and was widely expected in my previous editorial, Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh has brought the Bt brinjal story to a halt for now. The hurriedly convened press conference on February 9 and the subsequent clarifications told the story. No hurried decision on commercialization of Mahyco's Bt brinjal hybrid for now. The moratorium will be in place till the regulatory system is in a position to evaluate credible, independent data on toxicity aspects of Bt brinjal. At the same time the government has helpfully clarified that there is no moratorium on genetically modified (GM) foods per se but only on this particular product under regulatory process.

The fate of Bt brinjal was sealedÂ by two key developments. One, Jairam Ramesh's decision to go on a nationwide consultation process in January and February 2010. The 8-city event gave the right high profile platform needed by anti-GM forces to make themselves heard. The industry and the few scientists willing to stand up for GM foods could not match the support drummed by civil society groups with a combination of rhetoric, emotions and folklore. Two, the strident voices for caution expressed two eminent geneticists, Dr MS Swaminathan and Dr PM Bhargava. These two factors were a potent anti-GM combination which Jairam Ramesh, even if he had wanted, could not have overcome to allow Bt brinjal for now.

One is not sure how Mahyco's Bt brinjal will play out in the coming months or years. Either it could get commercial approval quietly or delayed for a few years till independent studies are ready. If latter is the case, then the wait could be easily for a few years. A quiet commercial release appears unlikely given the range of civil society forces ranged against the product in particular and GM foods overall. And the anti-GM forces would be keeping a hawk's eye on all related developments about this product.

However, there is a silver lining amidst the dark clouds gathering over the biotech sector, particularly due to the agri-biotech segment. The long pending legislation to set up a unified regulator in the form of the National Biotechnology Regulatory Authority (NBRA) has got a fillip. The Prime Minister's support to speed up its passage will help to overcome the hurdles within the government which had stymied its progress since 2005.

The bill was stuck apparently due to the tussle between the ministers (ministries) of S&T and Agriculture in the UPA-1 government. DBT secretary Dr MK Bhan is hopeful of tying up the loose ends and sending it for Cabinet approval in March. Then the bill will be placed before Parliament for debate and approval. Even here, some sections of the current draft bill

related to steps to tone down anti-GM opposing voices have run into aÂ public controversy. Here again the main opposition to the NBRA bill coming in due to the clauses related to GM products. It is again now anybody's guess how the NBRA's passage through Parliament amidst these tumultuous developments in the backdrop of Bt brinjal controversy will happen.

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