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# **Technology, Liberalisation and Farmer Suicides in Vidarbha (Maharashtra State, India)**

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## **SAVED FROM REAPING A DEADLY HARVEST**

There have been several attempts to undermine the irrefutable evidence against Genetically Modified Crops presented by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture by labelling it as the work of 'green activists'. This 450-page report was the outcome of a two and a half year study prepared by 31 MPs from diverse political parties – both ruling and opposition, left and right wing, who normally do not agree with each other! It is therefore a unanimous and landmark refutation of the false propaganda that has been fed to the press, public and policy makers all these years by the GM seed manufacturers, their sponsored NGOs, PR agencies, and 'farmer leaders'. To say, it was prepared by 'green activists' is an insult to their work. The Parliamentary Committee has recorded the public consultations it held, considered thousands of pages of depositions, including those of leading Indian scientists, and cited highly reputed studies such as the International Assessment of Agricultural Science & Technology for Development (IAASTD Report) commissioned by the World Bank, FAO, WHO, GEF and several UN agencies and conducted by 400 outstanding scientists from across the world. The IAASTD Report did not find that GM crops are the answer for global agriculture, poverty and hunger and highlighted that traditional agricultural practices can provide superior yields and incomes than high input corporate agriculture – of which costly, patented, genetically engineered seeds are a prime example. The Parliamentary Committee not only exposed the falsehoods of the pro GM propaganda but also rightly castigated the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee for regulatory failures that put Indian consumers, farmers, biodiversity and national seed sovereignty at risk. Its recommendations of a cessation of all open-air field trials should be immediately implemented until a new and publicly debated bio-safety regulatory process is in place. Let our Government play its role now to protect Indian citizens and not foreign corporations and their Indian partners.

**Does GM increase yield?** The propaganda that Genetically Modified food is the only way to increase yield is refuted by a number of independent studies e.g. the Union of Concerned Scientists did a 13 year study of GM crop yields aptly entitled Failure to Yield. In India cotton production has increased because area under cotton has increased, at the expense of food crops, due to Govt policies. Cotton yields have increased when irrigation increased as in Gujarat. Initial increases due to bollworm control have been followed by increases in bollworm resistance, and in the increase of secondary pests. Area under Bt cotton has increased because these are now the only seeds that are available in the market. These are not indicators of the success of Bt cotton but indicators of why farmer indebtedness has increased, and why desperate farmers are leaving the failed gamble of Bt cotton for soya in Vidarbha. As a farmer, and honorary worker for farmer organizations since over 40 years, I can say that yield is a product of many factors – quality of seeds, soil, nutrition, water and climate - and there is no gene, which magically increases intrinsic yield. About 99% of GM seeds transfer only two traits – a 'toxin producing' gene (such as Bt) which leads every cell of the plant to produce an insecticide which cannot ever be washed away, or a 'herbicide tolerant' gene which enables a crop to withstand a herbicide – usually produced by the same GM seed company! Let us not for a moment think that companies like Monsanto, Cargill, Syngenta, Dow and their Indian licencees have the interest of the Indian farmer at heart. When their seeds fail do they compensate them or point to small print on the seed packets regarding timely watering, pest epidemics, refugia etc, which can never be ensured by small rain-fed farmers? Hybrid Bt cotton has contributed to GM seed company's profits, but farmers and the nation are dangerously losing self-reliance in seed production. There are over 70 GM crops awaiting clearance – which would be a monumental disaster for Indian consumers and farmers, making no sustainable

increase in yield and undoubtedly increasing the national shame of being a global leader in farmer indebtedness and suicides.

**Is GM the answer for our food requirements?** Are costly, patented, not reusable GM seeds needed to meet our food requirements. The farmers of our country have proved that they are more than capable of producing enough food to feed our growing population. The overflowing go-downs of wheat and rice – which are neither GM nor even hybrid seeds – demonstrate what happens when farmers are given irrigation and price support. As on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2012 we had over 800 lakh tonnes of surplus food grain. Yield is not our problem. Our problem is that much of this food grain is eaten by rodents or simply rots, is stolen from centralized go-downs by the powerful for profit, while the poor starve. Instead of shifting to a technology that makes highly questionable claims of providing higher yields, the focus should shift to build food storage and small food processing facilities at the village level, to improve food distribution and minimize spoilage, loss of produce in transport and theft of centrally procured food grain. We need ensure better prices to farmers and not to middlemen or foreign retail giants who seek to replace them.

**Poverty and malnutrition needs a different approach.** Those who produce our food cannot afford to buy it, and Dr M S Swaminathan who chaired the National Farmers Commission rightly pointed out, that the focus of agricultural policy now needs to shift to securing farmer incomes and not to production. GM has benefitted the seed companies, and perhaps a very small number of well off irrigated farmers and not the 80% of our farmers who are small and marginal and the 65% of our farmlands, which are rain-fed. The members of the Parliamentary Committee indeed visited the farmers of Vidarbha and their report correctly and poignantly states that the “villagers implored upon the Committee to voice their request to the concerned central authorities to ban farming of Hybrid BT Cotton in the country”.

**All Indians as consumers need safe food.** We are asked to put aside our ‘baseless fears of GM crops’. On what grounds are these fears ‘baseless’? A number of studies are emerging on the detrimental health impacts of GM crops, which give sufficient ‘base’ to consumer fears. The US population is now demanding labelling based on reports from doctors who have found a number of illnesses linked to GM. Reportedly Monsanto, the leading GM manufacturer, does not supply GM food in its own canteen. Yet Indian consumers are being fed GM cotton seed oil which is mixed into our edible oil, without labelling.

**Global position on GM Crops.** GM crops are being produced in only 29 nations across the world, but only 6 countries account for 95% of all GM crops grown: USA, Brazil, Argentina, India, Canada and China. Significantly China has now started proceeding with extreme caution and has less area under GM crops compared to India. Many countries have rejected or are strictly regulating genetically modified crops with heavy penalties and strict labelling laws, and one must congratulate our Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture for sounding a timely warning to stall the UPA Government's headlong drive towards GM food in response to corporate sponsored ‘educational visits’, research funding and other incentives to our agricultural establishment. If GM is such a successful, farmer friendly technology it is pertinent to ask why the US cotton farmers have to be given an annual subsidy of US Dollars 4.6 billion, and why our taxpayers money has to be spent on loan write offs which have increased astronomically after the arrival of Bt cotton in Vidarbha?

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