

SOUTH AGAINST GENETIC ENGINEERING

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25th March 2010

Shri Basudeb Acharia, MP

Chairperson

Departmentally related Standing Committee on Agriculture

C/o DIRECTOR (A&O) ,

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Sub: Submission related to “Cultivation of Genetically Modified Food Crops – Prospects and Effects”

Respected Shri Achariaji

It is with immense gratification that we, the representatives of the South Against Genetic Engineering (SAGE) receive the decision of the Departmentally related Standing Committee on Agriculture to invite suggestions and responses on 'Cultivation of GM crops- prospects & effects'.

We find that this democratic debate is extremely timely in the light of the earlier widespread national discourse on Bt Brinjal; We also believe that an informed parliamentary debate should have preceded the introduction of India's first genetically modified crop Bt Cotton in the year 2003. If that had happened, we could have avoided the spread of toxicity in large soil tracts of our country and saved many farmers the misfortune of falling prey to the false promises of biotech agro chemical giants.

It is in this context that we would like to bring to your attention that 40% of soils in Warangal [a district in the North of Andhra Pradesh] have become toxic within five years of Bt Cotton cultivation. Farmer women of Deccan Development Society with the help of scientists have brought out extremely revealing evidence (visual and written) which we enclose for you with this letter.

In fact an experiment done with nine sheep on the implications of Bt Cotton plants had stunning results. In this experiment carried out in the year 2008, three sheep were fed entirely on Bollgard I, three with Bollgard II and three with non Bt cotton. Bollgard I and II are two generations of Bt Cotton. The result indicated the levels of poison that the Bt Gene is infested with. Bollgard I and II fed sheep started ailing from week 6 and by 13th week all of them were dead. But non Bt fed sheep did not die at all. Enclosed are documents and videos that substantiate our claim above (**Annexure 1**). Similarly many cotton pickers, mainly women from the poorer sections of population, bitterly complained on breathing disorders and skin diseases. This has proved to us that Bt cotton was a disaster for soil health, cattle health and human health. But still Bt cotton cultivation is grown by leaps and bounds because of a corporate strategy on completely shutting out farmers from the availability of non Bt Cotton seeds.

We send along with this letter of ours, six affidavits of SAGE partners, which have already reached you. All of these reflect the voices of farmers, women's collectives, consumer groups and NGOs who have been in the centre of voicing their concerns about GM crops (**Annexure 2**). Their experiences highlight that the way out of India's agricultural crisis is not through alien and risk ridden technologies which disenfranchise India's farmers. The answers lie within the indigenous farming techniques and with the faith that local knowledge and techniques that have been evolved by farmers and farmer oriented scientists over decades. We do hope you will give each of these extremely powerful affidavits their due recognition and consideration.

We continue to be disconcerted that the Government of India shows an unhealthy doggedness in aligning its faith in modern biotechnology (which mostly means genetic engineering). Even though a bold step has been taken through a decision on issuing moratorium on Bt Brinjal, agricultural research centres and university are still conducting experiments and field trials related on other genetically modified crops. At the same time the Department of Biotechnology is proposing a Biotechnology Regulatory Authority Bill, 2009 which will cement the future of modern biotechnological applications in India's agricultural system. As you are kindly aware, this Bill does not question modern biotechnology but only puts forth an administrative procedure with the scope of formal scientific review of GM crops through. The ethical, social and political implications are missing from this initiative. We enclose the SAGE Position paper and covering letter which has been sent to the Prime Minister of India for your reference (**Annexure 3**).

We would like to bring to your attention that the nexus of multinational and Indian seed giants along with public sector agricultural universities is an ongoing concern. Large corporations like Monsanto, Syngenta, Del-Monte foods continue to fund public sector research in both crop and livestock arenas. As part of the Alliance for Democratizing Agricultural Research in South Asia (ADARSA), we have put together two comprehensive fact sheets which indicate that much of the private sector funding in both crop and livestock sector (both technical and financial) is directed towards modern biotechnological applications, including genetic engineering and nanotechnology (**Annexure 4**).

