

Defying the march of technology

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The fact that government regulators are not always the best judges of the areas they regulate has been proved repeatedly in many segments in India and abroad. The latest decision of India's regulator for genetically modified products, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) to reject a variety of Bt cotton tailored for growing in North India has only reinforced this notion.

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GEAC might have been influenced by media reports about the mixed results of a different variety of Bt cotton grown in southern states in the first year of cropping after formal approval last year. At least the regulator could have cited this as the reason and initiated a national debate on the issue. Instead, GEAC had rejected the new variety for an entirely unconnected reason, that it may not offer the best resistance against a particular pest widely prevalent in North India. Interestingly, the Bt cotton variety meant for North India did not claim to offer resistance against this pest. Whatever maybe the real reason, at least the head of the regulatory body has been replaced swiftly by the government. Of course, the opponents of GM crops attribute this to their sustained campaign against another GEAC decision to stop the entry of GM maize as gift by an international voluntary agency and related pressure by foreign companies.

Will things change for the better with a new look GEAC in place? It may not, really. In the absence of a clearly articulated national policy on GM products, similar arbitrary decisions are bound to be taken by the regulator in the future too. The reaction of the market forces to the GEAC decision was on unexpected lines. Indian Express reported that farmers in Gujarat were planting an unapproved, home-made variety GM cotton developed by crossing the approved Bt cotton variety with other

illegal varieties to reap the benefits of GM technology. Three years ago too, farmers in the state had done the same thing and the government was then forced to destroy such crops and pay them compensation. Uncontrolled use of high tech products like GM seeds is far more dangerous to the environment than the regulated use of these seeds under the watchful eyes of experts. But such wisdom rarely dawns on our regulators.

GEAC has friends in the government. In the late 1980s, our telecom regulators stopped the entry of cellular telephone services on the reasoning that it was 'elitist'. Again a decade later, they banned the entry of Internet-based telephone services for a similar reason. And both these services are thriving with government patronage itself now. There are many such areas where the regulators had to eat their own words. GM products may indeed be another such area. A sensible minister like Arun Shourie has suggested a more liberal policy on GM products because it was bound to be used in large scale few years down the line anyway. For how long should the nation suffer the fools who try to stop the march of technology in the mistaken belief that they know it better than anyone else? And then scramble to catch up with the rest of the world in the same areas which we had discarded earlier.

