

Bt cotton trap

In India, cotton plants which had inserted genes of a bacteria, *Bacillus Thuringiensis*(Bt) to fight bollworm, has been full of controversy. The debate got more attention with the planting of 10,000 hectares of land with Bt cotton in Gujarat in February 2002.

Fifteen years ago, to kill the American bollworm in cotton plants, various pesticides were sprayed. The deadly chemicals proved fatal as the plants developed resistance to these pesticides. The farmers were asked to use stronger pesticides. And they did so. But with no results. The farmers were at dead end. To make matters worse, they were buried in huge debt as they were borrowing more and more to cope up with the crop failure. This was a vicious cycle they were trapped in.

Bt cotton was introduced in 1990. With the promise to cure all ills. And Monsanto — a transnational company, with its GM variety of cotton seeds - seeds that are resistant to the American Bollworm pest - offered to solve all the problems.

Environmentalists feel that Bt cotton is no cure to the pest infestation while crop rotation is. In 2001, in the Indian Science Congress, it was agreed that producing healthy cotton seeds should be encouraged. And that as pest control measures, Neem and Garlic has proved more potent than pyrethroids and endosulphan.

The pest has shown resistance to Bt cotton in Australia and China where it was introduced on large tracts of land. In India it will be all the more fatal as unlike China and Australia the farm holdings are small. And contamination will be collectively on larger tracts of land.

It is the seed-selling multinationals that will benefit, not the farmers. Like the increased use of pesticides this time they will fall in the trap of these multinationals producing better seeds every year.

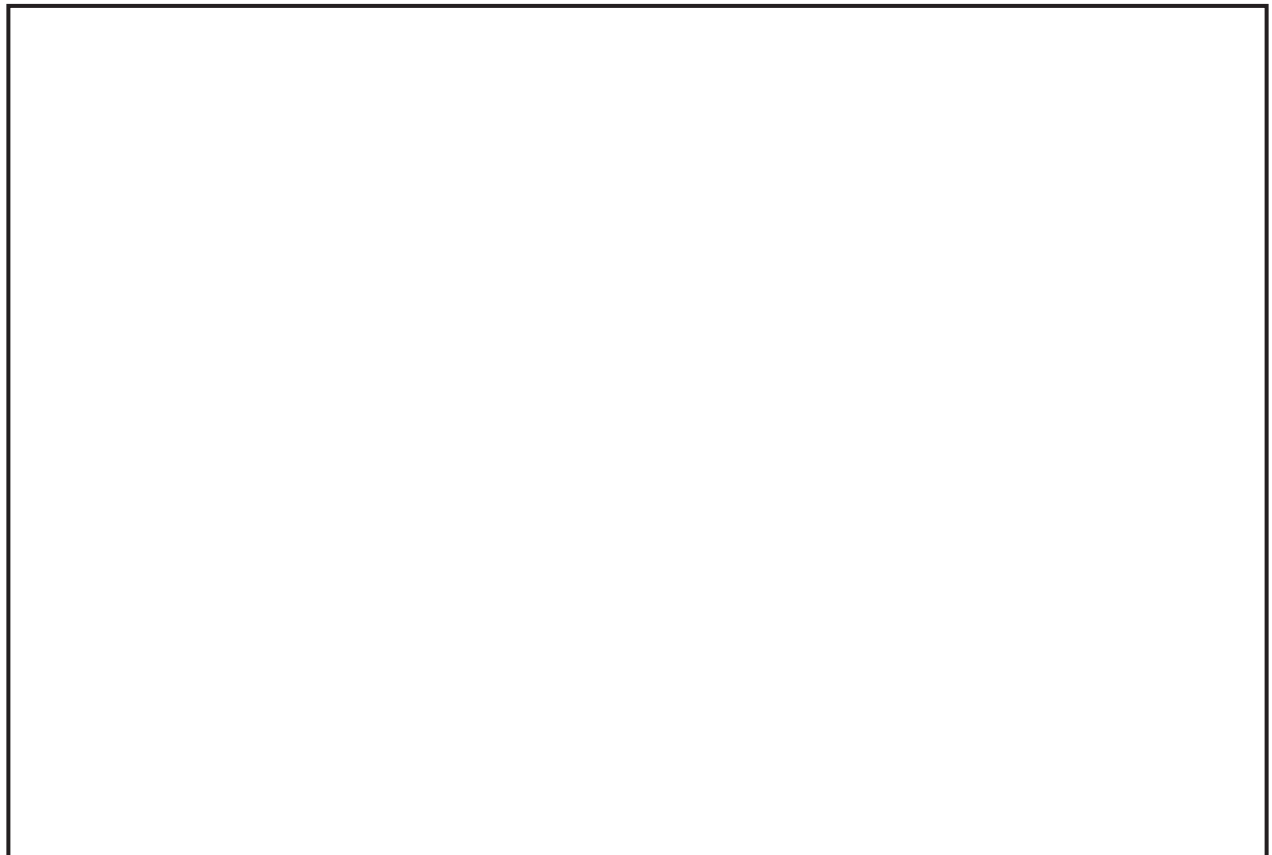
Then there are also the seeds induced with traits that make them sterile after first harvest — terminator seeds — forcing the farmer to buy new seeds every time.

The countries that are the major exporters of GMOs are US, Argentina, Canada. They are known as the Miami Group. They do not want trade regulations and no strict rules of labelling the product. Without labelling or with limited labelling, the product cannot be identified whether it is a GMO or not. Even if some percentage of seeds in a bag are GM it becomes important to label it as even a small percentage of seeds can ruin the entire crop. This group also does not want to be held liable of any thing that goes wrong with the crop or livestock.

Most developing countries want to protect the rights of the local people. They want proper labelling to be done as a regulatory and precautionary measure. They also want laws that would hold someone accountable or liable for any GM product that creates a problem.

Countries like Japan, Mexico, Norway, South Korea and Switzerland are trying to bridge the differences between the two groups. They understand the potential of GM. And soon want an end to the controversy as they too want a share in the trade pie.

Ask your teacher to tell you more about the issue. Then write an open letter to the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) about the pros and cons of Bt cotton. Send it to any newspaper requesting them to print it as an open letter from a concerned student. Write also to The Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and to agriculture minister Ajit Singh.



The demand for GMOs in India was US \$1,850 million in 2000.