

I am not anti biotech industry says Dr Shiva

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In a recent interaction with Dr Vandana Shiva who is more often known as a fierce anti-GM activist, BioSpectrum tried to know the other side of the story. Happy reading!

â– Are you against all kinds of GMOs? Given the use of genetic engineering in pharma can be crucial for fighting many diseases, don't you think that opposing it is grossly unfair to patients?

Dr Shiva: Let me make this thing clear that I am only against the usage of GM in agriculture. I am not against the biotech industry or other non GM technologies associated with it. I feel that we are unnecessarily pushing for it. Leaving enough space for all to thrive freely and biodiversity has been embedded in our culture. There can be no debate on this fact. Incorporation of monoculture in agriculture, has over the period of time, given rise to increased rice production but at the cost of ignoring the millets. In Punjab, the biodiversity has suffered because of green revolution. I believe that those propagating Bt cotton as success, are not doing justice as the bollgard worm against which it was said to be effective, has become resistant.

People like Ms Kiran Mazumdar make drugs that are very much within the containment. These are such that it doesn't affect the larger environment. On the medicine part, I am not competent enough to draw any parallels with agriculture. But I am a scientist and can evaluate the claims made about the benefits offered by GM products in agriculture. And my analysis has been that we must not allow it without enough satisfactory biosafety tests.

â– What are your concerns with the biosafety? How do you justify your opposition?

Biosafety is very important in agriculture as the products like Bt brinjal and Bt Cotton can affect the biodiversity beyond repair. The scientist claim three major points over the usage of genetic engineering in agriculture. The one is it will increase yield. That has been demolished when we saw the decrease in yield or no such visible increase in yield in Bt cotton. Second is that the

pesticide usage shall decrease. That too is not justified given the experiences. Third is that it will improve farmers lives.

It has not been done not even in America. They haven't passed the bioequivalence tests. In Europe, it has happened to some extent in Europe but wherever it has happened, there are reports of organ collapse, liver shrinkage, toxins resulting in aberration alongside intestine. In America, there is something called a lee-chi gut syndrome. The pesticide spraying has increased, leading to the still baby births and spontaneous abortions in American states. Remember the warning by Dr Don Huber, who wrote a letter to US regulators, warning of the discovery of a new pathogen and a possible link between Roundup Ready (GMO) corn and soybeans and severe reproductive problems in livestock as well as widespread crop failure. In India, the Bt cotton was illegally cultivated in 1998 onwards and then it also received support from few people who benefited in long run. There were 694 farmer suicides due to it. Farmers were left with no choice.

Even Supreme court appointed committee and parliamentary standing committee have recommended the biosafety tests for ten or more years. On that note, we need more biosafety labs than a biotech regulatory authority. Our agriculture minister, Mr Sharad Pawar, tried to frame laws unilaterally but we have and will oppose any such move at all the levels. I was called to attend a meeting by the biotech industry and when I asked about the lack of biosafety tests, someone remarked that we cannot wait for more, as we will lose out on revenue and competition. My favorite line for GMO's is 'God Move Over.'

â– How do you look at the approval of Bt brinjal in Bangladesh and its impact on India?

Our then environment minister, Jairam Ramesh did public hearings on Bt brinjal issue and finally did what he thought was more important. The moratorium continues and I feel deliberate release must not be done. Let the research continue in labs on all aspects including biosafety. The implications of the Bangladesh approval will happen due to the porous border conditions with India. States such as Bengal and Orissa are the top cultivators of the brinjal, and the close proximity will certainly have an immediate effect. This will become a way of illegal cultivation. It has been a part of Monsanto's strategy everywhere, so that eventually pressure is built to legalize it. Its is a trap and my like minded colleagues are working to do do everything possible to tackle it.

â– Don't you think its better to clear the mistrust between both activists and scientists who too are an important part of society?

Not all the scientists are for the release of GM in the environment. I am a part of 250 strong scientist forum that has written to the prime minister. I don't believe it to be a debate between scientists and activists. It is making a choice between manipulated science and what is right for humanity. Shift to the low intensity, income organic farming. The supreme court has combined many cases on GMOs Dr Paroda became independent reporter. That is when the civil society is stronger.

â– What about ensuring food security through increased food production by technological means?

Increase in the production cannot only be achieved through genetic engineering. There are enough other means that can be explored. As far as food security is concerned, all of these things are in a flux. On one side, we say that decentralization of food business is a must, there are people who want to control it. The biggest loophole is that the food security bill is that it didn't ensure that food-grains be procured directly from farmers. That is why we say that the farmers who will give away all their produce, must be compensated appropriately. Improvement in distribution system is more important.