The research in public sector universities and research centres is carried out to further the interests of the private sector. It was only after funding the Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) that Del-Monte foods launched its products in India in 2009. Bt Brinjal was developed in India under a USAID funded Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project (ABSP) II and had the involvement of national and international private sector entities working along with public sector research institutions.

Given this scenario, we urge the Departmentally related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture to take a pioneering decision to reject the introduction of genetically engineered crops into our farming lands. As a backdrop to this decision, we also request the esteemed parliamentarians to take three specific steps:

1. **Independent Review on Bt Cotton cultivation:** We are acutely aware that the committee members and other government officials have been receiving contradictory studies on the performance of Bt cotton in the country. The studies carried out on the behest of the private companies have shown profit and increase in yields. But as indicated above and through the six affidavits, Bt Cotton has left farmers enraged, debt-ridden and their farm lands polluted. We therefore request the Parliamentary committee to institute an independent review on the performance of Bt cotton in India, with ethical, social, environmental, health and scientific considerations. The condition of the farmers and farm lands warrants this urgent response.
2. **Recommend a moratorium of field trials other GM crops:** As you might be aware that a Supreme Court case on GM crops is pending a decision in the Supreme Court of India. This WRIT PETITION (CIVIL) NO(s). 260 OF 2005 Aruna Rodrigues and Ors v/s Union of India has highlighted the risks of GM crops and foods and sought a moratorium not just the commercial introduction of GM crops but also their field trials. We therefore request the Parliamentary committee to recommend a moratorium on GM field trials in India, pending a full parliamentary debate on the issue and a judicial decision on the same.
3. **Informed Public and Parliamentary Debate on the BRAI Bill, 2009:** The BRAI Bill is being finalized within the Department of Biotechnology with selective and exclusive discussions. Such a practice on a Bill with far reaching impacts on India's agricultural and health sector is totally unacceptable. At present there is no consensus that the future of India's agriculture rests in modern biotechnology. This is one of the premises on which the BRAI Bill is based. We do earnestly hope that the members of the Parliamentary committee will take a strong view on this issue. Any such Bill which has several draconian clauses (as indicated in Annexure 3) should be kept in abeyance on the recommendation on the Parliamentary committee.

We have several other points which we would be desirous of sharing with you in person. We hope you can give an appointment to meet a SAGE delegation where we can discuss various issues on GM crops at length.

We look forward to your response and a strong report of the Parliamentary Committee that rejects GM crops and upholds India's agricultural knowledge and heritage.

Sincerely



p v satheesh
convenor

Enclosures:

Annexure I: Bt Cotton Videos, Study Reports & Media Reports from Andhra Pradesh Films:

1. Why are Warangal Farmers Angry with Bt Cotton
2. Bt Cotton in Andhra Pradesh : A three year fraud
3. A Disaster in Search of Success; Bt Cotton in Global South

Study Reports:

1. Genetic Roulette: The Documented Health Risks of Genetically Engineered Foods by Jeffrey M Smith
2. Did Bt Cotton Save Farmers in Warangal? 2002 - 2003
3. Did Bt Cotton fail AP Again in 2003-2004
4. Bt Cotton in Andhra Pradesh: A three year assessment 2004 - 2005
5. False Hopes, Festering Failures, Bt Cotton in AP in 2005-2006
6. What farmers reaped growing Bt cotton- Profits or Problem?
7. Genetically Engineered Promises and Farming Realities a paper by P V Satheesh

Annexure II: NGOs Affidavits to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture

Annexure III: SAGE Position Paper : A Call to “Reject” the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority (BRAI) Bill, 2009 on Grounds of Ethical, Social and Political Concerns

Annexure IV: Fact Sheets

1. Farmer Proofing Agricultural Research, current trends in India
2. TAKING “LIVE” STOCK The Current Thrust of Livestock Related Research in India