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"Certain NGOs belittled Indian agri-biotech industry"

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"Certain NGOs belittled Indian agri-biotech industry, bureaucracy"

Q: How do you look at the latest Intelligence Bureau (IB) report revelation that certain NGOs have been behind the stalling of GM technologies?

The joint statement by NGOs against GMO section in the IB report has levelled some preposterous allegations that the report is influenced by large corporations who are interested in taking over the Indian seed sector. This not only belittles the contributions made by the Indian seed and biotech industry towards agriculture, but also insults our premier intelligence agency like IB. The mere thought that the IB can be influenced by corporates; the NGOs have merely demonstrated their attitude of 'attack is the best form of defence'. We are not surprised by such allegations levelled by the four NGOs. Denigrating our premier Institutions has been their hall mark all along. They insinuated highly credible institutions like the GEAC, DBT, Agriculture Ministry and the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Prime Minister earlier as they were progressing the deployment of Genetic Modification (GM) technology in the country. Any farmer, leader or scientist who supported GM technology was labelled as an agent of multinationals. Such an attitude contributed to the fact that many scientists, bureaucrats, technocrats and policy makers did not dare to voice their opinions on this matter, lest they should be branded as agents of various MNCs that are present in the country.

Q:Has the moratorium on Bt crops really affected the industry growth? How do you assess the damage in terms of finances and reputation?

The moratorium on Bt brinjal has really affected the growth of agricultural biotechnology industry in the country. It was followed by the requirement to get NOC from each state government to conduct open field trials. Some of the States refused to give NOCs. The meetings of GEAC have been reduced to annual events for the last three years. All this has led to a complete stalemate in the regulatory process and policy environment became adverse to the industry growth. Almost 60 events in about 11 crops which were being progressed through the regulatory process have been brought to a standstill because of regulatory paralysis. More than 50% of these events were from public institutions. The private sector kept losing confidence and reduced their further investments while scientists of the public sector got demoralized. Questions were being

asked by International technology providers whether India would ever take a positive stand on the technology deployment in critical areas that were very important for the food security of the country.

Over Rs 10,500 crore public and private sector investments are in jeopardy for the past five years due to NGO activism. Their activities like destruction of R&D Crop field trials, trespassing of field trials, filing case in the Supreme Court against government's approval for Crop field trials, , misleading public with incorrect information instead of scientific truths during sustained campaigns led to derailment of the deployment of vital Genetic Modification technology in Indian Agriculture. This has, deprived millions of Indian farmers the opportunity to enhance their economic and social lives. It is a pity that just when the country was about to take further steps in deploying biotechnology in more crops the unfortunate moratorium on Bt Brinjal was imposed in 2010, under pressure from the same NGOs.

Research in biotechnology has suffered because of the uncertainty over policy without progress in research. The country can never understand technology and its applications better. That is what has happened in the last four years. The ultimate losers are Indian farmers who are being denied access to the best technology in the world.

Q: What are the other challenges that require special attention? Any hopes from changed regime at center?

Our growing population, reducing land and water resources, changing food patterns, climate change and stagnant crop yields acres are the major challenges we face. Food security will be our biggest challenge in the decades to come. Food inflation will be our biggest threat. Meeting the growing demand for pulses, oilseeds, meat and dairy products will be a challenge. Our crop yields and animal productivity is one of the lowest globally. Blending modern tools of biotechnology with conventional breeding is essential to produce the required food, fodder, fiber and fuel per unit land area. Technology introduction of genetic modification in crops should be evaluated in the context of crops and traits in which traditional methods have reduced crop improvements or would take too long to develop. Biotech applications in agriculture may be used not in isolation but as a part of the package of solutions to address the economic and social needs of a growing population.

We urge the new government to ensure that the process of research including open-field trials under supervision of existing regulatory bodies does not get halted. Field trials are part of research to ensure that the data generated helps to evaluate bio-safety scientifically , food safety and the efficacy of the genetically modified seeds, and any attempt to discourage such tests conducted under strict supervision of the regulators is a retrograde step.

A country like India which has a high priority on increasing agricultural productivity and alleviating rural poverty cannot afford to ignore beneficial technologies. All technologies need stewardship protocols to be followed so that we derive the best advantage with minimum collateral damage. These need to be followed strictly. That would be the correct way to go forward rather than throwing away evolving technologies.

It is time our nation witnessed concerted action for farmers, science, and economic growth. A progressive vision for farmers, food and agriculture, which Centre and State Governments, agriculture universities, the private and development sector - all work to deliver.

Q: Which are opportunity areas that you feel remain untapped and how is ABLE-AG trying to bridge the gap?

There is a great opportunity to deploy GM technology in the areas where traditional crop improvement programs have limitations in meeting the emerging challenges and demands. If we look at such opportunities and utilize them it will be good for the country. There is an urgent need for an alignment among various stakeholders about the priority areas of application of GM technology that the country needs. Such a national document will be of great help to the stakeholders in understanding where we want to go. It will help the industry to invest in the right areas without wasting any time, effort and money. We feel that Water Use Efficiency, Nitrogen Use Efficiency, Salt tolerance, herbicide tolerance are some of the traits, apart from Insect tolerance, which will help the country greatly. Output traits like nutrition enhanced crops will revolutionize the nutritional security of India. These are the applications which the industry and ABLE feel that we should pursue for the benefit of the Indian farmer and the consumer. The greatest benefit for the consumer will be access and the cost of food, which can be made consumer friendly if we can produce more using the GM technology.

Q: Are you satisfied with the work undertaken by ABLE-AG since its inception? What are your priorities for next few years?

We are quite happy with the work that we have undertaken so far but there is so much more to do. The government and the

industry should work together to identify high priority crops and traits useful for India to deploy this technology and provide necessary policy support in these areas, to deliver the best value to the farmer.

We look forward to the new government ensuring that the process of research including open-field trials under the supervision of existing regulatory bodies is not halted.

ABLE AG strongly advocates adoption of biotechnology for the benefits of farmers and food security of the country. We request the government to take all possible measures for fearless promotion of suitable technologies that will help the nation to develop in different spheres of economy. Many traits like Water Use Efficiency, Salt Tolerance and Nitrogen Use Efficiency in addition to Insect Resistance and Herbicide Tolerance are waiting to be deregulated so that the country can de-risk the lives of millions of farmers. Our priority would be to see that these technologies are brought to the country in priority crops for the country and that too in the near future. Getting the policy environment to facilitate investments in the agricultural biotechnology would be one of our priorities.

We are also interested in working with the Government in building public confidence in the technology and our regulatory structure. There is an urgent need to make the general public understand the safety aspects of GM food and we will take it up as one of the action items for us.