



## DECCAN DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

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***director***

August 28, 2008

To  
The Editor  
The Hindu  
Hyderabad

### **For Kind Publication**

### **Please treat this either as a Press Release or as a Letter to The Editor**

Dear Sir

This has reference to the Edit Page article ***Bt Cotton: why do so many smart people get it so wrong?***

I am very tempted to use your headline as my question to Prof Ron Herring. But my primary intention here is not to challenge him. I would like to first correct a couple of factual mistakes that his article makes. The first is the observation, a quote from Najma Sadeq, that says “*Deccan Development Society (DDS), an Indian grassroots NGO ... found [that] those who grew non-BT cotton made six times more profits than the BT cotton farmers!*” Probably Deccan Development Society [of which I am the Director] is the only organisation in India which has done season-long close studies on Bt Cotton, year after year for the last five years in multiple locations in Andhra Pradesh, India. Nowhere in our studies have we said tht non-Bt Cotton farmers have made six times more profit than Bt farmers. It is true that in the season of 2002-2003, Bt cotton failed miserably in Andhra Pradesh. While the yields from Bt cotton was 450 kgs/acre, non Bt yielded 690 kgs/acre. But a combination of factors [Bt farmers had spent four times more on seeds than non Bt farmers; incurred much higher cultivation costs; the market price for Bt cotton was lower than non Bt] returns from Bt cotton was negative [-1295] while non Bt farmers got returns of Rs.5368 per acre. These are indisputable facts and even Monsanto has not challenged these figures.

However our five year average informs us that Rs 9960 is the average cultivation cost per acre for Bt cotton while it is Rs.8474 per acre for non Bt cotton. This still means that non Bt farmers are spending less than Bt farmers and their average earning over five years is Rs.3893. Over five years, except for 2006-7, in no year did Bt cotton had a higher profit than non Bt cotton. The methodology of our study as well as the entire list of respondents and their addresses are put in the public domain, both in the study reports as well as out website [www.ddsindia.com](http://www.ddsindia.com). Anyone can verify the facts.

Another factual incorrectness in Prof Herring's article is the mention that “...*the master narrative. GM Watch learns of GMO catastrophes in India from Deccan Development Society; the source is credible for being local and a member of coalitions that GM Watch supports, such as Via Campesina*”. This is totally inaccurate. Deccan Development Society is not supported in any manner by GM Watch. Infact GM Watch is an information network that collects information from all around the world and distributes it globally. Therefore it is organisations such as the Deccan Development Society that support GM Watch and not the other way round.

I think the crux of what Prof Herring's argument is that why do farmers choose a technology if it is not useful to them? The answer is simple. Indian small farmers are starved of options. DDS studies have relentlessly focused on small and marginal farmers for whose benefit, the GE industry claims, Bt cotton has been introduced. Today the small and marginal farmers have no option but to go for Bt seeds. The seed companies who have formed a cartel, have taken off non Bt seeds from the market. If you have to grow cotton, you have to be a Bt farmer. Nothing else will do.

The other danger in Prof Herring's argument is the sole concentration on farmer's profits. This is a very narrow vision of agriculture. The only asset that a farmer, especially the small and the marginal has is her/his land. If that very base gets eroded even while s/he gets a higher profit, then it is the proverbial cutting the branch on which you are sitting. This is precisely what is happening with Bt cotton farmers. Our studies have clearly brought out that some of the soil diseases such as root rot have spread from 2% of the soils where they appeared after the first year of Bt cotton in 2002-3 have, after five years spread to 40%. The soil is slowly becoming toxic for cultivation of other crops. Secondly the death of sheep and goats which have grazed on Bt cotton has sent alarm all around. But the compliant and lethargic administration does not want to do anything about it. The first alarm bells on human health are also sounding in AP and MP. But there is hardly anyone in the administrative and policy circles who is listening to this.

What I am trying to point out is that the great hype around Bt cotton and the thick web of lies that the industry has woven around it are completely masking the real face of Bt cotton. If one talks about the Disaster of Bt cotton one is referring to all these factors and not just a monetary calculation of the crop.

Finally the oft flung accusation that those who oppose Bt cotton is marked by *the distance of middle-class activists from agriculture and agriculturalists*. If Prof Herring does not cocooned in his own ivory tower of Cornell University [which incidentally has the mandate to promote Genetic Engineering technology and therefore is an active partner in the Indo-US Knowledge Initiative in Agriculture, the mega bus for GE protagonists] he is welcome to join me in Village Pastapur of Medak District in Andhra Pradesh, where I have been living for the last 15 years, interacting and working with farmers on a day to day basis. All the arguments made in the studies of DDS come from community researchers who are part of the villages and farming communities and do not need the shelter of biotechnology industry funded universities.

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