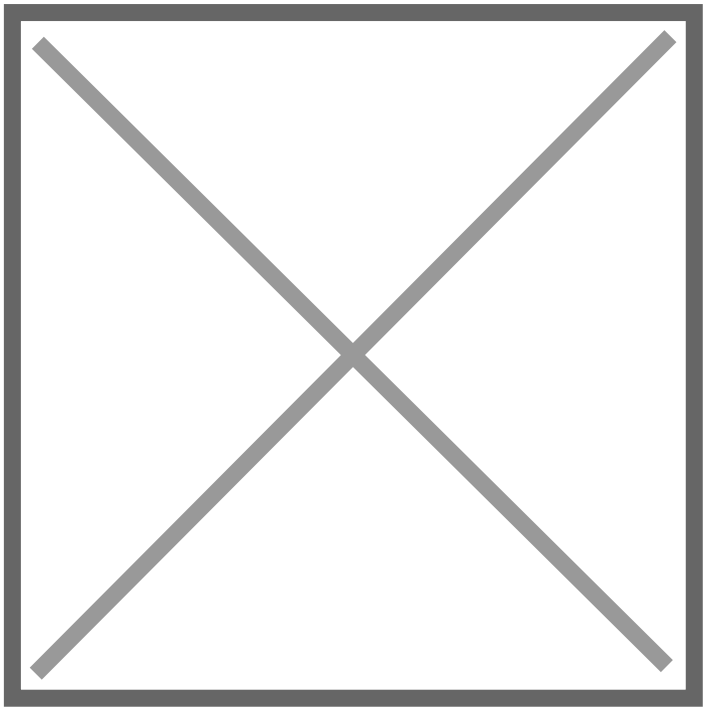
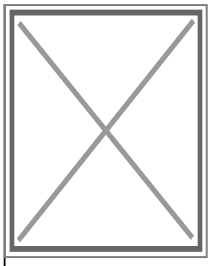
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A national rethink on GM crops?

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When it rains in India, it pours. And the more than average August rains across the country have proved this adage. The same appears to be true in the case of the BioAgri industry in the country. Three major developments related to the BioAgri sector have taken place in August. Of these, two are extremely inimical to the future of this sector in the country and third is an ironical step taken by the government.

The most devastating development appears to be the report of the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture which has recommended a total ban on the field trials of all genetically modified (GM) crops. The 31-member non-partisan committee comprising members representing all major political parties in the country has been very stringent in its comments. Said Basudeb Acharya, chairman of the committee: Ã¢â?¬Å?The committee has come to the conclusion that since concerns on the potential and actual impacts of GM crops to our food, farming, health and environment are valid, GM crops are just not the right solution for our country.Ã¢â?¬?

Rarely parliamentary committees make such scathing comments. Acharya did not stop at that: He added, Ã¢â?¬Å?The government should stop parroting the promotional lines of the biotechnology and seed industry and their cronies within the technocracy and stand by scientific reasoning and greater public good.Ã¢â?¬? After this report, it will be very tough for the government to go ahead with further promotion of GM crops in the country. Usually, governments implement the recommendations of parliamentary committees. With almost the entire political spectrum ranged against it, the BioAgri sector has a tough fight on its hands to turn around the public perceptions building against it.

The second major setback is the decision of Maharashtra government to ban the sale of Bt cotton seeds by Mahyco in the state for reportedly creating an Ã¢â?¬Å?artificial shortageÃ¢â?¬? for its products in the state and charging more than the recommended prices. This is also a very harsh step, especially in a state which is home to the company and headed by a former Science & Technology minister who promoted the cause of biotech in a big way nationally just a few years ago.

The third development in August is the most ironical. While the future of India's BioAgri sector is at stake with the earlier two steps, government has announced a decision to set up a national research center focused only on agricultural biotechnology. The ₹287-crore investment will be made to set up an Indian Institute for Agricultural Biotechnology at Ranchi, Jharkhand. This is the initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture. If all future GM crop trials are banned, what will this institute do with the crops it develops? The question may be rhetorical at this stage, but has every chance of becoming a reality if the Parliamentary committee has its way.

One thing is clear from this. The groundswell of opposition against GM food crops, built up during the approval of Bt brinjal in 2009 has snowballed now into a major coalition against the GM technology itself. The BioAgri industry which should have been at the forefront of engaging with the various stakeholders of the biotech community and the opinion makers in the society and among the public has not done a good job in promoting its case. There is still time to mount an effective pro-GM campaign and turn around its fortunes.

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