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MEDIA RELEASE

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FARMYARD TRUTHS AND INDUSTRY LIES

Spin doctors are bent upon distorting the Bt cotton facts

The Genetic Engineering industry has started a huge campaign on the so called success of Bt cotton to bamboozle public opinion in the country. In the wake of a series of setbacks suffered as a consequence of a spate of refusals by the apex regulatory body Genetic Engineering Approval Committee of the Government of India, the biotech industry had to go for an overdrive for its survival. And it has predictably done so.

Against this backdrop, it is essential for us to consider the realities on the ground both in Andhra Pradesh which is closest to us as well as the reality in the Global South where Bt cotton has tasted a string of reversals: It has been kicked out of many countries; it has been prevented from entering into others; has been losing in popularity in some others and is making an illegal business in some others.

The film **A Disaster in Search of Success: Bt Cotton in Global South**, an incredible production by a group of peasant women from the Community Media Trust of Medak District, Andhra Pradesh, presents these realities from South Africa, Indonesia, Thailand, Mali in West Africa and of course from India.

This truth has hit Monsanto so badly between the eyes that it has produced 29 short films of its own and has hosted them on its website to counter these realities. While Monsanto can have testimonies from manipulated farmers and paid scientists, the AP Coalition in Defence of Diversity and the Deccan Development Society will soon come out with its own web videos representing the experiences of farmer-victims of Genetic Engineering from different parts of the world and from independent, free thinking, respected scientists who have refused the corporate traps and have been cautioning the humanity about the negative impacts of GMOs.

Within AP itself, evidences are glaringly different from the fools' paradise that Mahyco-Monsanto is creating with its cohorts from the Assocham and Chamber of Commerce and Industries, for whom the foreign direct investment is far more important than the lives of farmers lost in the pursuit of Bt cotton or the Bt-infected toxicity in our soils and plants because of which thousands of animals have died over the last two years.

Many NGOs including the Deccan Development Society and the APCID have presented irrefutable evidence of animal deaths as a result of feeding on Bt Cotton plants. This prompted the Government of Andhra Pradesh to start its own investigations. As a result, the Director of Animal Husbandry, Government of Andhra Pradesh wrote a letter to the Chairman, GEAC to arrange for Biosafety studies on the impact of Bt cotton on sheep and goats. But the GEAC has done nothing of the sort.

This leads us to the question of direct or indirect complicity of responsible government institutions who refuse to get out of the trap laid for them by the industry. The AP Coalition in Defence of Diversity, in spite of repeated appeals to National Institute of Nutrition, the apex body of the Government of India on the issues of nutrition and food toxicity has not succeeded in persuading the institute to start the toxicity study of Bt plants on animals. This is in spite of our offer to meet the costs of the study. So is the case with GEAC, which refuses to pro actively study the Biosafety aspects of GM crops and save the citizens and soils of this country from the toxic crops. The only option left to us is to use the RTI Act and force these institutions to take up their constitutional responsibility.

While the public sector institutions are cocooned in their reluctance to explore the truth, the industry spin doctors have started crying from the housetops about the phenomenal success of Bt cotton in India “because of which cotton farmers of India earned an additional income of Rs.7,039 crores after an increase of 50% in yield”. [Press Release from ASSOCHAM, July 11, 2007] That such an incredulous lie goes unchallenged by the public sector is extremely tragic.

On July 27th, ASSOCHAM which claims to have done a survey on Bt Cotton farmers came up with a series of embarrassingly false claims. Look at some of them below:

Those who had grown Bt cotton earned higher incomes and their household income and family conditions had improved substantially. Increased maternal care services like anti-natal checkups, access to services by trained paramedical and nursing personnel, larger school enrolment and other such improvements in quality of life were found among the Bt cotton growers as compared to those growing non-Bt cotton.

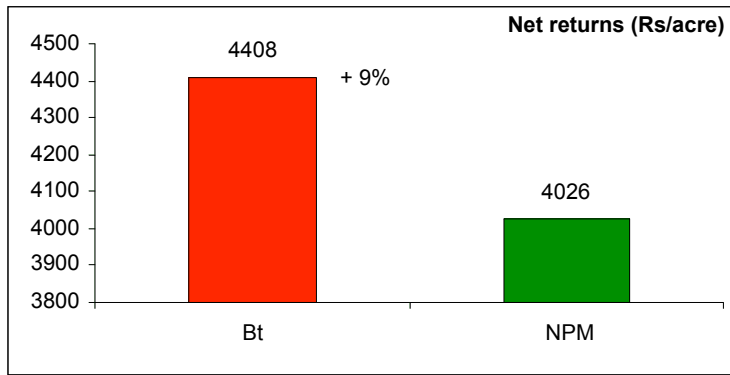
Children in the Bt cotton growers' families had been vaccinated for polio and received complete immunisation. Villages where Bt cotton was being grown had benefited due to increased access to services such as telephone systems, electricity, drinking water, better internet connectivity, banking, and markets and shopping. [from a report in The Hindu, July 27, 2007]

Short of saying that people were breathing air in and out because they grew Bt Cotton, the ASSOCHAM publicists gave credit to Bt cotton for everything else.

