

“ICAR should do more on spreading awareness about GM crops”

05 March 2015 | Interviews | By Rahul Koul Koul

“ICAR should do more on spreading awareness about GM crops”



Q: Scientists feel disheartened because research done by them has been labelled controversial? Shouldn't Indian Council for Agriculture Research (ICAR) have been more forthcoming in supporting genetically modified (GM) technology?

I feel that ICAR has not taken a very active role either in promotion or research of GM crops. Many times they have permitted a lot of research projects but it has not realized that whether we are doing it for the sake of research or the end result. In agriculture, the final utility is for the farmers and I think if that is missing, then research will have little meaning. So, I always say that ICAR must take an active part in it. In case of cotton where the ministry of environment permitted so many hybrids, it is the duty of the environment minister to intervene. Although an ICAR member is present on the committee, they should have clearly conveyed that the release of material is under its purview.

Scientists doing research are demoralized yet shying away from talking about it. We have potential scientists in the country who can match anyone in the world. This should not have happened. You should allow them to permit this technology whether its India or China.

Q: What is your idea of a national biosafety regulator?

The efforts to put together a biosafety regulator earlier too have to be applauded. But then, we have those opposing the technology who are trying to create a bogey of sorts wherein they want to show that whatever is being promoted is not

correct. Therefore, to take everybody together, we need to have a regulatory system that is acceptable to all. Although I sometimes feel that it might be difficult as there are hardcore oppositions from certain sections who do it just for the sake of it. Therefore, to avoid any further delays, I propose a third party regulator not attached to any ministry with a good number of agriculture scientists.

Q: But what should be the composition of such a regulator?

You see when the bill was put before the Parliament, the composition has been made clear. I think there are three areas including pharma, agriculture and veterinary where protocols have to be standardized. My concept is clear. It is the regulatory authority's job to see whether the material being released is environmentally safe. Once you say that it is safe, the job of product testing has to be done by the authority which has the power such as ICMR or ICAR.

If we take the example of Bt brinjal, it has been proved to be safe by the regulatory authority and now whether it is effective or which hybrids are safe, should be left with ICAR.

Q: A prominent scientist once said that over-emphasis on the Bt Brinjal controversy has overshadowed the entire biotech industry. Is he right?

He is partially right. Why we say Bt brinjal is because it is a test case for Bt crops. Unless you permit it, Bt brinjal is an equally important crop as you say. Those who are spraying 45 times in Bengal to control pests may surely be willing to use the technology. When we say Bt brinjal people will be proud. However, it is not that it is the only edible crop but we are ready with tomato, potato, rice, and maize as well. But once you see the line is choked and the kind of opposition with people clamouring around it, demotivation is quite natural. We have 20 crops with research done and ready to release.

Q: What about farmer suicides in Maharashtra being linked to Bt cotton?

Basically in terms of suicidal data, all of them are not because of technology. It is all projection. As a farmer was just pointing out that there is also pressure from money lenders and existing debts are the main reason behind most of these cases.

Regarding safety, awareness on technology and its benefits, there has been a communication gap. It is always difficult for scientists to make the common man understand the insertion of a gene. If I want to talk about it in layman's language, the entire genome and particularly transgenics becomes difficult. Although we tried it in BT cotton, which is now acceptable.

The technology has been demonized as if something will happen the moment you consume any crop. What do you have to say to activists who are dead against the technology?

It is difficult to explain to a person with no scientific background. It has to be explained in layman's language. The public has got more confused due to the communication gap and hence all the bad ideas.

We have launched a mass awareness campaign in local languages to explain it to the masses who are least bothered about the technology. I am sure if we are able to do that, it will definitely help us. Activists need to think logically and not oppose it merely for ideology.

Q: Has GEAC been made toothless with no powers of implementation on what it permits?

I was told that the new government is playing an active role and there have been a few meetings. They have given permission to field crops. I have been told that there is nothing left with GEAC. That means they are already conducting those meetings. Hence, it is clear that it was made toothless by the previous government. There was some confusion on what will it prove to be after changes in name but I think they certainly have powers.

I am sure Mr Javadekar is a man of science and he will do something on this. I urge him to resolve the issues and also involve the state governments once the permissions come from the central government. Without field trials in states, the permissions will not be of much use. Policy has to be fixed. It should go forward otherwise we will be stuck.

Q : What is your vision for the agribiotech sector in India?

65 percent of area in India is dependent on rains. We should have traits of all important crops with drought tolerance. I think I will have to find food security for the nation and not be dependent. It may be Jowar, Maize, Cotton or important pulses and oil seeds. We are importing oilseeds worth Rs 9,000 crore which is avoidable if we grow our own rapeseed mustard. Classical case is Delhi University where the trials of GM mustard were halted. These issues can be resolved when concentrated upon.

Besides Chickpea, we can go ahead with pigeon pea, groundnut etc. Also can we have golden rice? I think we have done wonderful research and converted our own varieties into golden rice. We are already late and it is high time we move forward into these fields.

Q: The rush of farmers from villages to urban areas could prove disastrous for India which is an agriculture dependent country. What is your take on this?

Lucrative farming has to come with more of precision agriculture. Like in case of grape farmers who can live in cities and yet cultivate grape plants, the love for farming can be increased through awareness.

As far as entrepreneurship is concerned, there are a lot of people interested in production, processing, and marketing. There are equal opportunities existing equally in primary, secondary, and tertiary agriculture. While urban areas can be used for testing agriculture produce but ultimately rural areas too benefit.