

Genetically Engineered “Terminator Seeds”. Death and Destruction of Agriculture

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The widely held belief is that genetically modified ‘terminator seeds’ are not available on the commercial market anywhere. Since 2001, there has been a de facto worldwide moratorium on the use of terminator technology (UN Convention on Biological Diversity). By definition, such seeds are genetically engineered to make them sterile and unusable for replanting, resulting in farmers having to buy new seeds from a central supplier each year.

Under Article 28 of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (the TRIPS Agreement), “planting, harvesting, saving, re-planting, and exchanging seeds of patented plants, or of plants containing patented cells and genes, constitutes use,” and is prohibited by the intellectual property laws of signatory states

Previously, farmers just replanted their own seeds and exchanged them among themselves. As with the forced enclosure of common land in England hundreds of years ago, ordinary farmers today are being denied access to their heritage too: the common exchanging, saving, evolving and breeding of seeds. By using various legal and political instruments, through seed monopolies and seed patenting, big agribusiness has taken over the cotton seed market, especially in India, where over 90 to 95 percent of all cotton is now genetically modified and controlled by big corporations.

It is frequently argued that the high debt incurred by Indian farmers and resultant farmer suicides (over 250,000 since 1997) have largely resulted from the need to purchase costly pesticides and expensive seeds each year because they contain a ‘terminator’ gene. Environmentalist Vandana Shiva has taken a good deal of flak from some quarters for implying that seeds with ‘non-renewable’ genetic traits are responsible for the mass farmer suicides in India. Her most strident critics say that this is a much-propagated myth or outright lie, given the global ban on the commercial use of ‘terminator’ seeds. So, who are we to believe?

Tiruvadi Jagadisan worked with Monsanto for nearly two decades, including eight years as the managing director of India operations. The former Monsanto boss said government regulatory agencies with which the company used to deal with in the 1980s simply depended on data supplied by the company while giving approvals to herbicides.

As reported in India Today in 2009, he is on record as saying that India’s Central Insecticide Board simply accepted foreign data supplied by Monsanto and did not even have a test tube to validate the data and, at times, the data itself was faked. Jagadisan stated that Monsanto

was getting into the seed business and that he had information that a 'terminator gene' was to be incorporated in the seeds being supplied by the firm.

It begs the question, who can we trust? Monsanto, a company with a more than dubious history of safety standards and scruples, and state regulatory bodies in India, a country where corruption throughout officialdom runs deep and is well documented, or people like Vandana Shiva and farmers on the ground who suspect terminator technology is already a reality?

Back in 2005, biologist Pushpa Bhargava alleged that there were reports that unapproved varieties of several genetically modified crops were being sold to farmers. He spoke of terminator seeds being sold to farmers and stated that one farmer came to him with some samples of sterile seeds and wanted him to test them to see whether they were terminator seeds. Dr Bhargava urged the central government to wake up to these happenings and take urgent steps.

The real experts, the farmers with generations of tradition and know-how to call upon, suspect something is amiss.

“We do not buy seeds from the market because we suspect they may be contaminated with genetically engineered or terminator seeds,” Pavamma, a Dalit woman, near the town of Zaheerabad, as quoted in 'Women in India take on Monsanto' by Arun Shrivastava, Global Research, 9 Oct, 2006

The European Union has already suspected Indian Basmati rice could be contaminated with GMOs, despite, as with 'terminator seeds', GM food crops not having been 'officially' released onto the commercial market in India. How stringent are the checks on crops in India, whether in terms of 'terminator' technology or GMOs in general?

Either way, due to the corporate patenting and monopolization of GM seeds, farmers are compelled to regularly buy expensive seeds and use excessive amounts of chemicals on their crops. They thus incur massive debt due to spiraling input costs and weak returns as a result of US agribusiness manipulating global commodity prices courtesy of policies enacted on its behalf by the US government.

While the debate rages as to whether certain seeds contain a 'terminator gene' or more likely some other trait that at least diminishes seed virility, the outcome of global policies that have benefited big agribusiness, as well as seed patenting and seed monopoly (and the swallowing the seed companies' pesticides!) has been the widespread termination of farmers' lives in India. [With reports of collapsed cotton yields throughout the state of Maharashtra in India](#), 'cutting edge' biotechnology is proving to be terminal on many levels.

Regardless of the absence or presence of any 'terminator' gene, biotech products are too often proving to be 'terminator seeds' in all but name.

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