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India's Battle over Brinjal

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India, like most countries around the world, is facing an onslaught from the biotechnology industry to introduce genetically modified(GM) crops .The first and only commercially approved GM crop, in India, is Bt cotton, genetically engineered with bacillus thuringiensis (BT), developed by Monsanto, which according to them makes it resistant to a major cotton pest , the bollworm. However the Bt cotton story, in India, like in other places, is very controversial. Suicides among farmers in the cotton belt continue unabated (1). Death of sheep that foraged on Bt cotton was reported (2). The targeted pests which are supposed to be killed by the Bt engineered in the plant have in many cases developed resistance to the toxin (3). Many minor pests have evolved into major threats in the cotton fields, consequently increasing the usage of pesticides. There have been numerous reports of variable performance causing economic losses to farmers (4).

Within eight years of its introduction, Bt cotton has become very prevalent dispossessing indigenous cotton varieties. This is partly due to lack of availability of non Bt cotton seeds as seed companies have stopped producing non Bt cotton seeds. Traditional cotton varieties have almost disappeared. Organic cotton farmers and producers are struggling to find indigenous seeds; many parent lines have been contaminated by Bt cotton (5). It was also discovered that organic cotton exports from India were contaminated by Bt cotton.

However the onslaught has not stopped with GM cotton. The GM crop developers (large seed multinationals and even research institutions in the public sector) have several GM food crops under development and many of them have been approved for field testing. The continued pressure to introduce GM crops has led to the development of active resistance from civil society and aware citizens to keep India GM free. A large number of grassroots groups, working on agriculture and food issues, came together under the umbrella of ?Coalition for a GM Free India? and have been very actively working towards this. There are numerous other groups all over the country actively involved in the anti GMO battle.

In the meantime Bt brinjal (eggplant), developed by Mahyco, Indian partner of Monsanto, using Monsanto technology was approved by the genetic engineering appraisal committee (GEAC), the Indian biotechnology regulator, in October 2009, for commercial cultivation. This was despite stiff opposition from farmers, consumers, civil society, the supreme court appointed independent member in the GEAC, and negative feedback from independent scientists about the adverse health and environmental effects of Bt brinjal. The decision was referred to the Minister for Environment and Forests for final approval. Bt brinjal, if permitted, would have been the first GM food crop in India and Indians would have been the first people anywhere in the world to be subjected to this transgenic eggplant.

The battle over brinjal was fought on many fronts; creating public awareness, obtaining data from the regulator, getting evaluations from independent experts, continuous dialogue with decision makers and engaging elected representatives and state governments. As part of creating awareness among the public, the coalition member groups organized brinjal food and seed festivals, brinjal events and exhibitions, screened a documentary film ?Poison on the platter (6), organized seminars and public meetings, published articles in the media. The ?I am no lab rat? (7) campaign went to many major cities to create awareness, resulting in 10s of 1000s of petitions being sent to the Prime Minister.

Four months later, in February, 2010, The Minister for Environment and Forests, Mr.Jairam Ramesh announced an indefinite moratorium on Bt brinjal till such time that independent studies establish its long term safety from a human health and environmental perspective. The Minister arrived at the decision which he stated as ?responsible to science and responsive to society? (8) after consulting scientists, seeking public opinion and writing to the various Indian states. In his lucidly argued note, supported by a 532 page annexure of all reports/opinions received, he argued that there is no ?overriding need? to introduce Bt brinjal. Some of the major reasons he cited are: ten states expressed their apprehensions about cultivating Bt brinjal; the scientific community itself is divided on the safety of the crop; non-pesticide management (NPM) (9) is a far superior way to control and eliminate pesticide usage; and there is concern among people

about multinationals controlling food supply.

[1]

The moratorium is merely a breather. We have work ahead of us with numerous GM crops on the anvil with many including corn, rice, and potatoes at various stages of field and lab trials. Losing control over our seeds to trans-national corporations and losing our bio diversity through mono cropping of GMO crops (as experienced with Bt cotton already) are threats staring us in the face.

At this juncture it is critical to identify, conserve and propagate our indigenous seed varieties. In a world which on one hand is rapidly urbanizing and on the other is ceding control over agriculture into the hands of a few agri-business corporations, it is time for home gardeners to take on the mantle of farmers- food providers and seed keepers of the world.

Rapid introduction of genetically modified varieties into the natural environment would lead to contamination of indigenous varieties and irreversible loss of bio diversity (already being experienced in the areas where GM crops are rampant). Home gardeners around the world can play an important role in cultivating and popularizing heirloom varieties, learning to save seeds, and growing and eating traditional plant foods . This would be a great first step to conserve bio diversity. We need all hands on board to preserve our plant genetic bio diversity and our future!

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6) A documentary film made on the issue of Gm foods and Bt brinjal can be viewed online at http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/poison-on-the-platter/ [9]

7) The campaign was to say that we Indian do not want to become lab rats for testing Gm foods. Face book page of the campaign: http://www.facebook.com/iamnolabrat [10]

8) Decision on commercialization of Bt brinjal, Ministry of Environment and Forests, http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/minister_REPORT.pdf [11]

9) NPM method is being practiced by farmers across 2.5 million acres in the state of Andhra Pradesh, resulting in pesticide free food, better health and economic security for farmers.

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