

WHY PEOPLE OPPOSE GE FOODS

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Governments all over the world are facing public distrust regarding the safety of GE foods, since the public does not trust the food safety testing procedures, whereas the governments claim them to be safe.

An increasing number of Indian NGOs, farmers' organizations and common citizens are becoming vocal in their criticism of Genetically Engineered (GE) crops and foods. Farmers have set ablaze fields where trials of genetically engineered crops were being conducted and questions have been asked in Parliament about the status of such crops and foods in India.

Public distrust of GE Foods originated in Europe and it remains strongest there. So far, opposition has not been particularly visible in the US, although consumer concerns have been voiced. Surveys in the US show that most American respondents are willing to eat GE foods and do not feel threatened by it. In India, the ground is fuzzy, the level of awareness is poor except for select groups, but a nascent opposition is building up.

The greater public acceptance of GE foods in the US is anchored in the fact that the scientific community made an attempt to engage with the public on the applications of this technology. When recombinant DNA technology was discovered and its potential for applications in agriculture and pharmaceuticals began to unfold, American scientists organized the Asilomar Conference in the early seventies. These discussions included a risk benefit analysis of this new technology by which genes could be shifted around across the species barrier. The public was, at least to some extent, included in the debate and the scientists decided on a moratorium for a few years on application, to understand the technology better. This engendered confidence in the scientific community.

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. The shameful eugenics program of the Nazi regime when "genetically inferior" races like Jews and gypsies were gassed to death, tarred the science of genetics. Understandably, genetics was seen as 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 infected beef was defended by the British government as perfectly safe for human consumption. Then the link was shown to a human disorder called Jacob- Creutzfeldt 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 GE technology and the effort to market GE foods. The government said it was safe. The regulatory authorities said it was safe. Nobody believed a word. Activists and law-abiding citizens applauded as fields with GE crops were destroyed in the UK. In a final blow, the courts let off those charged with tearing up fields planted with GE crops . The protest spread across the world.

In addition to all this, there is resentment at the element of corporate control and the fact that six mega- corporations who have styled themselves the Life Science Corporations control agricultural biotechnology almost entirely. The most notorious of these, Monsanto has so attracted the ire of civil society for its so-called 'terminator' technology, that it is facing an anti- trust lawsuit in Washington. The aggressive intellectual property rights regime pushed by the corporations has raised the hackles of even moderate campaigners.

In today's climate, people 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 scientists and experts who they do not hold in any special awe. Governments seem to have lost the trust of the people in both developed and developing countries and a government endorsement of food safety is more likely to be met with scorn than trust. Corruption plays a role. Many Indians believe that both bureaucrats and political leaders can be 'bought' to make statements and policies favouring vested interests and that it is no different in the food sector.

Apart from this crisis of confidence, there is the angle of consumer attitude. The fact is that GE foods so far do not show any advantage over conventional foods. They are not better tasting or more attractive looking, neither are they more nutritious or cheaper. Whereas there are no visible benefits, there is the very real possibility of risks to the environment and to human health, as numerous studies would indicate.

The reasons for the many strands of resistance to GE foods will have to be understood and taken on board if the dialogue is to continue to some point of resolution and a coherent policy can be made. It is silly for protagonists of the technology in the government and in the private sector to accuse the public of ignorance.

It also serves little purpose to insinuate that there are vested interests behind the lobbying positions of NGOs and that the pesticide lobby is using NGOs to resist Bt cotton so that pesticide sales can continue unabated. This is a juvenile argument and will backfire.

To allow a fair and critical evaluation of genetically engineered crops and foods, 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 dialogue on GE foods and in decision making. The agenda of research on GE crops will have to be determined after consultations with stakeholders. Who benefits from Roundup Ready soybean except Monsanto and why should the public take on all sorts of real and imagined risks so that Monsanto can line its pockets ? Or Syngenta? Or Bayer?