

Poison on the Platter

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The propagation of Genetically Modified (GM) food has the potential to affect nearly every single individual on the planet, warns Mahesh Bhatt in the 30-minute documentary film titled *Poison on the Platter*.

The film shows the proved impact and the possible future impact of the use of GM food on living creatures. It claims, based on “incontrovertible scientific evidence” that the consumption of GM food has the potential to stunt growth, impair the immune system, and even lead to severe damage to the brain, kidney and other vital organs. It may increase the incidence of life-threatening diseases like cancer and a number of other ailments.

Defining GM food Devinder Sharma, food policy analyst, explains that nature allows crossing among the same species, but in the case of genetic engineering—the technique used in GM food—inter-species crossing is done. In other words, the character of one species is transferred to another by this technique, which is quite dangerous. For example, the gene from a pig is transferred to rice, from fish to tomato, from the milk of the human female to rice etc.

As the documentary shows, there is little understanding of these facts among ordinary people. Modern, urban and aware young people interviewed in the film found it hard to believe that food can have undesirable consequences beyond the commonsensical assumption that “it may prove so only if it is not cooked properly”!

The film depicts many instances of the harmful effects of GM food: soy allergies skyrocketed in the UK with the use of GM soy; 12 cows died in Germany after Bt corn is fed to them; Bt corn caused skin and respiratory infection in people in a Philippines village; Star Link, a variety of Bt corn caused irritation and other disorders in the US. A January 1, 2002 article in the *Washington Post* reported the vices of genetically engineered varieties of crops and food in a piece ‘Monsanto hid decades of pollution’.

In European countries, the initial euphoria about the prospect of GM food solving the world food crisis was dashed when increasing instances of prostate cancer were linked to a genetically modified substance called Bovine Growth Hormone (BGH). Use of this hormone caused mad cow disease and foot and mouth disease which led to massive destruction of cattle. Consumers, farmers and civil society groups in Europe vociferously protested against the use of any GM food and many countries banned the use of the same or put a moratorium on their use till it is proved to be safe.

In the US, however, the lobby of GM giants like Monsanto and Syngenta has succeeded in getting approvals for GM foods from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). It was revealed later that the person who was in charge of taking policy decisions in the FDA was from Monsanto’s law firm and later became the vice-president of the company!

Such instances of regulators meant to protect the interests of the people working for unethical companies, is not uncommon. As Kavitha Kuruganti of the Coalition for GM-Free India says in the film: “It’s a classic case of vested interests wreaking havoc on people’s health because the institutions that have been created to protect our health are actually hand in glove...”

Dr Pushpa Bhargava of the Centre of Cellular and Molecular Biology debunks the claims of the GM lobby that the gene revolution is a great revolution like the green revolution and will solve the food crisis in India, and that the use of genetically modified seeds will increase food production by improving crop variety and lowering input costs. Dr Bhargava says that based on the facts available as of now, these claims are absolute lies as there is no scientific evidence to back them.

The film is relevant to India because GM food is expected to expand hugely in this country. The film points out that the combination of an ignorant public and a “corrupt and incompetent” regulatory system is lethal. Biotech multinationals are conducting experimentations on GM crops and as many as 56 such varieties are in different stages of trial in India. The GM variety of rice and common vegetables like brinjal, tomato, cauliflower, potato, okra, ginger etc are being experimented with and will gradually be released into the market.

The film shows the impact of Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) cotton, the only genetically engineered variety of crop allowed in India so far. Thousands of poor farmers in Andhra Pradesh committed suicide when the benefits of using the modified cotton did not materialise. People working in the fields developed skin diseases and about 2,000 goats and sheep that grazed in the Bt cotton fields died, forcing the administration to issue a warning in 2006 against sending cattle to graze in these fields.

Bt brinjal is in a very advanced stage of approval for commercial use by the nodal regulatory body, the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC). Experts like Dr Pushpa Bhargava, Dr Jeffery M Smith, founder of the Institute of Responsible Technology, and Devinder Sharma claim that proper tests have not been done on the safety aspect, that examinations done on the so-called safety data by regulators are full of flaws; it contains the type of genes which may cause superdiseases untreatable by antibiotics; it can kill useful bacteria inside human intestines, and so on.

Though Bt brinjal may become the first GM food to be consumed in India, this does not mean Indians are not already eating GM food, the film points out. “We are already eating food having GM content and it has been conclusively proved,” claims Rajesh Krishnan of *Greenpeace India*. Doritos corn chips made by PepsiCo International are illegally imported into India and sold here. The film says these were tested in laboratories in Germany and were found to contain GM corn which has the potential to cause liver and kidney damage. It has been banned in many European countries. The film shows several other such food items available in supermarkets here whose import is illegal since they contain GM strains.

One way to make the GEAC more accountable, Devinder Sharma suggests in the film, is to introduce a clause that says that “for anything going wrong with GM food, the chairman of GEAC is put behind bars; you will see everything will stop!”

More effective would be a strong civil society response. The film depicts some ongoing protests such as actor Milind Soman taking part in the ‘I am no lab rat’ campaign, and the formation of the Coalition for GM-Free India. Sri Sri Ravishankar, founder of the Art of Living says “...propagation of something which you are not sure of and which may cause enormous damage to life on the planet is simply not acceptable by any means; it’s not science, it’s terrorism...”

The film exhorts consumers to say 'no' to GM food. As Mahesh Bhatt says, "There is one definite outcome of genetic engineering of food, that is, the end of choice." Bhatt doesn't mince his words: "We have to ensure that our bodies are not enslaved by these corrupt and criminal multinationals and we will have to force our governments to put a complete ban on production and distribution till its safety is assured through extensive and impartial trials. What is, after all, at stake, is our health and very survival."

The film is a CAC production and is directed by Ajay Kanchan. While the documentary does an excellent job of highlighting the argument against GM foods, it has not included a single voice from the pro-GM group, though it does mention that efforts to get such opinions did not materialise due to the latter's unwillingness to participate in the documentary. Also, while it rightly concentrates on the impact on the health of consumers, the fact that genetic modification of foods will gradually lead to the extinction of indigenous crop varieties, is not mentioned. □□□