Then what is the reality from the field? Let us bring a few for your consideration:

Truth No.1: Bt COTTON FARMERS EARNED JUST 9% MORE

In AP, across various hybrids and varieties, the Bt cotton growers earned in 2006-7 just about 9% more than non Bt farmers who followed Non Pesticide Management practices [NPM].



The non Bt farmers did not have access to good non Bt hybrids such as Tulsi, Raasi and Banni since all of them had converted into Bt. Those who were able to access a good hybrid such as Banni in its non Bt version, had yields upto 590 kgs per acre while Bt Banni farmers had a yield of only 615 kgs per acre. A slight difference of 25 kgs per acre.

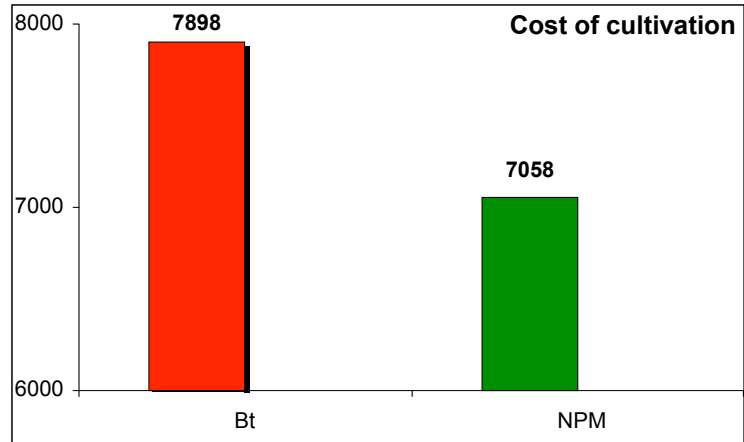
However the farmers using non Bt seeds of Banni had earned Rs.100 more per acre than Bt Banni farmers thus nailing the lies of Bt spin doctors.

However, across all range of hybrids and varieties the income of Bt farmers was around Rs.4408 per acre while the NPM farmers earned Rs.4026 per acre. This is in spite of the fact that the NPM farmers had unnecessarily spent 23% more on fertilizers than Bt farmers and had to make do with inferior variety of seeds since non Bt seeds have disappeared from the market! If they had access to good non Bt seeds as before and if they had not spent so much on fertilisers they would have reaped a greater income than Bt farmers.

This paltry difference of Rs.380 between Bt and Non Bt farmers is the basis for the laughable ASSOCHAM hype and its series of embarrassing lies. How vulgar can publicity get?

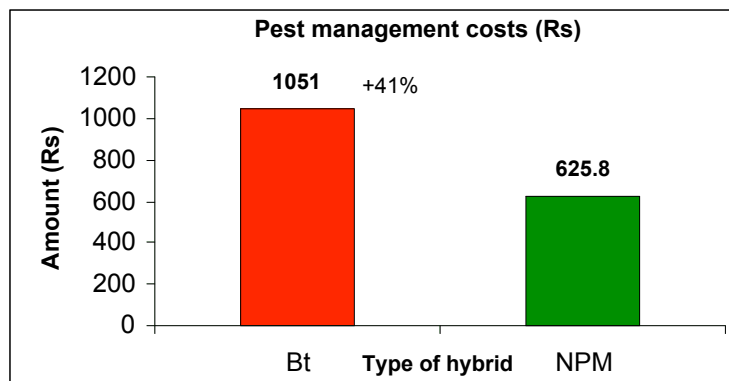
Truth No.2: CULTIVATING Bt COTTON WAS MORE EXPENSIVE

In spite of the fact that NPM farmers spent more on fertilizers than Bt farmers, their total Cost of Cultivation was still 11% less than the cost borne by Bt farmers. Since we trace all the agrarian crisis to higher cost of cultivation, see how Bt cotton is contributing to this crisis.



