

Misplaced outrage over decision to halt GM crop trials

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The reported assurance of Environment Minister, Mr Prakash Javadekar, to anti-GM activists who called on him to keep in abeyance the regulatory approval for the field trials of 15 crops, has predictably created a storm across the country.

The mainstream media has accused the Narendra Modi government of pandering to the whims of organizations like the Swadesi Jagaran Manch (SJM) and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) in preventing cultivation of new genetically modified (GM) crops in the country. Both these organizations are loose affiliates of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is the dominant constituent of the ruling NDA coalition.

But most of these die-hard opponents of the government decision, to put on hold the regulatory approval taken by the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) on July 18, 2014, are missing the point. The Modi government would have actually betrayed the trust of the people if it allowed introduction of new GM crops. For the BJP manifesto in 2014 had clearly stated that "GM foods will not be allowed without full scientific evaluation of their long-term impact on soil production and biological impact on consumers."

Obviously, the manifesto had taken inputs from various affiliated organizations and so the party could not have gone against its stated policy after assuming power. Of the 15 approvals for confined trials granted by GEAC, four are food crops -- mustard, brinjal, rice and chickpea. And the GEAC has also allowed the import of GM soybean oil by three MNCs -- Monsanto, Bayer BioScience and BASF.

A leading columnist Mr Swaminathan Anklesaria Aiyer has argued in The Economic Times that the government should approve GM crops on the occasion of the 100th Birth Anniversary of Dr Norman Borlaug this year. Dr Borlaug supplied the hybrid seed technologies to India in 1960s that led to the Green Revolution.

What is the real situation in India? The country has not banned GM crops. The first GM crop, Bt cotton, was allowed 11 years ago and is a runaway success. Farmers have accepted it. The actual debate is about the use of GM food crops. The country needs a rational debate on the costs and benefits of growing GM crops.

It must be remembered that the hybrid technology was developed by publicly funded laboratories under the United Nations system. It was further adopted to Indian conditions by the large network of government agricultural universities and institutions. The benefits accrued to the society.

On the other hand, the GM technology is a near monopoly of US based multinational, Monsanto Corporation. On every packet of GM seeds sold in the country and in 26 other countries where it is allowed, Monsanto earns a handsome 'technology fee'. Most of the opposition to GM technology in India and most of Europe, even the USA, comes from a vast coalition of civil society groups who are vehemently opposed to the emergence of Monsanto as the new Czar of global food markets.

It is safe to assume that Monsanto is the red rag that pulls all GM opponents in the direction and not really the technology.

Modi government should allow experimental trials of GM crops in India to study its impact but it should be done by Indian government scientists and not by private companies. The public trust in our agricultural research system is still very high and it should be used to the fullest to resolve the contentious GM crops issue at the earliest.