

Cotton fields swamped with illegal Bt cotton: Monsanto the poorest performer

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Reports of the performance of Monsanto's Bt cotton in the 2003-04 cotton season need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Gene Campaign's study in Andhra reveals that there is widespread cultivation of illegal Bt cotton in the state and reportedly in all the other cotton regions of India. It is not possible to assess the performance of individual varieties of Bt cotton anymore. Only one thing appears to be clear, all the illegally Bt cotton varieties outperform the Monsanto cotton.

There has been a great deal of controversy over the performance of Bt cotton in India. On the one hand is Monsanto-Mahyco, engaged in a massive PR exercise, putting out data that portrays Bt cotton as a runaway success. On the other hand is everybody else. All studies done by organizations like Gene Campaign, reports submitted by state governments, independent investigations done by media teams and even data collected by central government agencies have reported that Monsanto's Bt cotton has been a failure and farmers have by and large suffered losses.

In this backdrop, like the first year, Gene Campaign had conducted a field study on the second cotton crop, to assess the situation in Andhra Pradesh, a cotton growing state over which lies the tragic shadow of farmer suicides. A total of 136 farm families were surveyed in the four districts of Warangal, Guntur, Mahboobnagar and Rangareddy.

The study found that like last year, the economics of cultivating the Monsanto variety remains adverse for the farmer. Monsanto's seed is about four times more expensive than the best local cotton varieties. Since the performance is poorer, the farmers suffer a loss and often cannot even recover their investment. However this year, we found that Andhra Pradesh, as almost all other cotton regions, was swamped with a large number of illegal variants of Bt cotton. A complicating feature in the Bt cotton situation in India is the spread of illegal varieties which originate from a variety called Navbharat 151 which was sold by Navbharat seed company without a license and bypassing the mandated official procedure.

There is chaos in the cotton fields now and nobody can say with any guarantee what actually has been cultivated in this cotton season and how much. Like our findings in Andhra Pradesh, colleagues are reporting a similar situation from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab, in addition to Gujarat where the mixture of Bt varieties has been known to exist since at least two years.

Most farmers were not willing to admit the real name and source of the seeds they had planted since they are aware that the Navbharat derived variants are illegal and their purchase is punishable. Almost no one had planted Monsanto's failed Mech 162 from last year. The few that did, reported the same poor results as last year. An interesting finding that we encountered was that farmers who had planted Monsanto's Mech 162 last year got poor chilly crops in those fields in the next season. Other fields of chilly where the Monsanto cotton had not been planted were not affected. This needs to be investigated.

Farmers cited fictitious names like Rasi Bt, Banny Bt, Jalna Bt, Ratna Bt, Ankur Bt, as the cotton varieties they had planted. None of these varieties have been released for cultivation officially. The only known Bt varieties in the pipeline are from Rasi and Ankur but they were still undergoing field trials when the 2003-04 crop was planted and were not available to farmers.

There are three distinct possibilities of what has taken place. One, that varieties like Rasi Bt, Ankur Bt and Banny Bt have actually been leaked to the farmers before completion of the required procedure and official approval, in much the same way that Navbharat 151 was. The second possibility is that knowing such varieties are under development, farmers are using these names to cover up for the illegal Navbharat varieties that they are actually using but are afraid to admit to. Most of the Bt seeds have been procured through gray channels and neither farmers nor seed stores had either seed packets or bills of purchase to show the Gene Campaign team. Only the Guntur cotton farmers, who are on average the larger farmers in this study, admitted that they had procured the Bt seed from Gujarat. The third possibility is that fly by night operators are marketing spurious Bt cotton seeds which may not even contain the Bt gene. Several Bt variants are available in the market and can be procured easily, and at a much cheaper cost than Monsanto's Mech 162 or Mech 12.

The complete failure on the part of the GEAC to take action against the spread of illegal Bt cotton varieties, originating from the original Navbharat 151 has resulted in several variants becoming available to the farmers. Since this has been going on for at least the last four years, some say longer, the rash of Bt cotton varieties has spread to all the cotton growing regions including Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. A number of agencies including progressive farmers have backcrossed the Bt gene to local, high performing cotton hybrids. This has resulted in a range of hybrids available in the illegal cotton seed market, with varying performance. Due to this development, it is now probably impossible to get an accurate picture of the performance of Bt and non-Bt cotton. Only one thing seems to be emerging clearly, that most local cottons carrying the Bt gene are out performing the Monsanto varieties. Because of their better performance, farmers have assiduously sought the illegal seeds in preference.

Monsanto's unsubstantiated claims

In this situation, one cannot but wonder at the boldness of Monsanto's statements asserting the superb performance of the cotton that the farmers seem to have rejected. A recent survey commissioned by Mahyco Monsanto and conducted by the agency AC Nielsen ORG-MARG, has reported outstanding performance for Bollgard, (Monsanto's Bt cotton variety) in the 2003-04 cotton season! The executive director of AC Nielsen, Mr. Inamdar, even chose to give Bollgard a resounding endorsement.....*"For us it has been an enlightening experience to see, at first hand, the difference that Bollgard has made in the life of India's cotton farmer."*

Given the fact that the cotton fields of India are awash with a mixture of Bt cotton variants and that it is impossible to know the performance of individual varieties in this tangle, Nielsen's data must be questioned. What have they actually surveyed and what do their results mean? Knowing the reality on the ground, it would be difficult to take at face value the data that AC Nielsen has put out and their ringing endorsement of Monsanto's Bollgard.

The Nielsen study showing superlative performance for the Monsanto cotton is of a piece with the earlier, controversial and thoroughly discredited study by Qaim and Zilberman which reported an 87% increase in yield when Monsanto's Bt cotton was used! The little catch was that the Qaim and Zilberman study was done exclusively on the field trial data of Monsanto. No other data was analyzed, nor any farmers' fields studied.

We therefore have a rather curious situation when the only people praising the Monsanto varieties are Monsanto themselves. Its friends and supporters have ensured both times that these questionable data are circulated widely and enter the record as the authentic data from India. Every other agency is reporting results to the contrary, that Monsanto varieties are the worst performers when compared to good local hybrids and illegal Bt variants.

It is high time the Indian government, the GEAC particularly, woke up to this charade. A long due investigation into what is actually happening with respect to Bt cotton must be undertaken immediately and the mess has to be cleaned up. Finally someone has to get up and cancel the permission given to Monsanto's non-performing Mech varieties before the farmers are fooled any further.

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