

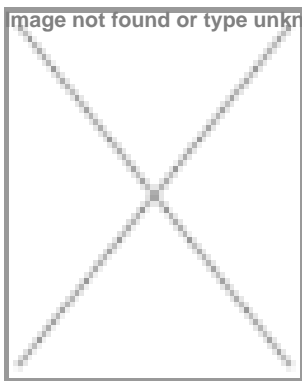
"We are ready to create public awareness on technology"

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AG, New Delhi

The Association of Biotech Led Enterprises – Agriculture Group (ABLE-AG), is a group of agricultural biotech companies in India that uses innovative technology to strengthen agriculture sector. The mandate of ABLE-AG is to promote the agribiotech sector in India at all levels. As an influential association, ABLE-AG plays a vital role in the development of appropriate policy environment and influences public perception on technology.

In an exclusive interview with BioSpectrum, Dr Shanthu Shantharam, executive director, ABLE-AG, talks about the controversy surrounding Bt brinjal in India, and clarifies some of the deliberately created urban myths about the use of genetic engineering technology in crops.

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What are your views on the controversy surrounding the moratorium on Bt brinjal?

Dr Shantharam: My biggest concern is that the whole Bt technology has been completely politicized. Because of the controversy there is an uncertainty on the future commercialization of biotech-based goods and services in India. It is really unfortunate that Bt brinjal became a victim of the ideologically motivated political campaign. The scientific knowledge, the empirical data from the field and the credible global scientific expertise have been neglected. It is no longer a fight on the safety of technology. It has become a battle of political ideologies of different groups on how agricultural development should take place. Some people claim to represent the 'public' or 'farmers' would like to shape this country's agriculture future by going back to old forms of agriculture. It is clearly conflict of ideology driven by activism of all sorts.

Some activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) allege that most of the Western science and technology developments are ill-suited to ancient culture and civilization like that of India. The opponents are well-organized and have been very successful in changing the minds of people to bring down GM technology. On the other hand, the people who support the technology, are not doing enough to counter this propaganda of vilification, misinformation and disinformation campaign against the technology. It is heartening that India's scientific academies have finally spoken and endorsed the use of genetically modified (GM) technology.

This moratorium on Bt brinjal was purely a political decision. The ministers' office was flooded with thousands of faxes and e-mails through an orchestrated campaign to stop this technology as it is a food product. They wanted the minister to be extra careful before approving it. GEAC did not do any good to itself by deferring the matter to the minister. GEAC is a statutorily appointed committee, and it is in the Ministry of Environment and Forests. When we say 'statutorily appointed committee' it means that it is the highest legal authority, and is almost like a court. Its members are like judges. When the judges give their verdict, it is supposed to be final. But, it can be challenged in a higher court (not in a higher bureaucracy). Now that GEAC has been rechristened as the Genetically Engineering Appraisal Committee, which means all future decisions will be made by a political authority, which does not bode well for technology development in the country. What is required now is to commandeer the best possible scientific expertise available in the country, and decide on lifting the moratorium.

Q Why was brinjal chosen as a crop of interest?

Dr Shantharam: Bt technology can be used in other crops such as tomato and potato, and in fact there are many crops in the pipeline. The reason for selecting brinjal is that it is grown on 55,000 hectares of land in India, and high amount of pesticide is used to control the fruit and shoot borer, the dreaded insect pest of brinjal. In addition, no other insect control technology other than chemical insecticide sprays can control this insect pest as there is no natural resistance known in the entire germplasm of brinjals. Another reason is that it is relatively very amenable to genetic transformation techniques.

Q Is there any need for labeling Bt crops when it is available in the market?

Dr Shantharam: It is very difficult to maintain market segregation of Bt from non-Bt. Rules and regulations can work when there is a mechanism to implement them. In the Indian supply chain and market place, there is no way of implementing this. A Bt brinjal and a non-Bt brinjal looks the same. A labeled Bt brinjal may not be a guarantee that it is a Bt brinjal, and the reverse is also true. Starting from the farm to dining table, the entire chain has to be changed to maintain 'true' labeling. Non-labeled brinjal may turn out to be Bt brinjal. This is the nature of the problem. The cost will go up if you segregate the two. Even in a sophisticated market system like the US, one cannot maintain segregation. When regulatory agencies have declared it safe, there is no need to label GM crops. The inability of the current market system to maintain segregation should not be used as a reason to avoid growing GM crops in the country.

Q How can biotech industry and ABLE help in changing public perception on Bt brinjal?

Dr Shantharam: As ABLE is the industry organization, our major goal is to promote agribiotech sector. We strongly promote and participate in public-private partnership and collaborations to promote technology development.

We have major responsibility to clear the misconceptions about modern biotechnology. We are trying our best to counter the false propaganda against the technology by reaching out to administrators, policy-makers, politicians, and the public at large. The point is that why would we want to unleash a technology that is inherently unsafe and we will be exposed to its bad effects too. This industry too has a sense of corporate social responsibility to bring only safe and utilitarian products of technology to the market place. We would like to form a networking relationship with scientific community to make stakeholders realize the advantages of GM technology. But, in the meanwhile, we cannot also wait for the entire public perception to change. We, as an industry, need to survive and for that, we are ready to work with any stakeholder to create public awareness and education about the technology.

So far, no substantial efforts were taken to uplift agriculture in the country. To strengthen the agriculture sector that employs 70 percent of Indian population efforts need to be done at war footing. Government needs to make big investments for infrastructure development in agriculture. As an industry, we would like to work with the government to develop conducive

investment policies. We are living in global world but there are still people who oppose direct foreign investment in this sector. But, we need to understand that this sector like others cannot grow without foreign investment, collaborations and technology partnerships.

Rahul Koul in New Delhi