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Genetic engineering law should protect Indian society: judges

Staff Reporter

Round-table draws farmers from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu

— Photo: Sampath Kumar G.P.



DISCUSSION: Pushpa Bhargava (left), founder-director of Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, V.S. Vijayan, botanist and former chairperson of Kerala State Biodiversity Board, and Abdul Qayyum, former Joint Director, Agriculture, Andhra Pradesh. in Bangalore on Sunday.

BANGALORE: While making any legislation for regulatory bodies for genetic engineering in food and agriculture, the predominant factor should be the interest of Indian society as consumers, farmers and the soil and other components of environment, observed a panel of eminent judges, participating in a round-table here on Sunday. Regulatory procedure has to be independent and not oriented on data inputs received from the manufacturing community, the panel said after the round-table, the first of its kind in the country, on Emerging Jurisprudence of Genetic Engineering — Food, Farming and Biosafety.

The two-day event, which concluded on Sunday, saw farmers from Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu making submissions before the judges, explaining the havoc wrought by Bt cotton on their farms. They contended that it had not given economic benefits while the soil had become more toxic.

The panel

Among others, biotechnologists, scientists and eminent lawyers made out a case against genetic engineering before the four-member round-table involving Chief Justice of the Orissa High Court Gopal Gowda, senior judge of the Andhra Pradesh High Court Goda Raghuram, Anand Byra Reddy of the Karnataka High Court and Thottathil B. Radhakrishna of the Kerala High Court.

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"Information regarding the identity of the persons involved in such process should be available in the public domain for such scrutiny as would ensure transparency and credibility of such establishments," judges added in their observations.

Following the submissions, the judges observed that in India, Bt cotton was introduced with a false promise of no pesticide use and farmers were duped into cultivating it without providing proper information.

They said that it was also introduced in some areas clandestinely.

Observing large-scale crop loss compared to what had been told to farmers, the round-table said facts had emerged that Bt cotton had adversely affected cultivation of traditional cotton, caused loss of cattle and had had adverse impact on groundwater.

Compulsory labelling

With respect to labelling of food products, the consumer should have the right to choose between GM and non-GM foods, the round-table observed and added that truthfulness of information should be ensured by regulatory authorities, including legal insistence of compulsory labelling.

"Genetically modified foods should not be provided for consumption without them having withstood trial runs, having in focus the requirements of the consumer rather than the commercial interests of the producer," it pointed out.

The round-table had been organised by National Law School of India University, Southern Action of Genetic Engineering (SAGE), Hyderabad, and Institute of Cultural Action, Bangalore.

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