

BT BASMATI, DOES IT MAKE SENSE?

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Basmati rice and Darjeeling tea are perhaps India's most easily identifiable premium products in the area of food. Basmati is highly prized rice, its markets are growing and it is a high end, expensive product in the international market. Like Champagne wine and truffles from France, international consumers treat it as a special, luxury food. So does it make any sense at all to breed a genetically modified (GM) Basmati, that too a Bt Basmati, along the lines of Bt cotton? The Basmati traders would appear to have far more sense than the government of India and its scientific establishment in this respect. RS Sheshadri of United Riceland, the largest Basmati exporter to Europe has said in the Economic Times that "Anything connected with GM is the kiss of death for Basmati."

Given the fact that there is fearsome resistance to GM foods in Europe and in other pockets of the world, is it an intelligent act to 'taint' your Basmati with the GM label, that too the Bt label? The Bt gene belongs to Monsanto, the company that is the most visible target of the anti- GM lobby and for the GM protesters on the streets, symbolic of all that is wrong with GM crops. Monsanto's Bt approach is not only collapsing in parts of the world, it has also been criticized as unsustainable. And the Indian scientific establishment wants to deliver its much sought after Basmati as a target of protest and rejection, to the anti- GM group that is increasingly determining consumer preference in the European and other selected markets!

Basmati rice is an up market product; eaten largely by that section that is willing and able to spend money on expensive foods. It is precisely this section, which is usually better educated, has surplus money and no food security concerns, that is quite strongly opposed to GM crops. It is this section that is both promoting and consuming organic and natural foods by preference. Not surprisingly, the demand for brown, unpolished Basmati is growing in this elite consumer section of Europe.

So whom is the Bt Basmati targeted at? Who are supposed to be the consumers of this premium rice with the "kiss of death" GM tag? If the argument is that GM is not an issue in the Middle East, the other large market for basmati, and here Bt rice would be acceptable, then that is an untenable argument. Once India is producing GM basmati rice, the concern in the European market will quite legitimately be whether any 'non-GM basmati' designated for them and that they are buying isn't contaminated by GM basmati? This leads us to the question of labeling and identity preservation of GM and non-GM crops.

Segregation of GM and non- GM basmati (or for that matter any crop) is going to be next to impossible to maintain under Indian agricultural conditions, and it will entail large costs. Even if this were to be done, at the first hint of GM- non-GM mixing, which is bound to happen, consignments to Europe and other GM sensitized markets will be rejected and India will lose the assured market she has today for basmati. Has any one thought any of this through? Have all those votaries of introducing disease

resistance through the patented Bt route, (now seen collapsing around our ears in the failure of India's first GM / Bt cotton harvest), thought of what will happen to farmers who grow basmati and who command assured prices, when their harvests find no buyers ?

This idea of Bt basmati is every bit as crazy as the idea to introduce the Golden Rice technology into basmati rice. Work on Golden Rice is being done with the goal of increasing the nutritional status of the poor, rice dependent populations of the world who usually have nothing more than plain rice as their only food. Since rice is nutritionally a poor cereal, it is thought that adding iron and vitamin A to it by genetic modification would increase the nutritional quality of rice.

The Golden Rice project may or may not materialize ultimately but to think that people who buy basmati at Rs. 40/ kg are likely to be in need of nutritional fortification is about as absurd a theory as any. Are these the people threatened by night blindness that golden basmati rice is supposed to be helping? Should the diminishing agricultural research budget of India be frittered away on nonsensical notions of the golden basmati rice kind? Or should it be targeted at solving problems that real farmers have in real fields?

When will our science planners get it? Basmati rice is an expensive, premium product, which is doing well enough on its own, without the scientific establishment trying to queer the pitch every step of the way. Every grain of basmati rice is likely to find a market today. It will not if we ruin the legend and perception of basmati in the international market. Can any one think of GM truffles? Premium wine makers have outright rejected the notion of GM doctored wines that were designed to cut out the hangover and were supposed to be 'healthier'. Premium products like special wines, truffles, and basmati rice need to be handled in a special, premium way. The aura of specialty has to be maintained in order to keep the consumer captivated, and the market vibrant and growing! The approach of Bt Basmati rice and Golden Basmati Rice are about as wrong as you can get to achieve these goals.