



I Am a Struggling Farmer And Anti-GM Activists Do Not Speak For Me

Pawan Payal

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Indian farmers have traditionally used various innovative methods to find solutions to challenges in their farms as they often did not have access to modern technologies, especially in remote rural areas, which are burdened with poor agricultural infrastructure.

However, as time passed, farm challenges have only increased. For the last 20 years, I have farmed mustard in the Shekawati region of Rajasthan. Every year I procure hybrid seeds and use five sprays of pesticide – but my yield remains below the national average.

I tried to experiment with different techniques to improve my yield, but nothing worked. Instead, it increased my cost of production by 30 percent. Thousands of farmers in the Rashtriya Kisan Progressive Association, the organisation I work with, have experienced similar challenges.

We farmers are unable to find solutions for stagnant or declining productivity, which is badly affecting our livelihood and very existence. At the same time,

costs have been escalating and the price of produce has been declining. Tools for increasing productivity aren't available, contributing to making farming increasingly unsustainable.

Recently, I interacted with farmers from USA, Canada and other countries at the RBF-UNDP meeting this November in Singapore. Their yield is almost double ours, even though we are in a similar agro-climatic zone.

So why is it harder for us? The answer could lie in genetic modification.

Indigenously developed GM Mustard is a promising technology for over 60 lakh mustard farmers all over the country. It has been vigorously tested and has the potential to enhance productivity and profitability enormously.

GM crops can minimise crop losses due to pest attacks. Other innovative in-built protections allow these crops to grow under challenging conditions such as drought, flood and salinity. India's first GM crop, Bt cotton, is a prime example. The introduction of genetically modified cotton brought better income to farmers and also improved exports drastically.

However, activists have hindered efforts to introduce other GM crops. In early 2010, India placed a moratorium on the first GM food crop, Bt Brinjal, and GM Mustard has recently come under severe criticism from these same groups. Basically, a motivated motley group of unscientific people are trying to decide on behalf of crores of Indian farmers and are holding their interests to ransom. They don't speak for me.

Mustard is grown in most states, but yield is limited by diseases like Alternaria Blight and White Rust that cause damage of about 10-70 percent of yield while the Aphid disease alone causes a damage of 35-73 percent loss in yield. GM mustard offers solutions to these challenges.

Cotton is the only GM crop allowed in the country. (Photo: Manon Verchot)

Still, even after the regulatory body GEAC cleared GM Mustard for commercial cultivation, history seems to be repeating itself. Activists have

upped their ante against its release through fear mongering. The government is now forced to go slow on its release by taking up the general consensus and consultation route. It is a pity that our government has so far been unable to find the will to tame these activists.

India is no stranger to products based on GM foods. Last year we imported 3,56,000 MT of Canola oil and 29,86,000 MT of Soya oil, both of which are made from GM varieties cultivated in countries like Canada, the US and Australia. GM canola meal and GM soymeal are safely used as major protein suppliers for poultry and dairy animals across the world.

Activists and farmers protest against GM mustard crop outside the Environment and Forest ministry in New Delhi on 5 February 2016. (Photo: IANS)

People opposing GM mustard are not connected with agriculture and have vested interests in keeping agricultural productivity poor in India. Their efforts are anti-farmer, as farmers remain poor with low yields without access to technology. If they succeed, it will be a big failure of the government.

GM technology enables Indian farmers to be globally competitive. Given our rich experience in agriculture, it is high time for decision-makers to have a long-term view of agriculture's progress in the interest of farmers and the economy.

*(Pawan Payal is National Coordinator of Rashtriya Kisan Progressive Association (RKPA) based in Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan. This is a personal blog and the views expressed above are the author's own. **The Quint** neither endorses nor is responsible for the same.)*