

SELLING INDIAN FARMING TO CORPORATE INTERESTS ON A PLATTER : THE CASE OF BT BRINJAL

It was a black day for India when the biotech regulators of the country okayed Bt Brinjal on October 14th 2009, the first GM food crop for 'environmental clearance' (commercial cultivation). Remember, no such Genetically Modified (GM) crop exists anywhere in the world and no GM food crop has been allowed into India so far. If allowed by the Government of India, Bt Brinjal would be making its entry into India backed by several American agencies in a consortium project, led by Mahyco, Monsanto's Indian partner.

The concern with this Bt Brinjal is not just about the adverse health and environmental impacts from such a genetically modified food. Many understand Bt Brinjal to be the Trojan Horse by which the GM crops' takeover of Indian farming would be done by profit-mongering corporations. GM seeds, like several agricultural technologies that have preceded them like chemical pesticides, are ways of entrapping Indian farmers into dependency on markets for all their inputs while creating perpetual markets for the companies. This GM vegetable is also the way by which America would like to see more markets opening up to this technology which is at this point of time facing tough opposition from a majority of countries around the world. No wonder several American agencies were involved in the development of Bt Brinjal.

It is interesting how Bt Brinjal and other such crops are being sought to be sold to us on environmental grounds and citing improvement of farmers' livelihoods as the rationale. But it is time that the government re-looked at these claims at least now before proceeding further.

Many analysts point out that the current agrarian crisis in India shows that farmers have been pushed into 'treadmill' technologies and are entrapped into these unsustainable technologies which are expensive, erode productive resources, leave toxic impacts on people and other life forms and make farming enviable. GM is no solution and in fact, it will make things worse for farmers and consumers.

We all know that science is not infallible and we have seen the case of chemical pesticides wreaking havoc with the economics, ecology and health of our farming community members. When pesticides were introduced a few decades ago, the same argument that only the pest will be killed and nothing will happen to the rest of us was profered. However, we know that the many chronic and other impacts of this technology were never anticipated nor adequately assessed. Probably they were even found but not reported! Incidentally, it is the same players who gave us these toxic pesticides who are now saying that these pesticides are bad for us - which we wholeheartedly agree with - and are offering their GM seeds, without closing down their chemical businesses. It is very clear that they want to earn their profits both by selling GM seeds and agri-chemicals. While that is so, what is alarming is that this time, it is an irreversible technology. It should also be remembered that even though the claim is about pesticide use coming down, there is now a newer pesticide, a protein from inside the plant that is getting produced 24X7 from this GM plant. After advent of GM crops, agri-chemical use has actually gone up. The environmental health crisis that is already unfolding in some South American countries due to an expansion of HT GM soy are now well known and horrifying. It is in this larger context that Bt Brinjal should be resisted - against Bt Brinjal per se, as well as what these GM crops would do to our farming and farmers.

Mahyco created this new organism, Bt Brinjal, with a bacterial gene inserted into Brinjal so that a new toxin is produced inside the plant, which is toxic to certain pests that feed on the crop (fruit and shoot borer). India, with its absence of any policy framework guiding the development of GM crops, allowed this Bt Brinjal development even though we are the Centre of Origin/Diversity of Brinjal. No GM crop has been allowed to be cultivated in any region of the world which is the Centre of Origin/Diversity of that crop. However, India is unwisely moving ahead with the commercial release processes for this Bt Brinjal. There are more than 2500 varieties of Brinjal in this country. This rich

diversity which is humankind's heritage will be jeopardized irreversibly with the entry of Bt Brinjal, if it is allowed.

Further, GM foods are known to cause various health effects like allergies, damage to organs like kidneys and liver, effects on immune system, reproductive health problems etc., and Bt Brinjal can be no exception. The Indian regulatory regime does not require independent research to be taken up before a GM food is allowed and all the research with regard to biosafety of this Bt Brinjal was either done or commissioned by the crop developer. No long term studies have been undertaken either. Valid concerns have been brushed aside time and again.

But let us begin at the beginning - Bt Brinjal has not been assessed for its very need! No one can claim that it is to address food security concerns, for instance. It is not clear why we need Bt Brinjal when safer, affordable, sustainable and farmer-controlled alternatives exist for pest management. These ecological solutions have to be extended to farmers all over the country.

If Bt Brinjal is approved, consumer choices will be violated forever. They will have no way of knowing whether the brinjal that they are consuming is GM or not since all brinjals will look the same in the market. This will be a violation of their right to know, right to safe food and right to informed choices with regard to food.

Further, given that state governments have an authority over Agriculture and Health (state subjects) and given that states like Kerala and Orissa do not want such crops to be introduced, the Government of India should not be taking any steps that violates this constitutional authority vested with state governments.

Reports indicate that the regulatory processes adopted including the constitution, mandate and processes of an Expert Committee which recommended this Bt Brinjal for commercial cultivation are questionable and unacceptable. The GEAC (Genetic Engineering Approval Committee, the apex regulatory body) is reported to have taken only some hours from the time of circulating the Expert Committee report to its decision clearing Bt Brinjal for release. There is clear reason to believe that the report based on which the GEAC gave its clearance is fraught with questions and decision-making based on this is unacceptable.

At this juncture, India could do well to remember that more and more regions across the world are actively prohibiting GM crops and are declaring themselves GE-Free as more experiences of GM crops unfold around the world and more studies emerge.

The Minister for Environment & Forests is supposedly taking a view on Bt Brinjal, going through reports and feedback and is reported to be planning a consultative process in the first couple of months in 2010 (democratic and transparent processes around the very need for this Bt Brinjal should have been taken up before its R & D was allowed, in fact). However, for those who have a vision for Indian farming and rural livelihoods, the only way forward is an outright ban on all GM crops. That is the only way to have sustainable solutions for the agrarian and food crisis around us.