

Bt cotton not to blame for farm distress: scientists

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MUMBAI: Farmer suicides in Maharashtra's Vidarbha area and other parts of the country have nothing to do with Bt cotton, scientists said at the Indian Science Congress here on Monday.

"There is a lot of negative public perception about Bt crops... Even a paper in *Nature* says linking these two [Bt. Cotton and farmer suicides] is our imagination," said Dr. Anupam Verma, INSA [Indian National Science Academy] Senior Scientist at the Indian Agriculture Research Institute, speaking on 'GM crops — use of modern technology in agriculture.'

Some scientists said there were interesting research prospects in the field of biotechnology. "We could be extracting oil from leaves, instead of seeds. Imagine what it would mean for us, when our government is spending over Rs. 60,000 crore on oil import," Dr. Deepak Pental, former Vice-Chancellor of the Delhi University, said. "We can produce oil indigenously if we use Bt. But unfortunately, it is caught



School children at the 'Pride of India Expo' in Mumbai on Monday. — PHOTO: PAUL NORONHA

up in a debate taken up by the Left and now supported by the neo-right." Dr. Pental is an award-winning genetic scientist who has been credited with major breakthroughs in hybrid seed science.

In the recent past, there had been a sharp increase in the acreage of GM crops in the country, and over 90 per cent of the cotton cultivated was GM crop, scientists said. They refuted arguments about monopolisation and said there were over 1000 Bt

Cotton hybrids available in the country. Dr. Verma referred to Project Sunshine in Gujarat and explained how Bt Cotton had powered the growth in agriculture in Gujarat. He said GM Maize had taken nutrition to Adivasi farmers.

The session, attended by over 100 delegates, including students, farmers and scientists, didn't have a single critical or dissenting paper on GM crops.

The scientists called for a clear policy decision by the

Central government on genetically modified crops. Some scientists questioned the need for stringent regulations. The need of the hour was more of confined field trials. "How will there be trust among the people if there is not enough data for analysis?" asked renowned scientist and Padma Bhushan awardee R. Paroda.

Scientists said the ambiguous policy relating to GM crops had caused disillusionment, and it was keeping young researchers from venturing into the field.

Heated debate

A debate ensued after a journalist questioned the basis for selection of scientists to present the papers. He wondered why there was not a single critical voice. He claimed scientists were fudging data and not giving out clear information about the adverse impact of GM crops. He accused them of fear-mongering about food insecurity.

But while one scientist answered some of the questions, a few others called the journalist 'neo-leftist' and

claimed there was no scientific basis for his arguments. "We have created a gene bank with over four lakh samples. It has been acknowledged as one of the best biodiversity programmes in the world. We have understood the need of our farmers and have helped them flourish. We have doubled cotton production and have reduced the load of pesticides. We are now exporting cotton worth \$3 billion. But it is people like you who have created policy paralysis," Mr. Paroda told the journalist.

He later acknowledged that there was a need for post-release monitoring system.

Alternative route

Dr. Pental said a country had to make choices and take an alternative course of action if it did not want genetically modified crops. "We should go ahead and say we don't want to research in the field of GM technology. In that case, we have to invest in alternatives.

"For example, Europe is investing hugely in new generation pesticides. But we are still using old pesticides," he said.