

Who fears GMOs?

Farmer and consumer groups are cautious

The 'gene revolution' like the 'green revolution' could boost the food production say the propagators of the theory. But they forget that 'green revolution' was a government initiative the world over benefiting the marginalised farmer (though it flipped over and benefited the pesticide industry). 80% of the biotech firms are private conglomerates which spend huge sums in developing the technical know-how solely driven by the profit motive.

Samuel Ochieng of Kenya Consumer Information Network says, 'We are not saying there are no benefits. The issue is that we are being rushed and there is not enough consultation'

When GM products first hit the market the proponents said that these will feed the world. This is the solution to world food problems. Those against it said it will spell disaster. Biotech food is not the magical solution to the food problem.

According to the journal, *New Scientist*, researchers may not

Small farms

Threat to their control over seed varieties

Take the case of Percy Schmeiser, a farmer in Canada. He was taken to court by *Monsanto*, the biggest GM company in the world, as some GMO canola plants were found in his fields. This plant, whose fruits bear canola oil are wind pollinated. The court ordered that it didn't matter how it landed up in Schmeiser's field but it was his fault that it was growing in his field. Schmeiser, a recipient of Mahatma Gandhi Award in the year 2000 lost the case and had to pay a sum of US\$153,000 as compensation to the multinational biotech companies.

Environmentalists are angry with the decision. They say it sets a wrong precedence to all multinationals. They know genetically modifying any living being is a risky business. And its long-term repercussions do not benefit the poor marginalised farmer. They say that the cons outweigh the pros. Moreover dominance of one variety of crop over the others cannot be ruled out. They fear that the Third World countries having weak laws can be made into safe havens for experimenting with these crops. Devendra Sharma, a trade and agriculture analyst, says that extensive Bt cotton farming in China and Australia has shown that pests like bollworm have become resistant to the single gene of the bacteria that is inserted to protect the plant from infection. Now the number of genes needs to be increased.

Only these farmers who can afford to bear the cost and those who have not borne the brunt of the technology are happy with the GM traits in the plants. They see an immediate rosy picture. The crops have high yield and the quality is good. But it is the informed farmer who would rather share seeds with their neighbours and not produce large tracts of monocultures are unhappy. They fear that their indigenous knowledge of making better seeds and diversity in crop yield is being threatened.



Greenpeace activists protesting against the use of GM foods

need GM to breed good varieties of plants - by reproducing them asexually. This can also be done by old-fashioned process of plant breeding and the new technology of plant genomics. Though GM plants have to a certain extent reduced the use of herbicides but in some places the plants have shown resistance to the inserted genes.

Consumer

Very suspicious of the health effects

Food is a special case. Anyone wanting to make changes into what is eaten must listen to the consumer. Clear labelling becomes vital, saying how much of what is contained in the product. Consumers have the right to know and choose if they want to eat a GM product or not. 90 per cent of the GM exports is meant for human consumption. No wonder consumers the world over are worried. Research done by scientists have found that rats fed with GM potatoes have developed higher white blood cell count implying that the body has a negative reaction. Other researches have shown allergic reactions in humans after eating GM corn and deaths of monarch butterflies in cornfields. Consumers are scared. Vegetarian consumers may not like their greens to be contaminated



with animal genes. Many store owners in Sweden have taken products off the shelf which may include G.M. products. Sri Lanka was the first country to ban GM products. Sceptical farmers in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh uprooted *Monsanto's* genetically engineered Bollgard cotton. Elsewhere in the world, consumers and environment activists, especially in Europe, uprooted fields of GM crops. Crops were uprooted and mixed with normal crop to invalidate the experiment results.

New Scientist sums it up thus: 'Despite a few alarms, there's no real evidence that GM crops have hurt human health or environment in spite of their steady rise in use. But neither have they made the world a much better place.'

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