

LETTER

'NO' TO GM FOOD

December 11, 2008

My dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to bring to your notice the dangers of virtually unchecked approval of genetically modified crops in the country that is largely serving the interest of multinational companies such as Monsanto. This approval is granted, according to the present procedure, by a Committee of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) followed by a Committee (Genetic Engineering Approval Committee) of the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

There is a public interest petition pending in the Supreme Court (filed by Aruna Rodrigues) asking for a moratorium of a few years on the sale of genetically modified (GM) seeds and approval of GM crops. In pursuance of this case, the Supreme Court has nominated me to attend the meetings of the GEAC, which has made me acutely aware of our failings in the area.

I have provided to the GEAC a list of tests that must be done before a GM crop is approved. However, only less than 10 percent of these tests are actually being done before approval of GM crops. Not only that, in the absence of a national facility to do these tests or verify the results of tests done by others, the seed companies are either doing the tests themselves or having them done by laboratories in the country on samples provided by the seed companies. These laboratories do not have a facility to determine whether a seed is a normal seed or a GM seed. Therefore, for all practical purposes, there is no objective way today to ensure safety of a GM crop before it is approved for field trials or commercialization. We already have incontrovertible evidence that a great deal of damage has been done by Bt. cotton (the only GM crop released so far, with many others, including food crops, in the pipeline) to a section of farmers in India, as well as to farm animals.

Mrs Aruna Rodrigues told me that she had forwarded the list of tests mentioned above, that I had recommended to the GEAC, to randomly selected well-known scientists who are experts in the field, for their opinion, along with a copy of the counter-affidavit of the GEAC which said that these tests are not necessary (and which also cast personal aspersions on me!). She has forwarded to me replies from the ten scientists who were approached by her. All of them, without exception, have unequivocally supported my list of tests; none of them are my personal friends. I am enclosing copies of the replies of three scientists who are connected with three of the best-known institutions in the world. I would be happy to send your office all the other replies as well.

I, therefore, agree with the contention of Mrs Aruna Rodrigues in the above mentioned petition that is pending in the Supreme Court, that we should have a five to seven year's moratorium on the sale of GM seeds and the planting of any GM crop in the country. During this period, we should set up an appropriate laboratory to carry out all the necessary tests and to verify the results of others that may have been carried out. I have given to the GEAC a blue-print of such a laboratory which would easily take five years to be fully operational. We seek your support to the above proposal.

May I in the end say that as India is primarily an agricultural country, with 60 percent of its population deriving its total income from agriculture and agriculture-related activities, it would cease to be a free country if its agriculture is brought under the control of foreign multinational companies through control of seed and agrochemical production.

The marketing of GM seeds by the multinational companies is a step in this direction. What is worrying is that as much as 30 percent of our seed production today

may be, directly or indirectly, already in the hands of foreign multinational companies. We must prevent this trend. The proposed moratorium would be one important step in that direction.

I will be very happy to see you personally at your convenience in this regard.

With warm personal regards
Yours sincerely,

P M Bhargava

To : Dr Manmohan Singh
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