

INDIA PAYS IN AGRICULTURE FOR NUCLEAR DEAL WITH US: OPENS DOORS TO GM CROPS AND FOODS

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Mr. George Bush announced from the historic Purana Qila that India and the US will enter into an Indo- US Knowledge Initiative on Agricultural Research and Education. As the US president made it a point to emphasize, the initiative is to promote a 'Second Green Revolution' in India which means promoting agriculture biotechnology, especially genetically engineered crops and foods. Agriculture biotechnology has been cleverly packaged as the 'Second Green Revolution' by its promoters, the Life Science Corporations, in order to subliminally invoke the strong positive impressions that the political leadership in this country associates with the Green Revolution. In actual fact the two revolutions are about as different as chalk and cheese.

The Green Revolution was a publicly owned technology, belonging to the people. The research was conducted with public money to fulfil a public need, inadequate food production, and it created public goods to which everyone had access. There were no Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), no patents vested in multinational companies, no proprietary technologies or products. If there was ownership of the GR, it was vested in the farmer. Once the seed reached the farmers, it was theirs; they moved it where they wanted. Therefore despite its faults, the Green Revolution addressed farmers needs and India's food production showed an upward curve.

The Second Green Revolution is almost the exact opposite. It is a privately owned technology. Six corporations (Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer CropScience, DuPont, Dow and BASF Plant Science) control practically the entire research and output in the field of transgenic plants. Processes and products, including research methodologies are shackled in patents and the farmer has no say, let alone any control. The technology creates only private goods that can be accessed only at significant cost (a bag of Mahyco- Monsanto's Bt cotton seeds in India costs Rs. 1850 as compared to between Rs. 300 to Rs 400 for superior varieties produced locally).

The seed belongs to the company, which strictly controls its movement. With the development of the popularly termed 'terminator' or sterile seed technology, the farmer is reduced to a helpless consumer, not a partner as in the case of the GR. The Second Green Revolution has in its 20 years, not yet produced a crop variety that has any direct connection to hunger and nutritional needs. That in short is what the Indo-US deal in agriculture contains.

The so called Knowledge Initiative has been prepared over the last several months in India, more or less with the Americans calling the shots. Despite the last minute red herring of Indian mangos arriving in Washington this summer, the agriculture initiative is a one-sided affair from which India will gain little and give far too much. It is apparent that India has agreed to pay in the agriculture sector for the concessions that it has sought from the US in the nuclear field.

As always, it is the agriculture sector that finds itself being sacrificed in order to attain some nebulous goal framed in the context of national development. In the case of the GATT/WTO, the then Indian negotiators had no qualms accepting debilitating intellectual property rights regimes despite widespread national protests, to make some theoretical gains in the textile sector which actually never materialized. But the willingness to sacrifice agriculture for gains in some other sector was part of national policy then and appears to be so today when we have paid for nuclear concessions with accepting an American agenda in agriculture.

The US government had made clear right from the beginning that it would not invest a single dollar in the initiative and that India would have to foot the entire bill. . India has already committed that it will invest 400 crores in the agriculture initiative. Out of this about 300 crores will be used for genetic engineering and biotechnology products. The Indian money will be used to pay for the visits of American scientists to India as well as for the visits of Indian scientists to the US. There is talk of the US investing in some fellowships for research but the Intellectual Property Rights on the research outcomes will belong to the Americans.

Wal-Mart and Monsanto, two American multinationals are on the board of the Indo- US Knowledge Initiative on Agricultural Research and Education. Monsanto has now been elevated from being a seed company to becoming a member of the official US delegation

The American multinationals made their intentions very clear during the first meeting of the board in Washington in December 2005. Wal-Mart and Monsanto propose to use their position on the board of the Agriculture Initiative to enter into retailing in agriculture and agricultural trade. The board will set the agenda for collaborative farm research with Indian laboratories and agricultural universities. Apart from a poultry company, the Indian side on the Agriculture Initiative Board is represented by some bureaucrat from the agriculture Ministry and Dr Mangla Rai, Director General of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).

This skewed composition indicates the nature of the playing field on which the Agriculture Initiative will be implemented and the sheer inability of the Indian side to take on the Americans. The agriculture exercise has been led by Mr. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission. The entire preparation of this initiative was a highly secret affair with no consultations with any of the stakeholders. The National Academy of Agricultural Sciences,(NAAS) , the Indian scientific establishment, the Agriculture Ministry , farmers organizations, civil society organizations, Members of Parliament and state governments, have all been kept out of the discussions. As have been eminent agriculture experts and the rest of the Planning Commission.

The main features of the India - America agriculture deal are agricultural biotechnology, access to biological resources and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). All three sectors are interrelated and all are of crucial interest to the US. Progress in agricultural biotechnology has thrown up one very clear fact, that technology rich countries like the US do not have the raw material needed for biotechnology, which are genetic resources. Intellectual property rights regimes in the form of TRIPS/ WTO are the instruments devised to gain access to developing country bio resources.

Through the Agriculture Knowledge Initiative, the Americans have asked for unhindered access to India's gene banks. India's considerable genetic wealth stored in its gene banks will become available to the Americans for free under the guise of this unequal agriculture agreement. In India, the universities on their own and through Krishi Vigyan Kendras, serve as extension agencies for farmers in the field and because of this they have a wide outreach. Wal-Mart and Monsanto will be able to use the universities to reach farmers in many parts of India, to sell their products and establish their business, without the US having made any investments in this Initiative. . The agriculture initiative will allow the Americans to have complete access to the rich and valuable genetic diversity stored in India's Gene banks. It is not clear whether they will pay for this genetic wealth or how they will pay for it. Genetic resources are a very valuable economic resource in the era of biotechnology, the Americans have little economically useful genetic resources.

The Board has discussed issues of intellectual property rights on products developed from the research programme so it is feared that whereas India will invest all the money in the research, the

patents will be taken by the Americans. India's unique IPR law called the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers Rights Act (PPVFR), the only law in the world which is TRIPS compliant but still grants legal rights to farmers, will come under threat from American pressure. The Americans along with Agbiotech multinationals like Monsanto have been lobbying for a change in India's IPR laws to introduce patents on seeds and genes and do away with the provisions for protecting farmer's rights. A combination of physical access to the gene banks and an IPR law that allows seed patents will deliver India's genetic wealth into American hands. This will constitute a severe blow to India's ability to be food sovereign and food secure in the long run.

The Americans have asked for all restrictions to be removed to facilitate the import of US farm products into India. This is significant since essentially they have asked for the right to export GM crops and foods to India. India must be cautious that it does not become the dumping ground for a technology and its controversial products that have been rejected in many parts of the world and whose safety and usefulness remain questionable.

Given the aggressive one-sided nature of the America –India initiative, it is important to ask where India is headed with its agriculture program. Who ultimately will be deciding India's Agbiotech policy? The MS Swaminathan Task Force on Agbiotechnology has recommended that India's policy on transgenic crops should be sensitive to biodiversity conservation and the social-economic context of our composite agrarian system, which essentially means that the rights of farmers and their livelihoods must not be jeopardized by any genetically engineered crops. The Indo- US knowledge initiative goes against all these goals because it seeks to force open India's agriculture markets, disregarding the safeguards proposed by the Swaminathan Task Force Report.

It is not out of place to emphasize a simple truth here, that food security is an integral part of national security. All India's efforts in the nuclear arena to shore up its national security goals will be undermined if it allows itself to become insecure in the matter of food.