

GMOs and the Destruction of Indian Agriculture: Government in Collusion with the Biotech Conglomerates

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Global Research, August 15, 2013

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

Released in late July, the final report of India's Supreme Court-appointed Technical Expert Committee (TEC) on field trials of genetically modified crops reveals all of what is wrong with governance and regulation in India when it comes to GMOs (genetically-modified organisms). So says Aruna Rodrigues, lead petitioner in the Supreme Court for a moratorium on GMOs. This report is the fourth official report which exposes the lack of integrity, independence and scientific expertise in assessing GMO risk.

The TEC recommends that there should be an indefinite stoppage of all open field trials of GM crops, conditional on systemic corrections, including comprehensive and rigorous risk assessment protocols. The report includes a specific focus on Bt food crops. It also calls for a ban on the environmental release of any GMO where India is the centre of origin or diversity. It also says herbicide tolerant (HT) crops, targeted for introduction by the regulator, should not be open field-tested. The TEC "finds them completely unsuitable in the Indian context as HT crops are likely to exert a highly adverse impact over time on sustainable agriculture, rural livelihoods, and environment."

Writing in The Hindu on 12 August, Rodrigues states:

"Sound science and factual data form the basis of the TEC decisions. There is practical and ethical sense too. The TEC insists that the government bring in independence, scientific expertise, transparency, rigour and participative democracy into GMO regulation and policy. The accent is on bio-safety."

She goes on to discuss some of the dangers involved in exposing huge populations to the risks associated with GMO. It is simply not good enough to treat people as human guinea pigs, without their knowledge or consent:

"GMOs produce "unintended effects" that are not immediately apparent and may take years to detect. This is a laboratory-based, potent technology, described by WHO as "unnatural." The risk assessment (RA) protocols for GMOs are an evolving process to be performed by qualified and experienced experts who must be responsive to the latest scientific knowledge. The fact is that GMOs involve us in a big experiment in the idea that human agencies can perform adequate risk assessment, which, it is expected, will deliver safety at every level/dimension of their impact on us — the environment, farming systems, preservation of biodiversity, human and animal safety."

As to the efficacy of GMOs, evidence is mounting that they are bad for health, bad for the environment, bad for agriculture and bad for food security:

“After 20 years since the first GM crop was commercialised in the U.S., there is increasing evidence, not less, of the health and environment risks from these crops. Furthermore, we now have 20 years of crop statistics from the U.S., of two kinds of crops that currently make up over 95 per cent of all GM crops cultivated globally, (like Bt cotton) Bt and HT crops. The statistics demonstrate declining yields. GM yields are significantly lower than yields from non-GM crops. Pesticide use, the great “industry” claim on these GM crops, instead of coming down, has gone up exponentially. In India, notwithstanding the hype of the industry, the regulators and the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), Bt cotton yield is levelling off to levels barely higher than they were before the introduction of Bt.”

Rodrigues also wants to know where is the advantage and why are we experimenting given all the attendant risks? We have hard evidence from every U.N. study and particularly the World Bank-funded International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge and Science for Development Report, which India signed in 2008.

“The IAASTD was the work of over 400 scientists and took four years to complete. It was twice peer reviewed. The report states we must look to small-holder, traditional farming to deliver food security in third world countries through agri-ecological systems which are sustainable. Governments must invest in these systems. This is the clear evidence.”

Unsurprisingly, the response to the TEC Final Report came immediately from the Ministry of Agriculture, which strongly opposed the report. This, according to Rodrigues, was to be expected given the conflict of interests:

“The Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) promotes PPPs (Public-Private-Partnerships) with the biotechnology industry. It does this with the active backing of the Ministry of Science and Technology. The MoA has handed Monsanto and the industry access to our agri-research public institutions placing them in a position to seriously influence agri-policy in India. You cannot have a conflict of interest larger or more alarming than this one. Today, Monsanto decides which Bt cotton hybrids are planted — and where. Monsanto owns over 90 per cent of planted cotton seed, all of it Bt cotton.”

All the other staggering scams rocking the nation do have the possibility of recovery and reversal, but, as Rodrigues argues, the GM scam will be of a scale hitherto unknown:

“It will also not be reversible because environmental contamination over time will be indelible. We have had the National Academies of Science give a clean chit of biosafety to GM crops — doing that by using paragraphs lifted wholesale from the industry’s own literature! Likewise, Ministers in the PMO who know nothing about the risks of GMOs have similarly sung the virtues of Bt Brinjal and its safety to an erstwhile Minister of Health. They have used, literally, “cut & paste” evidence from the biotech lobby’s “puff” material. Are these officials then, “un-caged corporate parrots?”

Rodrigues argues that Ministries, least of all “promoting” Ministries, should not have the authority to allow the novel technology of GMOs into Indian agriculture bypassing authentic democratic processes. Such processes require the widest possible — and transparent — consultation across India, not least because it is an entire nation that will quite literally have to eat the outcome of a GM policy that delivers up Indian agriculture to it.

The full article by Aruna Rodrigues can be read here:

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/nip-this-in-the-bud/article5012989.ece#comments>

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