

Government faces an uphill task over passage of BRAI bill

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It took three years and eleven parliament sessions for the present minister for science and technology, Mr Jaipal Reddy to introduce the BRAI bill in the parliament. Caught by the surprise were both the industry as well as the civil society members. While the industry experts were keeping a close watch on the session, they were not sure of the bill's introduction because of disruptions by the opposition over the Delhi rape case. At the same time, opposing side including the Greenpeace, National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) Left and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) too seem to have been very unsure about it .

Greenpeace in a statement issued after the introduction of the bill demanded that the bill should be sent to the joint committee of the Parliament with members from all political parties from both the houses for amendments so that it doesn't jeopardize food safety and seed sovereignty. "It is strange that Jaipal Reddy overlooked the concerns raised by political parties and the parliamentary standing committee report on GM, especially when the Technical Expert Committee recommendations are still pending at the Supreme Court. The UPA govt is trying to push the BRAI Bill amid all the confusion without much media debate or public opposition in the garb of rape incidents and Coalgate", mentioned the Greenpeace statement.

The Coalition for a GM-Free India expressed deep disappointment at the Government's action despite strong opposition from parliamentarians, scientists, civil society groups and other analysts to what they termed as a controversial and unacceptable bill. "As we have reiterated on numerous occasions, the Bill is steeped in conflict of interest as the ministry promoting biotechnology is about to house the regulator; it undermines the federal polity of our nation by overriding the authority of state governments, even though agriculture is a state subject as per the Indian constitution", said Sridhar Radhakrishnan, Convener of the Coalition.

Meanwhile, Ms Aruna Roy, a member of the National Development Council, has urged UPA chairperson, Ms Sonia Gandhi to intervene and hold back introduction of a bill on biotechnology in parliament and allow further public debate on the matter. Few members of parliament have already written to the prime minister expressing their expressing concern over the

Government of India pushing forward the BRAI Bill. Among these are the former union minister of environment, Captain Jainarain Nishad, also a Rajya Sabha MP and Prof Anil Kumar Sahani, a Rajya Sabha MP, who wrote to PM, pointing out that the BRAI Bill appears to be too centralised and therefore, contradictory to the principle of increasing decentralization of governance. Earlier, there were opinion pieces by Ms Meneka Gandhi, BJP MP and Dr Raghuvansh P Singh, RJD MP on BRAI Bill, raising various concerns with the bill that was sought to be introduced earlier on August 17, 2011.

However, various government ministers who have voiced strong support for bill include Mr Sharad Pawar, union agriculture minister, and Mr Prithviraj Chauhan, former science and technology minister and now chief minister of Maharashtra. Also, few MPs within the government have been very forthcoming on supporting the bill. "Let the scientific matters be decided by the scientists and not get caught in the administrative and political indecisiveness", was what Mr Manish Tewari, former spokesperson, Congress Party had to say last year when BioSpectrum had contacted him.

With the debate raging on whether the time was right to introduce the bill, both the sides are keeping their fingers crossed over its possible passage next week.