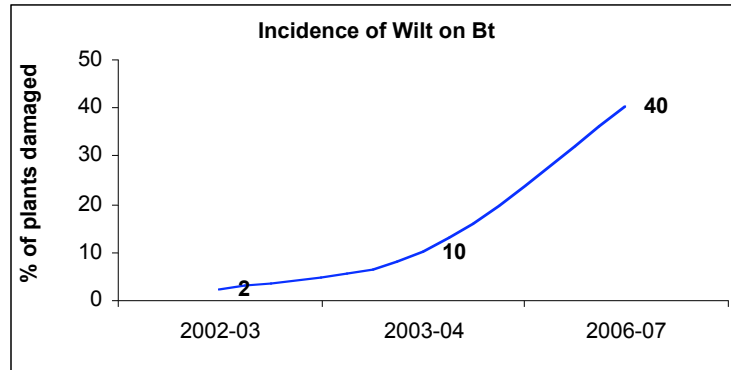
Truth No.3: Bt FARMERS SPENT MORE ON PEST CONTROL THAN NPM FARMERS

Biotech industry constantly boasts that Bt Cotton *Reduces Pest Management Costs SIGNIFICANTLY. But in reality, in 2006-2007, NPM farmers SPENT 41% LESS ON PEST MANAGEMENT THAN Bt FARMERS.* While Bt farmers spent Rs.1051 per acre, the NPM farmers needed to spend just about Rs.625 per acre to save their crops from pests. Thus the very *raison detre* for the existence of Bt Cotton has been proved false.



Truth No.4: NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN DISEASES TRAIL BT COTTON

Bt Cotton has brought never-before-seen diseases for cotton farmers. **ROOT ROT**, a disease which cotton farmers of AP had never seen before in their life, is slowly spreading like a silent fire. In 2002-03 the year when Bt cotton was introduced and harvested for the first time in AP, this disease made its maiden appearance and was reported in just 2-3% of the cultivated area. Year after year it has been spreading and this year, it has reached an alarming proportion of 40% of area. See the following graph for the rising incidence of wilt in cotton from the time Bt cotton arrived on the scene in 2002-03.



Some serious outbreaks of this disease occurred in Nalgonda district. The desperate farmers were forced to uproot their own crops in more than 500 acres.

In fact, even the Government was aware of this problem. Addressing a press conference in Hyderabad in the second week of April, 2007, the Commissioner for Agriculture, Government of AP had said that **“the introduction of genetically modified (GM) crops, engineered for a specific trait, was also resulting in new pest problems. This called for a regular monitoring and surveillance system to know the status of pests, which was a pre-requisite for effective implementation of integrated pest management.**

“To counter this, the department had cautioned the GM companies to indicate the problems on the labels of their products while they were also cautioned against spurious seed”.

But till today, no Bt Seed manufacturer has indicated such problems on their seed packets. This is a flagrant violation of the law of the land

Truth No.5 : SEED INDUSTRY DELIBERATELY CLOSES ALL NON-BT OPTIONS FOR FARMERS

After experiencing all the above effects of Bt cotton, thousands of cotton farmers who are scared of sowing Bt cotton. But they are deprived of all other options in AP. All the good cotton hybrids have miraculously been made to disappear through a sleight of hand by the seed industry.

Thus, Bt cotton which came to AP with a slogan that “WE ARE OFFERING MORE OPTIONS” has, in reality “CLOSED ALL OPTIONS” for farmers. In other words, they are telling farmers: You grow Bt or else there is no seed for you.

THIS IS THE MOST DANGEROUS IMPLICATION OF Bt COTTON FOR US. Several years ago, we had read in Toronto Star of Canada a statement from

a senior Monsanto executive which said: “We will flood the market with our products. You will have no option but to surrender”. Now we are seeing this being played out in AP.

In her April press conference, the Commissioner-Agriculture had also said that “The department had also cautioned farmers against opting for Bt cotton crops in rain-fed areas”. Since the farmers have been shut out of all other options by the manipulative, profit-hungry seed industry, what should the government do?

OUR DEMANDS

Therefore we demand:

- 1. Government immediately promulgate a law that all cotton seed companies produce and distribute non Bt seeds constituting at least 50% of their total trade volumes**
- 2. NIN must be ordered by the Government of India to start a thorough investigation of the toxicity impact of Bt cotton leaves and stalks on animals who graze them.**
- 3. The Government of AP must be pro active in demanding that GEAC take their findings seriously and ban Bt Cotton from Andhra Pradesh. Otherwise the State Government should be allowed to use its own discretion to ban these crops from its soils.**
- 4. Consistently we have seen that cotton farmers in general and Bt farmers in particular have not earned more than Rs.5000 per acre on an average over the last five years. In comparison, the millet farmers of Southern Medak have shown that they can earn around Rs.7500 acre on good soils under totally unirrigated conditions. Therefore government must pro actively encourage farmers to grow the low external input millet crops on rainfed farms by providing good markets for millet crops and making it attractive for farmers to grow.**

[p v satheesh]

Convenor

AP Coalition in Defence of Diversity