

GM Crops in India: Approval by Contamination?

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The regulatory system for GMOs (genetically modified organisms) in India is in tatters. So [said](#) the Coalition for a GMFree India (CGMFI) in 2017 after media reports about the illegal cultivation of GM soybean in the country.

In India, five high-level reports have already advised against the adoption of GM crops:

1. The 'Jairam Ramesh Report', imposing an indefinite moratorium on Bt Brinjal [February 2010];
2. The 'Sopory Committee Report' [August 2012];
3. The 'Parliamentary Standing Committee' [PSC] Report on GM crops [August 2012];
4. The 'Technical Expert Committee [TEC] Final Report' [June-July 2013]; and
5. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science & Technology, Environment and Forests [August 2017].

Given [the issues](#) surrounding GM crops (including the now well-documented [failure of Bt cotton](#) in the country), little wonder these reports advise against their adoption. Little wonder too given that the story of GM 'regulation' in India has [been a case of](#) blatant violations of biosafety norms, hasty approvals, a lack of monitoring abilities, general apathy towards the hazards of contamination and a lack of institutional oversight.

Despite these reports, the drive to get GM mustard commercialised (which would be India's first officially-approved GM food crop) has been relentless. The Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) has pushed ahead regardless by giving it the nod. However, the case of GM mustard remains in limbo and stuck in the Supreme Court due to various pleas lodged by environmentalist Aruna Rodrigues.

Rodrigues argues that GM mustard is being undemocratically forced through with [flawed tests \(or no testing\) and a lack of public scrutiny](#): in other words, [unremitting scientific fraud and outright regulatory delinquency](#).

Moreover, this crop is also herbicide-tolerant (HT), which is [wholly inappropriate](#) for a country like India with its small biodiverse farms that could be affected by its application.

GM crops illegally growing

Despite the ban on GM crops, in 2005, biologist Pushpa Bhargava noted that unapproved varieties of several GM crops were being sold to farmers. In 2008, [Arun Shrivastava wrote](#) that illegal GM okra had been planted in India and poor farmers had

been offered lucrative deals to plant ‘special seed’ of all sorts of vegetables.

In 2013, a group of scientists and NGOs protested in Kolkata and elsewhere against the introduction of transgenic brinjal in Bangladesh – a centre for origin and diversity of the vegetable – as it would give rise to contamination of the crop in India. As predicted, in 2014, the [West Bengal government said](#) it had received information regarding “infiltration” of commercial seeds of GM Bt brinjal from Bangladesh.

In 2017, the illegal cultivation of a GM HT soybean was reported in Gujarat. Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), a national farmers organisation, claimed that Gujarat farmers had been cultivating HT crop illegally – there is no clearance from the government for any GM food crop.

There are also reports of [HT cotton illegally growing in India](#). In [a paper](#) appearing in the Journal of Peasant studies last year, Glenn Stone and Andrew Flachs show how cotton farmers have been encouraged to change their ploughing practices, which has led to more weeds being left in their fields. The authors suggest the outcome in terms of yields (or farmer profit) is arguably no better than before. However, it coincides with the appearance of an increasing supply (and farmer demand) for HT cotton seeds.

It doesn’t take a dyed-in-the-wool cynic to appreciate that the likes of Bayer, which has now incorporated Monsanto, must be salivating at the prospect of India becoming the global leader in the demand for GM.

All of this is prompting calls for probes into the workings of the GEAC and other official bodies who seem to be asleep at the wheel or deliberately looking the other. The latter could be the case given that, as Stone indicates, senior figures in India regard GM seeds (and their associated chemical inputs) as key to modernising Indian agriculture.

CGMFI spokesperson **Kavitha Kuruganti** says that the regulators have been caught sleeping. It wouldn’t be the first time: India’s first GM crop cultivation – Bt cotton – was discovered in 2001 growing on thousands of hectares in Gujarat, spread surreptitiously and illegally by the biotech industry. Kuruganti said the GEAC was caught off-guard when news about large scale illegal cultivation of Bt cotton emerged, even as field trials that were to decide whether India would opt for this GM crops were still underway.

