

A somewhat garbled invitation was sent out by the Department of Biotechnology calling for a Consultation on Guidelines for Regulation of Genetic Modification in Crop Plants and Farm Animals with Reference to Trade Security. Had I not earlier known the purpose of this meeting, I would never have figured out what the consultation intended to achieve.

The purpose as it happened, was to discuss a policy for genetically engineering crops that India was exporting. The immediate impetus for the meeting was the understandable nervousness of the Indian Rice Exporters Association after contamination of US rice stocks with an unapproved genetically engineered herbicide tolerant rice led to the total rejection of US rice and entailed huge costs to recall stocks from the UK, Germany, Italy, New Zealand and Japan where US rice had been exported.

The rice exporters wanted the Indian government to have a policy and safeguards in place to protect rice exports from the country from contamination with GE rice, since as one representative rather imaginatively suggested, "anything to do with GM would be the kiss of death "for India's rice exports.

The gentleman had a point. India exports not just Basmati, but non-Basmati rice as well, largely to Europe and West Asia but also to Africa, both regions that have rejected GE crops and foods. The total annual value of India's rice export is approximately Rs.6000 crores. The importers of Indian rice are countries where there is mounting opposition to GE foods. Producing GE rice in India or even researching and testing it in the fields is bound to result in the escape of GE rice.

The irresponsible and clumsy manner in which the Bt rice field trials were conducted by the Mahyco Seed Company indicate that given the shoddy implementation of GE technology in our country and the lack of accountability on the parts of agencies and regulators, contamination from trial plots and field sites is a certainty. The presence of GE rice in India, will undoubtedly lead to contamination, jeopardizing rice exports to countries that will not accept GE foods.

Soybean is the other crop which India exports which qualifies as a special case for consideration. India is the only country in the world now that is producing GE free soybean. Because of this status it has an assured export market in countries like Japan and South Korea that are sensitive about soybean as food and expressly seek GE free soya. In addition, companies that use soybean meal in food, particularly baby foods and food for convalescents, and which have given undertakings to produce GE free foods, are buyers of GE free soybean. This is a captive market available only to India and it can be expanded several times, creating a growing market for India's soybean farmers many of who are to be found in the distress areas of Vidarbha. Instead of offering inadequate doles, a proper policy introducing GE free, organic soybean may

help Vidarbha farmers find their feet and rebuild their agriculture with self respect and dignity.

It is understood that the Review Committee on Genetic Manipulation (RCGM) in the Department of Biotechnology has given permission to conduct research on GE herbicide tolerant soybean. This is extremely undesirable and should be stopped immediately. If India were to allow the cultivation of GE soybean ,or even its research and field trials, it would at once lose its assured export market. Becoming a GE soya producing nation, it would have to compete for markets with gigantic producers like Brazil, USA and Argentina, who are sitting on huge surpluses, unable to sell their produce easily on the world market.

I have no idea whether there was any policy outcome on GE crops and Indian trade interests from the DBT meeting. Both the soybean people and the rice exporters present there held the same view, that genetic engineering of crops in which India had trading interests, was undesirable. The MS Swaminathan led Task Force on Agbiotechnology has made the recommendation that the national policy on GE crops should seek the "economic well-being of farm families, food security of the nation, health security of the consumer, protection of the environment and the security of our national and international trade". Seeing the trend of sharply declining global markets for GE crops and foods, and the rapidly burgeoning market for organic food (currently valued at US \$50 billion), it would be wise for India to recognize its USP in agriculture and develop the organic food sector, specially for exports.