

GM industry and science - Busy exploiting hunger

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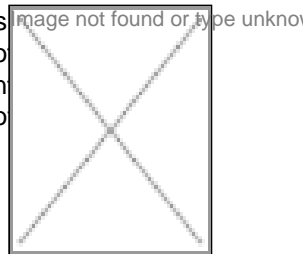


At the same time, in the past few months and for that matter a trend that continues from a couple of years ago, a few educated entrepreneurs in the Karnataka's capital, Bangalore, have suddenly become the darling of the state exchequer. Many foreign companies, most of them unable to operate in the hostile environment against GM crops in the west, have moved shop to Bangalore. Invariably, they all come with the promise of higher crop yields, nutritional crops, and with the underlying thrust on eradicating hunger.

It isn't therefore surprising to see Bangalore hosting five-star conclaves every month or so and that too in the name of fighting hunger. None of the delegates, and I repeat, none of them have ever stepped out of the hotels to even visit and meet the families of those who laid down their lives essentially to sustain flawed policies, including the misplaced emphasis on crop biotechnology.

The biotech epidemic has now spread wide. Karnataka is not the only state to have doled out state largesse to a handful of industrialists and business houses. If the recent surveys and reports in BioSpectrum is any indication, many other state governments are queuing with red carpet. Isn't it surprising that the same politicians who were once despised by the industrialists have now become their comrades in arm? Isn't it surprising that the same elite class that once blamed the "politician-engineer-contractor" nexus for siphoning off the state funds is now merrily part of the new age trio that comprises the "politician-industry-scientist"?

Industrialists are not alone. Let us examine the dubious role of agricultural scientists, part of the new age tribe. "When was the last time you had organized a national conference on farmers suicides?" I asked a group of distinguished agricultural



scientists participating in a recent national seminar on the need for a strong regulatory mechanism for GM crops at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi. "When was the last time you had organized a meeting on the shameful paradox of plenty that continues to plague the country—millions living in abject hunger while the mountains of food grains rot in the open?" The resulting silence is deafening.

In 2002-03, nearly 17 million tonnes from the unmanageable food surplus has been diverted for exports, and that too at a price that was actually meant for people living below the poverty line. Another six million tonnes were released for the trade at the same price. A year back, the country had a staggering food surplus of 62 million tonnes, stacked in the open and faced with the vagaries of the weather. A report of the Standing Committee of Parliament had estimated that the government was spending Rs 6,200 crore every year to maintain these food stocks. If every bag of grain in the godowns was to be put in a row, it would stretch to the moon and back.

Agricultural scientists have refrained to debate on this criminal apathy. GM industry too has very conveniently ducked this uncomfortable question. Both have instead joined hands to pry open whatever little that remains of the state exchequer. Aided and abetted by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), continue to organize seminars/workshops/conferences in league with the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences, Indian Council of Agricultural Research and The Energy Research Institute (TERI) on topics like the role of biotechnology in fighting hunger.

In the last few months, Monsanto, the torch bearer of the GM industry, has pulled out of Europe; cut up to 9 percent of its global workforce, reported a \$188 million loss; paid \$600 million in compensation to 20,000 residents of Anniston, Alabama; seen a big drop in share value and now pulled out of Pharmaceutical Crops. In Britain, in what is seen as a major blow to the industry, Bayer Crop Sciences, a key GM crop developer, has decided to halt trials of genetically modified plants. Bayer was the last company carrying out GM trials in the UK.

In recent months, more than 20,000 people in Britain had turned out in meetings and 37,000 people had filled in questionnaires in response to a nation wide debate, aptly called "GM Nation?" In an overwhelmingly clear verdict, 98 per cent of them rejected the introduction of GM crops, a majority of them were in fact hostile to the idea. In New Zealand, some 9,000 protestors had marched through the streets of Auckland, some call it the biggest demonstration since the Vietnam War, to show the government the groundswell of public opinion against GM crops. Faraway in Brazil, the state of Parana, which declared itself a transgenics-free territory, has held some 800 trucks—some of them from Paraguay—carrying genetically modified soy.

The biggest-ever scientific research trials, and that too carried by the British government science agencies, have established what was widely known and feared: GM crops do an irreparable damage to wildlife and biodiversity. Cross-pollination between GM plants and their wild relatives is inevitable and could create hybrid superweeds resistant to the most powerful herbicides. The results of the research trials, which too were rigged, were so obvious that scientists were actually unable to hide them any longer. Why did I say rigged, is because it subsequently became known that researchers had used a highly toxic chemical on the non-GM maize crop, while the GM crop was treated just once with another chemical, so allowing weeds and insects to thrive.

Two years later after the controversy shrouding the contamination of maize—one of the world's most important food crops—in its centre of origin in Mexico broke, the Mexican government (and also the scientific community) have now acknowledged that Mexico's traditional maize crop is contaminated with DNA from GM maize despite a government prohibition on the planting of GM seeds. The contamination is much widespread than what was earlier reported. Isn't it therefore worrying that despite the known facts, the Department of Biotechnology has given a green signal for research on GM corn in India?

The hype that is being created through the gullible media is based more or less on lies. The Independent, London (Oct 12, 2003) screams: "Ministers knew of the environmental dangers, but the tests were designed not to focus on this." Wasn't the same prescription followed for the tests on Bt cotton in India? And as European Union Environment Commissioner, Margot Wallstrom, said: "They tried to lie to people, they tried to force it upon people ... So I hope they have definitely learnt a lesson from it and especially when they now try to argue that this will try to solve the problems of starvation in the world. It will solve starvation among shareholders, but not the developing world unfortunately."

In India too, spearheaded by the Department of Biotechnology, a massive disinformation campaign has been launched. The reason is simple: stakes are so high that if India rejects the faulty technology, there will be no safe haven for the discredited industry. And India, which has traditionally accepted, and that too with a lot of respect, almost all kinds of rubbish from the western countries—be it cow dung, toxic wastes, obsolete industrial technology, sub-standard automobiles, cattle feed in the name of food commodities, no eyebrows are raised in accepting an unwanted technology, which comes with the more

acceptable and emotional tag of removing hunger.

In reality, neither the politicians, nor the industry and not even the agricultural scientists are actually interested anymore in fighting hunger. Under such circumstances, more and more state governments will follow the trend initiated by Andhra Pradesh – build up a cadre of psychiatrists to advise farmers not to commit suicide.

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