

# WHY IS THERE DISTRUST OF GM FOODS?

**SUMAN SAHAI**

In the last couple of years, all manner of organizations, especially industry federations, have begun to call brainstorming sessions on biotechnology. The usually well-attended meetings with a focus on GM crops, indicates the entrepreneurial interest in this new technology. Civil society groups are sometimes invited to present their concerns at such meetings but this does not normally happen unless there has been some pressure, either because of a protest or a strongly worded comment in the media.

An increasing number of Indian NGOs are becoming quite vocal in their criticism of GM technology, chiefly GM crops. Many do little more than making sensational statements, expressing a gut level rejection; others are well informed and analytical, basing their criticism on an analysis of the facts. Apart from the reaction from civil society organizations, individual viewpoints are being heard from a variety of age groups and backgrounds against GM foods.

The reaction of Indian civil society is in consonance with international resistance and a common perception that GM foods are bad. Why is that so? It is important to understand the anatomy of the resistance against GM foods since it is a strong and valid resistance. In particular, it needs to be understood that apart from scientific concerns, principally related to the environment and human and animal health, there are ethical, social and economic concerns as well. In addition there is an emotional and historical baggage associated with genetic manipulation, which is expressing itself as a rejection of genetically manipulated crops. The genesis of the opposition to genetically modified foods is to be found in Europe and with reason.

Public distrust of GM Foods is currently most visible in Europe, especially Britain where public action succeeded in getting Bayer CropScience, a multinational concern, to withdraw its GM corn from UK. It is not so bad in the US although consumer concerns have been voiced and international NGOs like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have carried the protest against GM foods across the Atlantic. There is a reason why unlike Europe, public acceptance of GM foods is higher in the US. Surveys have been conducted which show that respondents are willing to eat GM foods and do not feel threatened by it.

Perhaps one reason for this is that US citizens do not distrust their government on this subject the way Europeans distrust their governments. When the technology of recombinant DNA was established and its potential for applications in agriculture and pharmaceuticals began to unfold, American scientists and regulatory agencies conducted a series of public discussions called the Asilomar conferences in the early seventies. These discussions included an analysis of the risks and benefits of this exciting new technology by which genes could be shifted around across the species barrier. The public was included in the debate to quite an extent. Unlike the US, European nations did not engage in such an exercise. Discussions with the public were not held. Scientists remained in ivory towers doing science and the public was not aware of what was happening in the laboratories. They feared the worst - perhaps monsters were being hatched in test tubes.

In addition to this, in some sections of Europe, there is distrust, even aversion, to the science of genetics and genetic engineering, strongest perhaps in countries like Germany and the Netherlands. During the Nazi regime, Germans saw the science of genetics abused in the name of Eugenics, Hitler's mad and rotten plan for racial cleansing. Genetically 'inferior' races like gypsies were gassed along with the genetically 'inferior' Jews (over 6 million of them) in death chambers. Many in Germany's scientific community supported Hitler's views and some German geneticists were partners in the unspeakable

crimes of the Third Reich. Understandably, for the Germans today, genetics is a tainted science, its manipulation for any purpose, undesirable.

Burdened with this past, people in European countries had to suffer the abominations of the food scandals stemming from the Mad Cow Disease (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) when the British government defended the infected beef as perfectly safe for human consumption. Then the link was shown to a human disorder called Jacob- Creuzfeldt syndrome and all hell broke loose. The British government was shown to be lying to its people and engaged in a cover up exercise to protect beef revenues at the cost of risking the health and lives of its people. As if this was not enough, close on the heels of the beef scandal came the revelations, long denied, that dioxin laced animal feed was fed to cattle in Belgium. What made everything insupportable was the denial by the government and regulatory authorities that there was no wrongdoing, there was no dioxin. The trust between government and people, if any was left after the Mad Cow terror, vanished. In the eyes of the people, specially the radicals, the government lied routinely to the people and could not be trusted.

