

## Seed business should be our own business

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If today, any country wishes to control the destiny of its own, it is extremely unlikely that the country would wage a war against us, like what America has recently done in Iraq, for there are much more subtle and insidious ways of taking the reins of another's destiny in one's hand than an Afghanistan or Iraq-like attack. Some 70 percent of our people derive their total sustenance from agriculture or agriculture-related activities. The same is true of several other populous countries such as Nigeria with 120 million.

Agriculture is dependent on seeds and agrochemicals. Therefore, any one who controls our seed and agrochemical production, essentially controls us. In other words, if our seed and agrochemical production comes to be controlled entirely by multinational corporations (MNCs) which have their base in certain developed countries, we would cease to be an independent country and our people would survive only at the whims and fancies of the country where such corporations are located, and only in the manner in which the MNC-bureaucracy-government nexus wishes them to.

It is, unfortunately, not widely known that India was not immune to such efforts even as far back as 20 years. For example, between 1979 and 1986, two separate attempts were made by an American company to market an agrochemical in the country which was claimed to augment nutritional support for plants, enrich soil fertility, help crops absorb and assimilate plant nutrients better (thus reducing the input of fertilizers), make plants more drought and stress resistant, increase the yield by 20 to 50 percent, and increase the quality of the product, such as taste or shelf life! In other words, the holy-grail of agriculture! A state government even gave a substantial loan to a party in Andhra Pradesh to set up a subsidiary of this American company. The claims of the company were subsequently proven to be absurd, and intervention by us prevented

the American company, making the fake claim, from getting a foothold in India. If this hadn't been done, and high-pressure advertising had persuaded our farmers to use the product, our yields would have gone down, as had happened with another product in Africa earlier, and we would have been back to the situation before the Green Revolution that led to the PL-480 fiasco.

Similarly, in 1981, the United States' Environmental Protection Agency had just about persuaded a number of Indian scientists to work on chlorinated aromatics (hydrocarbons), which were being banned in the West as pesticides. The objective was to eventually have them marketed in our country through America-centered MNCs. Fortunately again, through intervention of the Prime Minister's office, we were able to prevent laying the seeds of many Bhopal-like tragedies. The details of the above two stories are being published in the Economic and Political Weekly.

The primary purpose of setting up first the National Biotechnology Board in 1983 and then the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) in 1986 was to have R&D-cum-production facilities in public, private or joint sectors in the following eight areas: genetic engineering, immunotechnologies, enzyme technologies, tissue culture, photosynthesis, production of alcohol from non-conventional sources, plant-based drugs and drug formulations, and energy plantations. But not a single such organization was set up by the DBT or through its support.

If, indeed, this had happened as was hoped at that time, it would have given enormous boost to biotechnology in the private sector, just what Indian Drugs and Pharmaceuticals Ltd (IDPL) did for the drug sector, and the Electronics Corporation of India (ECIL) for the electronics sector or what Sam Pitroda's effort then and Ashok Jhunjhunwala's effort now have done for our communications sector.

We would then have had our own GM crops by now, and an appropriate risk assessment and evaluation system for all biotechnology products including GM crops, which would have allowed us to build public confidence in the new biotechnologies by ensuring that there shall be no exploitation of our people by bureaucracy, government or MNCs. If China and Australia can make their own Bt cotton, why not India?

But we did not do all this because our government and bureaucracy have had no compunction in selling us to multinational corporations by becoming a part of the well-known nexus between MNCs, governments and bureaucracy. In more than 20 years of NBTB and DBT, nothing worthwhile has been done in the public sector in the area of biotechnology, which has brought social and/or economic benefit to the people of this country. On the contrary, the DBT has played a role in compromising the real independence of the country by helping MNCs acquire full control over more than 30 percent of seed business in our country. None of the seeds of the MNCs have been such that we couldn't produce ourselves, or for which indigenous alternatives have not existed.

We have thus two choices today: either we continue with what has been happening in which case India will cease to be a free country, or we resolve, through an Act of the Parliament, that seed business will be entirely our own business—be it in the government sector, in the private sector, or in the joint sector. When that happens, modern biotechnology would have an important role to play in ensuring that the required seeds of the best possible quality are made available easily and at a reasonable price to our farmers.

We would also need to ensure that the Provisions of the bill passed by the Parliament in 2002 granting certain rights to farmers—for example, in respect of their seeds—are adhered to, even if they come in conflict with the provisions of international agreements such as UPOV that our government has signed.

If we need seeds from abroad, the deal should be made through an appropriate agency of the government whose credentials and credibility are not in doubt. The control over such seeds when used in India should be our own and not that of a foreign organization.

PM Bhargava