

SOUTHERN ACTION ON GENETIC ENGINEERING

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Dear *Shri Ramesh*

We have read with great concern the recent demand made this week by ABLE [Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises] for a special meeting of the GEAC for a speedy approval for trials of GE crops. We urge you to initiate a very wide national debate before acceding to any such demand from the industry aimed at fast tracking their profits.

As a matter of fact, in the current politically surcharged atmosphere of the country where every decision of the government is being closely questioned by the citizens and national media for their lack of transparency, any acceptance of this ABLE demand will generate a new spiral of accusations that the government has given into the bullying of the biotech industry. Therefore the government will do well to initiate extensive and wider debate in the same vein as the unprecedented and phenomenal debate you wove around the Bt Brinjal issue.

The ABLE argument might enable them to earn huge profits but it is also a way of totally disabling farmer controlled agriculture in the country. As a person from Karnataka you must have been reading reports about how farmers have been pushed into the Bt Cotton trap. In districts such as Haveri, Ranibennur farmers are laying siege to seed shops and seeds are being **rationed out** at One Packet Per Farmer. And this has led to huge black marketing. While the official price of cotton seeds [Bt Cotton around Rs.900 and non Bt around Rs.500] the black market prices are going through the roof @ Rs.2400 to Rs.2800. Farmers are spending their days and nights in mile long serpentine queues in front of seed shops braving sun, rain and police cane charges. Bringing farmers to this state of desperation and beggary should be squarely laid on the hype created by Bt cotton and the unprecedented [what some people also call manipulated] increase in cotton prices which jumped from Rs.2500/quintal to Rs.8000/ql in 2011

Therefore the more the government keeps acceding to the disabling demand of the ABLE and ISAAA alongside the industry organizations, the tighter will be the noose around farmers necks even while the industry will laugh all the way to their banks. In this cycle of farmer disaster and industry prosperity, the only way for Indian farming will be downhill slide all the way.

As the Minister for Environment, please consider whether all the biosafety standards have been maintained till now. As someone who has been working very closely with farmers on a day to day basis for over 20 years, I have seen with horror that the issue of refugia around Bt Cotton fields has become a joke. Farmers' natural care and love for earth has been so consumed by the monetisation of their minds that they are not ready to experiment with three lines of non Bt cotton refugia around their fields and manage to push in Bt right into that part. Besides the Bt industry has stopped supplying non Bt refugia seeds since the last few years since they are scared that many farmers have been observing that the refugia does better than the Bt seeds themselves!

There is hardly any District Level Monitoring Committee for GE crops in existence and no one is bothered to look at this aspect. Thus the nation is on top of an environmental volcano ready to explode any minute.

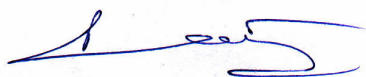
In this kind of an apocalyptic situation the industry is asking for fast track clearance to minimize the already sub minimal environmental regulation especially in the biotech area. Your work on Bt Brinjal has won you global appreciation. I have personally witnessed it in seminar after seminar in world capitals as the GE activists have portrayed you as the model environmental minister in the world. I hope this reputation of yours will come into play when you deal with this demand of greed by the biotech industry.

The least that the Government of India should do now is to call for a nationwide debate not only in the state capitals but in all small towns and kasbas of the country and designate 2011 – 2012 as the Year of GM Debate in India. The debate must go beyond the hallowed scientific experts and even some self styled leaders of GE movement in the civil society and must encompass farmers, health practitioners, legal fraternity, consumer groups and thoroughly democratize the debate. With hundreds of media channels operating all over the country the entire debate can be on the e-domain to reach millions of people across India. I urge you to facilitate the voices of the unheard to come to the surface and inform the policy processes by offering some exciting new perspectives and rescue the debate to the “stale”mate it has reached.

In order to make this debate an informed debate we also need to start the processes of spreading the information on GE to the local communities in a massive way. I am sure you will have the cooperation of grassroots civil society organizations, farmers associations, consumer organizations, health activists and many others who will come forward to spread this information across the country. In all the South Indian states as well as in Orissa, The SAGE – Southern Action on Genetic Engineering is already doing it within its capacity. But if the MoEF joins its force with SAGE we can have a vibrant debate all across South India, Orissa and Vidarbha which have the maximum concentration of Bt Crops and are now being targeted by the disABLEing arguments of the biotech industry.

We urge you to pioneer this debate and not to be bullied by the aggressive demands of the FICCI, CII, ISAAA and ABLE whose only obvious aim is to line their pockets with scant disregard to the ecological future of this country or the welfare of small and marginal farmers who have been taken for a cruel ride by the Bt Cotton industry till now and in future by the peddlers of a wide ranging, life threatening array of GE crops.

Very sincerely yours



[p v satheesh]
National Convenor
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To
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