Against this backdrop, came GM technology and the effort to market GM foods. The government said it was safe. The regulatory authorities said it was safe. Nobody believed a word. The crescendo of the protests rose. NGOs like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace took up cudgels on behalf of what was seen as a people betrayed by their government. Activists and law-abiding citizens applauded as fields with GM crops were destroyed in the UK. In a final blow, the courts let off those charged with tearing up fields planted with GM crops. The protest gradually began to spread across the world.

These are some of the reasons why GM technology is being treated with suspicion in the west. On top of this, it does not help at all that the technology is controlled almost entirely by six mega- corporations who have styled themselves the Life Science Corporations, the most notorious of which is Monsanto. Actually there are somewhat more complex issues involved in the European rejection of this science. John Durant, a public policy analyst in the UK points out that even though GM food technology is science based and strategically significant, it is significantly out of step with public opinion, particularly in highly industrialized Western Europe. According to him, citizens of industrial democracies are essentially skeptical. They tend to be well informed and access data efficiently, they are mindful of special interests, distrustful of governments and disinclined to defer to the opinion of experts who they do not hold in any special awe.

If one looks for a common thread in the attitudes to GM technology in the industrial or developing countries, it is seen in the striking lack of credibility of the purveyors of this technology. The governments are disbelieved and the industry is resented for its monopoly. Monsanto has so attracted the ire of civil society for its attempts to promote the so-called 'terminator' technology, that it has been made the Frankenstein of corporations. The aggressive intellectual property rights regime pushed by the corporations has raised the hackles of even moderate campaigners.

Apart from this crisis of confidence, there is the fully understandable resistance of consumers. The fact is that GM products do not show any overwhelming advantage over conventional foods. They are not better tasting, more nutritious or cheaper. It is not as though this technology has increased the choice or the quality of foods available. With none of these advantages on offer, the consumer has to deal with fears of safety of the food, whether real or imagined and possible damage to the environment, if not today, perhaps tomorrow. For the average person, GM foods do not offer any overwhelming advantages. There are no tangible benefits but there may be quite serious risks.

The real reasons for the many strands of resistance to GM foods will have to be understood and taken on board if the current impasse is to be bridged and the dialogue is to continue to some point of resolution. It is silly for protagonists of the technology to accuse the public of simplicity. There is no

point in charging people who protest, with ignorance, chiefly because that is usually untrue. It also serves little purpose to go on about how the public can not understand the complex technicality of the subject or that there are vested interests behind the lobbying positions of NGOs. This last is most often heard in the context of Bt cotton, which is supposed to decrease pesticide use because the Bt toxin is supposed to function as an in-built pesticide in the cotton crop. GM *wallahs* charge that the pesticide lobby is using NGOs to resist Bt cotton so that pesticide sales can continue unabated. This is a juvenile argument and invokes ridicule.

Accusations by the biotech supporters that there are maverick, irresponsible scientists who put out unscientific data and scare the public and that the media is interested in nothing but exaggerating and sensationalizing issues it does not understand, adds nothing to the credibility of the biotech lobby. Hounding Arpad Puzstai, the scientist at Rowett Institute for showing a possible health danger from GM potatoes or pillorying Chapela and Quist for reporting that GM corn had contaminated native corn in Mexico is finally counter-productive.

Aggressive assertions in the face of public apprehensions that all is well in the world of GM technology, will continue to backfire. Public relations efforts undertaken at great cost by companies like Monsanto (50 million dollars according to the grapevine) have not transported them an inch out of the doghouse simply because they failed to address the real issues and the crisis of confidence that they face.

To break down the barriers and allow a fair and critical evaluation of GM technology, policy making in this area will have to be open to public scrutiny. Equity and justice will have to define regimes for intellectual property protection. Risk benefit analysis must be conducted in an open and transparent manner. Monitoring of field trials should be done by independent experts and include NGOs. The informed public will have to become a partner in the GM dialogue and in decision-making. The agenda of research on GM crops will have to be determined after consultations with stakeholders. In India and the developing world, the system for regulation, monitoring and oversight of GM technology must be entrusted to people with the highest technical skills, not handed over to a clutch of bureaucrats as at present.