

The testing of GM crops in India is atrocious

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Our biosafety testing process is dangerous, says Suman Sahai, Gene Campaign.

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Dr Suman Sahai, president, Gene Campaign, New Delhi

Gene Campaign is recognized as a leading research and advocacy organization working in the field of bioresources, farmers' and community rights, intellectual property rights and indigenous knowledge, biopiracy, issues related with GE food and crops.

I am very glad that at least somebody in the government has acknowledged the danger posed by GM crops given the current state of biosafety norms. As a scientist who is concerned about the release of genetically engineered crops, I would like to say that the testing of GM crops in India is atrocious. The public is not aware of what has been tested and if it has been tested as well. In the case of Bt Brinjal, we had asked for information on allergenicity and toxicity studies for which we were told that the information is confidential. If a product is tested for food safety, that data has to be made available to the public. Our biosafety testing process is incompetent and because it's not transparent it is very dangerous.

Second, I think it is imperative to test food far more efficaciously than it is being done and also the adoption must be subject to public acceptance. Was there any report assessment done on the priorities of Indian agriculture to say that Bt Brinjal is the

most pressing need of the hour both for Indian agriculture and the Indian consumers? There has to be a proper study to assess the need of the particular crop before it is tested and trials are conducted. We visited the rice trials being done by Mahyco in Jharkhand where the trials were being done in the farmers field, in open air. There is no way of isolating the seed, no supervision of the crop after harvest, so much so that the second generation has come up. But the company insisted that they had burnt the harvest. This is possibly the worst form of violation that one can think of. We have written to GEAC but with no replies, not even acknowledging the letter. Companies are only buying influence in India by spending money and promoting their own vested interests at the expense of the consumer.

To make sure that GM food is safe, we need to have a transparent system, wherein the food safety data is made available to the public in terms of what is the health impact. The biosafety protocol mentions very clearly that the public has to be involved in the decision making process and its time we go ahead with it. No further field trials should be allowed until it is made clear of what all battery of tests are being conducted and how they are being conducted. Stringent biosafety testing experts have to be deputed in regulatory authorities along with the overhaul of the entire legal framework. Unless these things happen, genetically engineered crops will continue to be unsafe.