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AÃ¢â?¬Å?MonsantoÃ¢â?¬? Protection Act for India too?

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During the last working days of March before the Easter vacation started, US President Barack Obama signed a legislation that will allow the government to continue its ongoing work with public for another six months before the next federal budget is approved by the US legislature. Called HR 933 Continuing Resolution, an innocuous section 735 was inserted by the US Senate and it was approved by the President. This section has now become controversial in the context of genetically modified seeds.

In fact, this piece of legislation has been dubbed as "Monsanto Protection Act" by its critics because Section 735 has removed the powers of US judicial system into reviewing any actions related to the planting of genetically modified (GM) crops and use of GM products in the country. President Obama's approval means no US court can now stop the sale or planting of GM crops even if studies indicate now or in the future that these products could be harmful to the health of consumers. Monsanto, as the world's largest GM seed company, will be the major beneficiary of this legislation as it is facing many court cases in this regard. The protection comes in the form of a Farmer Assurance Provision against future liabilities.

The current status is valid only for six months but critics claim that such acts will be difficult to reverse once it is on the statute. What President Obama has done is to protect GM seed companies from any future financial liabilities. This is similar to the Indian government's action in 2008 when Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh piloted a legislation despite stiff protests to cap the liabilities of companies that provide nuclear power in the country. It was done under tremendous pressure from the US government and companies which see a major market for nuclear power in energy starved India.

Introduction of India's first GM food crop, a Bt brinjal, has been stalled by environment ministry's administrative action despite regulatory approval since 2009 and also due to the intervention of the Supreme Court. Opponents of GM crops in India are now worried that the US legislation may provide the template for a similar action in India. In the last few months the bioagri industry had mounted a high-intensity campaign around the country to get the moratorium on Bt brinjal. The industry has suffered due to lack of investments and limited research and field trial activity in the last 2-3 years. The government may have given some relief to the bioagri industry, but now one can foresee the anti-GM activists taking advance action to stall a "Monsanto Protection Act" in India. The Indian bioagri industry's future lies in promoting public sector developed GM seeds. It needs to come out with products into the market quickly to iron out the rough edges caused by Monsanto's global dominance in this field.