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Agri biotech undone by NGO protestors

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Suresh, the cat is finally out of the bag. And the cat has been let out by none other than Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh. For nearly two years, India's promising biotech agriculture sector has been shouting from the rooftop about the extraneous forces which have played dirty in the commercialization of the country's first genetically modified (GM) food crop, the Bt brinjal developed by Mahyco Monsanto.

In mid-February, in an interview to the US magazine, Science, the Prime Minister has confessed that the undue pressure exerted by foreign-funded non governmental organizations (NGOs) were the main cause of delay in the commercialization of Bt brinjal, apart from slowing down of the country's nuclear power program.

Of course, the PM did not name the NGO which has influenced the moratorium imposed on the introduction of Bt brinjal after the statutory regulatory agency, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) approved its use in the country in October 2009. After the GEAC approval, the highly educated environment minister, Mr Jairam Ramesh, overruled the scientific and regulatory opinion on Bt brinjal's introduction and used a highly unusual nationwide public consultation jamboree, orchestrated by NGOs, over the next two months. And in February 2010, Mr Ramesh used his ministerial heft to stop officially-sanctioned commercialization of Bt brinjal. Since then, the GM food research work has more or less come to a halt.

It suffices to say that apart from the dozens of local NGOs in different states, the international organization, Greenpeace, was and continues to be in the forefront of public efforts to stall the commercial cultivation of Bt brinjal in the country.

Bioagri industry leaders have been talking in whispers about the periodic public spectacle of anti-GM campaigns organized across the country to keep the issue alive. In fact, the statutory clearance given by the GEAC is more than enough to start commercial cultivation of Bt brinjal. But various state governments too have gone with the "popular" sentiment orchestrated by anti-GM protestors and stood in the way of Bt brinjal cultivation.

What is curious is that the UPA government of Dr Singh which gave official respectability to the NGO movement by setting up the National Advisory Council, staffed by NGOs, to set its policy agenda since 2004 has now turned itself against NGOs. This does not speak of very high standards of governance. Even in a democracy, there are enough legitimate channels available to make dissenting voices heard and influence public policy. But stalling the implementation of a regulatory decision on Bt brinjal on extraneous considerations is a puzzling act, not fully explained by the Prime Minister's off-the-cuff remarks on NGO power.

As the nation gets set to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the introduction of its first GM crop, the Bt cotton, next month, the bioagri industry too should reflect on its failures on the Bt brinjal front. One can understand the reticence of government scientists to speak up strongly for biotech in the agriculture sector. But the industry has not covered itself with glory in the biotech story by its reluctance to counter the anti-GM campaign with a spirited public engagement with facts and figures on the benefits of GM food products. It is still not too late for India's bioagri sector to awake from its slumber.

With this issue, BioSpectrum completes its ninth anniversary. The magazine is what it is today because of the committed and enlightened readers and leaders of the biotech industry. Happy Reading!

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