KEEPING OFF THE GM BANDWAGON[i,ii]

SUMAN SAHAI

The Task Force on Agbiotechnology chaired by MS Swaminathan has just submitted its report to the government. An important recommendation in the report is that India's program for developing GM crops should acknowledge the reality of the market. One of the crops mentioned in the report as needing special attention, is soybean. This should be taken serious note of by the policy planners. India is a tiny producer of soybean; the total output peaked last year at about 3.5 million tons. All India's soybean is GM free. The US alone produces over 32 million tonnes of Soya per year 75% of which are genetically modified, Argentina produces about 28 million tonnes, 98% of which is genetically modified and there are other cultivators like Brazil which are expanding their acreage of GM Soya rapidly.

Should India start to cultivate genetically modified soybean as the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is promoting? What is a better course of action for our farmers? GM Soya or non-GM Soya? At present India's entire Soybean crop is sold (3 tonnes in 2002-03). If it were to double its production, every single bean would still be sold. The reason is that it is one of the few countries from where non-GM soy can be sourced without risk of contamination, since the country does not cultivate GM soy at all and can easily certify its soybean as GM-free.

The Indian soy is supplied to niche markets that are seeking assured GM free produce. The bulk of the soybean cultivated in the world is now genetically modified and when GM free soya is available, it is from countries that are large producers of GM Soya where mixture is certain. Even in the EU where there was a de facto moratorium on GM foods, 25% of the soya produced is genetically modified and in Japan where there is a growing opposition to GM foods, 40% of the soybean is genetically engineered.

India's USP is that it is the only country in the world that is producing 100% GM free soybean. Today all the soy that India produces is sold. Even if it were to increase its soy production several fold, all the Soya would still be sold because the international market is increasingly seeking GM free foods due to the growing rejection by consumers. Manufacturers of baby foods and convalescent foods and housewives in countries like Japan and Korea, large soy consumers, are strongly opposed to GM foods and prefer GM free Soya.

Under these circumstances, resolutely remaining a non- GM producer of soybean best serves the interest of Indian farmers. If it were to become a producer of GM soy, it would loose its special markets. Its GM soy would not be able to compete with huge producers like the US and its highly subsidized, low cost Soya. So does it make sense for India to forego its special status, lose a secure market for its produce and incomes for its farmers and start cultivating GM soybean that no one will buy?

In the case of rice, India exports not just Basmati, but non-Basmati rice as well, largely to Europe and West Asia but also to Africa. The total annual value of India's rice export is in the vicinity of Rs. 6000 crores. The importers of Indian rice are countries where there is mounting opposition to GM foods. Indian rice enjoys assured markets today and there is a distinct upward trend in exports of both Basmati and non-basmati rice. Does it seem like an intelligent act to jeopardize this assured market and start cultivating GM rice? Who will make up for the revenue losses to the farmers that will result from countries declining the import of GM rice from India?

As against this push GM at all costs approaches, it would be wise to take cognizance of the burgeoning organic sector and respond to it. The hill states have understood this simple logic. Sikkim, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Uttaranchal have decided to go organic rather than GM. The international organic market does not permit GM contamination in organic produce, so organic and GM free has to go hand in hand. This would appear to be the future that the markets are pointing to but India's biotech policy makers seem to be oblivious to the reality of the world. Full of misplaced zeal and the desire to join the GM bandwagon at all costs, even if through copy cat research with borrowed genes, the biotech bunches are willing to play with the livelihoods of farmers by chasing a personal agenda rather that looking for the public interest.

Given the ad hoc and apparently mindless nature of decisions that are being taken on GM crops and foods by a small coterie of people, it has become a critical imperative to conduct a broad based and transparent debate on what should constitute the nation's policy on GM crops. It is embarrassing that a country of this size and with once formidable skills, with such agricultural strengths and dependencies, is lurching from biotech product to product with no defined policy to guide it and no consultation with the public to ask what it wants.

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[i] Sahai, S.,(2004), The Hindu, June 15

[ii] Sahai, S., (2004), Genetically Modified Crops in India; Some Issues –II, Gene Campaign, pp1-3