Bt brinjal, worming its way in through the back door?

in

- **Industry** [1]

Is Monsanto trying to undermine opposition to GM crops in India by introducing them via India’s neighbours?

Corporate brinjal & profit motive

When smooth operators can’t break in through the front entrance, they worm in from the back door. Even after a lawsuit was filed against Monsanto biopiracy, it took India’s civil society years to win a decade-long moratorium on Monsanto’s Bt brinjal last year, thereby buying time. Monsanto then moved onto Bangladesh, alerting alarmed activists as contamination would spread fast in a small country and across porous borders to India and Pakistan.

South Asia is one of the world’s Centres of Origin and Biodiversity – the limited geographical area belted around the equator where groups of organisms first developed their distinctive properties. Some 2500 varieties of brinjal, also known as eggplant and aubergine, have been around here at least 4,000 years, from where it spread to neighbouring regions. It is not native to North America, Europe, Australia, or north, or the Himalayas.

Angered by the banning of Bt brinjal, AR Reddy, co-chair of India’s Genetic Engineering Approval/Appraisal Committee that granted commercial approval, let the cat out of the bag saying it was only a matter of time before it reached the Philippines and Bangladesh, after which it would be difficult for governments to control its spread.

Reddy’s logic was that because commercial cultivation was delayed in one state, illegal cultivation started elsewhere, so Bt may as well be permitted! Is that justification? Yet it could not have happened unless some company made Bt seed illegally available. Indeed, wherever in the world Bt crops have awaited approval, they invariably “escaped”, contaminating and spreading. Known culprits have never been caught.

Sure enough, Monsanto took Bt brinjal to the Philippines. But the country boasts a unique legal remedy known as “kalikasan” that has a lesson for us. Petitioners filed a writ for those “whose constitutional right to a balanced and healthy ecology is violated or threatened by an unlawful act or omission of a public official, involving environmental damage of such magnitude as to prejudice the life, health or property of inhabitants in two or more cities or provinces.” Consequently, in 2011, the Philippine Supreme Court banned Bt brinjal field trials. However, it’s a long way from South Asia which remains Monsanto’s main target. To date some 27 different countries have banned GMOs while 50 others require labeling.

Why would a GM corporation insist on genetically modifying a foodcrop that already comes in thousands of delicious varieties, each perfectly adapted to local soil and climate, thriving around the year, so easy to grow at no cost, and produced to overflowing? – For that very reason.

Because South Asia offers over a billion brinjal consumers, Monsanto aimed to displace its brinjal biodiversity with Bt brinjal, by fair means or foul. - Despite brinjal being protected under the Indian Biological Diversity Act and the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers Rights Act, and cannot be patented or appropriated for proprietary gains.

To subvert restrictions, Monsanto funded USAID and took Ford Foundation’s help to set up a collaborative research front with several Indian agricultural institutions that picked up popular, common varieties and tinkered with them without government permission or approval, finally...
partnering with a local company - Mahyco.

For two decades, Monsanto has been helping itself to other countries’ native plants and illegally genetically modifying them. Just because a US Supreme Court allowed blatant theft doesn’t make it right or acceptable elsewhere: something our governments have to put their foot down on before it’s too late.

Agri-corporations have never bothered to genetically engineer niche or rare crops, only those that have huge, existing markets and variety, making GM unnecessary. It started with maize and wheat, two of the world’s staples, virtually destroying corn’s centre of origin in Mexico, and has now gone on to common vegetables such as soyabeans, tomatoes, potatoes, squash, papaya, and more. They even robbed basmati rice, although they failed with turmeric (haldi) and neem, and don’t let up.

Contrary to what people believe, science has not discovered or understood everything in existence. Science is an ongoing process of discovery: our planet alone is so incredibly vast and complex, most life forms and processes are yet to be uncovered. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. After learning a lot about a narrow area, designated a “specialisation”, the self-proclaimed authorities of the corporate variety - not even practicing farmers - actually arrogantly believe a laboratory-tinkered plant can be superior to and make dispensable thousands of plant varieties that have evolved over millions of years to adapt to micro-regions, local soils, and micro-climates. The profit motive affects clear thinking.

Matters get worse when decision-making politicians oblivious of ecological and agricultural issues, are persuaded by powerful vested interests to see only a one-sided picture. Mr Shahbaz Sharif, who now seems to be vacillating over the Bt issue, should be listening more to voices of local farmers and the public interest.

Initially after genetics were discovered and mapped, specialists erroneously concluded that single genes were responsible for single, specific traits, which became the central dogma of molecular biology. Genes come in the thousands, and many were considered unnecessary “junk” – just because scientists couldn’t decipher their purpose!

They simply forcibly introduced a gene of their choice into another species which lacked it, supposedly turning it into a “new” plant to conveniently patent and commercialise. They also claimed that the “new” plant, although different by virtue of an added gene, was nevertheless “substantially equivalent” to the natural counterpart plant! If that were so, why did it deserve a patent? Belatedly, but thankfully, in 2009, this dogma was disproved by the finding that not one, but a variety of genes in a mother plant was responsible for a set of traits, including some they previously considered junk!

Scientists, lawyers, bureaucrats, and politicians, not farmers and ordinary citizens, have flouted principles such as no living form or part thereof - plant, animal, or human – can be given in private ownership. Neither can the universal and historical ownership of the commons and whatever grows on it.

Copyrights are justifiably awarded for unique works of creativity such as a novel, a piece of music, an original painting. By forcibly inserting a gene into an alien plant where it did not belong, Monsanto claimed it “created” something new and novel. It did not; it simply stole an indigenous plant that always existed, and warped it through an unnatural process into something undesirable, unpredictable, environmentally and health damaging, and unnecessarily expensive. Monsanto repeated the tactic it used for Bt cotton, as an entry point for complete agricultural takeover. Only governments can ensure whether they – or citizens - ultimately win or lose.

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