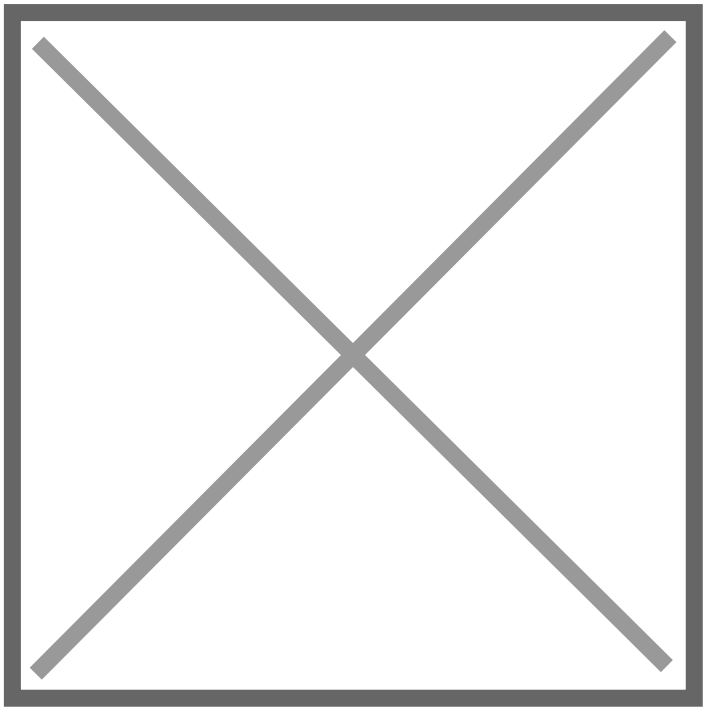
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Union Health Minister on genetically engineered crops

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The Indian media have widely publicized the opposition of the Union Minster for Health (HM) Anbumani Ramdoss to the genetically engineered (GE) crops, more particularly to Bt brinjal. Professor C Kameswara Rao of Foundation for Biotechnology Awareness and Education, Bangalore, gives us a wide perspective on this.

The HM's stand is basically rooted in factoids and political expediency and not on facts. His statement that 'When there are so many indigenous varieties of brinjal in each region of India, where is there a need to borrow this Bt Brinjal from other countries?' reflects his ignorance of the matter. All the varieties and hybrids of brinjal used in the development of Bt transgenics are the products of Indian private and public sector. The Bt gene Cry1Ac has been in extensive use in cotton, which is in commercial cultivation since 2002, as well as in several other transgenic crops in development in India, both in the public and private sectors. Bt brinjal is being developed in a public-private sector partnership and the Indian Agricultural Research Institute itself is involved in the development of Bt brinjal and several other transgenic crops.

It was the international scientific community, not the anti-tech activists, who have identified the possible biosecurity risks posed by the transgenic crops and devised testing protocols. The HM and his supporters or the anti-tech activists have no locus standi to trash the combined global scientific wisdom.

In India, the matter of biosecurity of GE crops comes under the responsibility of the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research and HM's own Indian Council of Medical Research are actively involved in biosecurity evaluation of GE foods and food crops.

The process of biosecurity regulation in the country has been reviewed and the National Biosecurity Authority Bill currently on the anvil will take care of any deficiencies and stakeholder concerns, when it comes into force. If the HM has any specific issues he should take them up with the concerned ministries and not transgress and issue public statements contrary to the stated policy of the central government.

The Indian farmers have shown their preference to Bt cotton whose acreage has increased from 0.5 mill. ha in 2002 to 6.2 mill. ha in 2007. Farmers seek reduced farm inputs and higher returns and would grow even unapproved varieties if they think that they would benefit from them. Cultivation of illegal Bt cotton (mostly in Gujarat and some other states like Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh), of some unapproved varieties of Bollgard I and II (Andhra Pradesh) and of Bt cotton even when not approved for the whole state (Orissa), are good pointers to farmers' attitude. Banning genetically engineered crops as proposed by the HM and his supporters will lead to chaos as farmers would anyway go for them even when not approved

for their region or the state, and all control on biosecurity would be lost.

The farmers' wing of Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) is reported to have mustered the support of a number of ignorant and gullible groups to pursue their politically motivated opposition to GE crops. The HM is playing to his constituency with an eye on the ensuring general elections, ignoring the fact that the whole opposition to GE crops is orchestrated for unscientific reasons, ignoring India's agricultural needs.

The HM's promise to the protesters 'to oppose the move till proper research is conducted on whether it (Bt brinjal) is safe for Indians' does not hold as a cautious or remedial approach since the damage is more severe from his other statement that the 'PMK has always opposed GM seeds. As a minister of PMK and as the Union Health Minister, I will continue to oppose it'. This violates healthy norms of coalition culture. What we have at the center is the UPA government and not the PMK government and the Union Cabinet is collectively responsible. His assertion that Bt Brinjal is being brought into the country without proper research on its safety reflects his ignorance of the voluminous biosecurity data already on the official website since September 2008 and/or a calculated indifference to the country's efforts in ensuring biosecurity of GE products.

It was reported that on December 4, 2008, a group of doctors from different streams of medicinal systems have submitted a memorandum to the HM stating that 'that Genetic Engineering in our food and farming is inherently risky and irreversible and that decision-making in India is currently happening based on the crop developer's data without any independent research for assessing long term effects'. These doctors, who are compulsive users of manufacturers recommendations and promotional literature to prescribe medicines, are only voicing tutored concerns. They cannot claim to be more knowledgeable than plant biotechnologists and seem to be as ignorant of the procedures adopted for biosecurity evaluation in the country, which is among the most stringent in the world. Over 350 million North Americans have been eating GE foods for over 12 years without any reported risks to their health and wellbeing, which is in a sense the largest human food safety trial experiment ever.

The Indian media, which believe that only issues with a negative connotation are newsworthy, gobble up all sundry nonsense and blow it out of proportion, without ever bothering to verify its veracity. The PMK group is reported to have collected some 70,000 signatures against Bt brinjal. Is this based on an informed decision taken by the signatories? Even so what is the proportion of this group compared to the country's population? Any one is free to choose or reject GE crops but does not have a right to impose their will on the others.

On the other side, Sharad Pawar, the union minister for agriculture said on December 9, 2008, that biotechnology could play a key role in the improvement of potato. He rightly said that the rules for regulation of GE crops in India are well in place. On earlier occasions he was optimistic that the Bt brinjal will soon come to the market. So far as the issues of biosafety are concerned, it does not make a difference whether it is potato or brinjal and the agriculture minister's stand is clear.

The Government of India is doing a considerable lot to ensure biosecurity of GE crops and to see that the farmers and consumers derive the benefits from the new technology like the people of several other countries. The HM's statements run contrary to the union ministry's policy and it is for the Prime Minister to control the damage caused by discordant notes emanating from his cabinet and to get rid of the jetsam.

More than blaming the HM or even the vested interest groups for unscrupulously exploiting the ignorance or indifference of the general public. I consider the agribiotech industry and the Indian scientific community, who failed to rise to the occasion, as responsible for the turbulence. As they failed to enhance public awareness on the biosecurity and the benefits of GE crops. The industry has hardly supported others who work to promote public awareness. Strong public awareness programs are an urgent need to ensure that the interest groups cannot so easily mislead the media and the public.