In March 2002, the GEAC ended up approving Bt cotton for commercial cultivation in India. To this day, no liability was fixed for the illegal spread.

The tactic of contaminate first then legalise has benefited industry players before. In 2006, for instance, the US Department of Agriculture granted marketing approval of GM Liberty Link 601 (Bayer CropScience) rice variety following its [illegal contamination](#) of the food supply and rice exports. The USDA effectively sanctioned an ‘approval-by-contamination’ policy.

Illegal GM imports

Despite reasoned argument and debate having thus far prevented the cultivation of GM crops or the consumption of GM food in India, it seems we are to be witnessing GM seeds and crops entering the food system regardless.

Kuruganti [says](#) that a complaint lodged with the GEAC and a Right to Information (RTI)

application seeking information regarding the illegal GM soybean cultivation in the country has stirred the apex regulatory body to bring the issue to the notice of the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT), months after the issue became public.

In reply to the RTI application, the GEAC responded by saying it had received no complaint about such illegal cultivation. Kuruganti says this is a blatant lie: the BKS had collected illegally cultivated soybean samples for lab testing and the report was sent to the GEAC along with a letter of complaint. GM HT soybean has not been granted permission for field trials, let alone large-scale cultivation.

It is also understood that apart from the BKS, the Government of Gujarat also alerted the GEAC to the illegal cultivation.

Kuruganti says:

The fact that the GEAC is writing now to the DGFT to take action (on preventing the illegal GM imports), makes it clear that it lacks any real intent to take serious action about the violations of its own regulations. It also indicates that it is putting up a show of having “done” something, before an upcoming Supreme Court hearing on PILs related to GMOs.

Her assertion is supported by Rohit Parakh of India for Safe Food:

Commerce Ministry’s own data on imports of live seeds clearly indicates that India continues to import genetically modified seeds including GM canola, GM sugar beet, GM papaya, GM squash and GM corn seeds (apart from soybean) from countries such as the USA... with no approval from the GEAC as is the requirement.

Kuruganti concludes that the regulatory system is a shambles and is not preventing GMOs from being illegally imported into the country or planted. Moreover, the ruling BJP has reneged on its election promise not to allow GM without proper protocols.

Offshoring Indian agriculture

It is not a good situation. We have [bogus arguments](#) about GM mustard being forwarded by developers at Delhi University and the government. We also have USAID [pushing for GM](#) in Punjab and twisting a problematic situation to further Monsanto’s interests by trying to get GM soybean planted in the state. And we have regulators (deliberately) asleep at the wheel.

The fact that India is importing so many agricultural commodities in the first place doesn’t help. Relying on imports and transnational agribusiness with its proprietary (GM) seeds and inputs is not a recipe for food security. In the 1960s, Africa was not just self-sufficient in food but was [actually a net food exporter](#). Today, courtesy of World Bank, IMF and WTO interventions, the continent [imports 25% of its food](#), with almost every country being a net food importer.

Is this what India wants? Based on its [rising](#) import bill, self-reliance and food security seems to be an anathema to policy makers. In response to the government’s decision to abolish import duty on wheat in 2017, Ajmer Singh Lakhwala, head of the Punjab unit of Bharatiya Kisan Union, said sarcastically:

The import of cheap wheat will bring the prices down. It appears the government wants the farmers to quit farming.

As previously [outlined](#), at the behest of the World Bank and courtesy of compliant politicians in India, it certainly seems to be the case.

Self-sufficiency is not to the liking of the US and the World Bank. Washington has for many decades regarded its leverage over global agriculture as a tool to secure its geostrategic goals.

Whether it involves the import of subsidised edible oils, wheat, pulses or soybean – alongside the ongoing neglect of indigenous agriculture and farmers by successive administrations – livelihoods are being destroyed, [food quality is being undermined](#) and Indian agriculture is slowly being offshored.

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Colin Todhunter is a frequent contributor to Asia-Pacific Research.

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