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Bio Agri Comes of Age

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Bt cotton propagation has given a new impetus to bioagri growth, development and further acceleration, says KK Narayanan, managing director, Metahelix Life Sciences, who is also the head of Special Interest Group on BioAgri sector at ABLE.

The year 2002 was a watershed year for bioagri, as it marked the approval of the first agribiotech crop, Bt cotton, for commercial cultivation. This decision meant that India could develop into a major market opportunity for transgenic crops, as it is an agricultural major.

So 2003-04 was seen as the test year for transgenic crops. The question was: will the farmers buy Bt cotton and plant it large numbers? Will it fail or flourish? The point here is that there has been a big hue and cry over Bt cotton's side effects on the

environment, its viability and affordability more than the technological capabilities of the transgenic product.

Demand increases
The passing year demonstrated the farmer's trust in transgenics. There was an increase in demand for improved seeds. The demand for the Bt cotton seeds was far ahead of the supply. And as a result, a lot of spurious and illegal Bt cotton varieties have come in many states. In fact, several seed companies, especially those who did not have the Bt version, found a gap in their portfolio as farmers were asking for Bt cotton. In that sense, it was a significant year as technology was finally reaching the end consumer.

While this demand is good for the stakeholders, there is a flip side too. There is a cause for concern as unauthorized and illegal seeds have also found their way into the fields. If not immediately, at some time in the future, the illegal Bt cotton versions are bound to fail. This is a reason for worry, as then the technology would be blamed. And the campaigners against the technology would have a point to pursue.

Positive vibes
The recent efforts of the government to reform the regulatory process are a significant step. The past and the current central governments have realized that there are many bottlenecks in the regulatory process. The National Task Force chaired by Prof. MS Swaminathan was constituted to recommend the use of biotechnology in agriculture. The Task Force has submitted its report and there are indications that the regulatory system will be revamped to make it science-based and various technologies would be thoroughly analyzed for biosafety.

The Task Force has suggested that the biotechnology regulatory policy should take into account the safety of the environment, the farmers, the ecological and economic sustainability of farming systems, the health and nutrition security of consumers, safeguarding of domestic and export trade and biosafety.

Trends
Last year, one of the noticeable trends was the increase in the number of companies willing to invest in developing technologies. Companies have also been scouting for sourcing new technologies and also trying to develop transgenic technologies. So far there were not too many players working in the transgenic area. In the agri space most companies focused on services and some had also diversified to other areas like the nutraceuticals. Though these fields certainly help in getting revenues, but the future lies in having a mechanism to incorporate transgenic technology into the seeds and then market them. The opportunities are huge in this sector.

This surge in technology development has been mainly driven by the consumer interest, which has been triggered by the first Bt crop in the country. For example, two years back a farmer had to buy the only variety of Bt cotton available in the market. Today, there are many more companies developing competing technologies. Nath Seeds has bought transgenic technology from China, JK Agri-Genetics is developing its own version of insect protected crops, Syngenta has come out with a different gene for insect protection, Metahelix is coming up with its own version, etc. The farmers have a wide choice now and people are becoming aware of it. This will ensure that good technology goes to the farmers, as each provider will be forced to demonstrate and ensure that their technology is better than that of the others. Besides, it will increase the accessibility on the price front. There will be pressure on the price and only the most efficient technologies, which have been developed in a cost effective manner will be able to gain the market share.

It is heartening to note that the national leadership, both at the bureaucratic and political levels, has responded positively to the need for such transgenic technologies. In this year's budget, there has been a thrust on agriculture and the importance of agribiotechnology was stressed. It is too early to say how much of this intention will be translated into action. Yet, it is a good beginning.