

Marketing GM: the making of poverty

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I fully endorse what [Asfar Jafri and Vandana Shiva](#) [0] argued in their **openDemocracy** article concerning the genetically-modified (GM) potato. I am also heartened to read that farmers in [Canada](#) [0] agree that GM technology will not solve the problems of the poor in the developing world.

It is of course not only in North America that you find food surpluses, but [also in India](#) [1], where free trade policies hamper the free distribution of grain across the country. In so far as GM crops are being used to bring about social changes, I would suggest that they are being used by India's bureaucrats to get rid of the class of marginal farmers.

Genetically-modified (manipulated) seeds are still new for Indian farmers – as are, to a very large section of farmers, hybrid seeds. There are obvious reasons for farmers to not to accept new and untried seeds: they cannot afford to risk their yields and crops. About 79% of Indian farmers are what are known as 'marginal farmers', owning less than 0.8 hectares of land.

It is this piece of land which has to provide the basic food needs of the family as well as of the landless labourers helping them. Such farmers hardly have the means to buy food from the open market; hence whatever they can bring home from their farms is the maximum they have for their consumption. Quite often this is not enough for all those working on the land.

Marginal holdings account for slightly more than 20% of the cultivable land of the country. These farmers do not have access to public irrigation facilities, so they can hope to have only a single crop during the rainy season. Rain-fed cultivation cannot ensure anything more than the minimum subsistence. Crop failures due to the monsoon vagaries are practically endemic, multiplying the woes of the marginal farmer.

Marginal farmers cannot afford to [buy seeds](#) [2] and chemicals from the market because they do not have the resources to procure them. Purchasing [seeds on credit](#) [3] will make such a farmer a debtor for all time.

An alliance of marketing and ignorance

Marginal farmers therefore use the seeds saved from their earlier year's crop, which simultaneously reduces the quantum of food available to the people working on the land. Their inability to acquire inputs commercially has traditionally bound the farmers to the age-old practice of using their own seeds and avoiding bought-in inputs.

Though this is the general pattern of things, we can observe farmers falling into the trap of [intense marketing strategies](#) [4]. These involve producers (both private and government) using marketing campaigns for seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides to influence the farmers, especially in the year following a crop failure season.

The government has a substantial share in manufacture and marketing of chemical fertilisers and pesticides in our country. Subsidy granted at the production point keeps the manufacturers in a good mood though many public units show continuous working losses.

Hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides – and now GM seeds – are introduced through doubtful marketing strategies, including failing to inform the farmers of the limitations of the product they market. The critical information that the farmers cannot use the seeds from their crop is withheld from them.

The government of India has to sanction the use of GM seeds before allowing the GM seed producer to introduce it among farmers. Despite this statutory requirement, the 2001 cultivation season saw large companies distribute the GM Bt cotton seeds on an extensive scale amongst farmers in different parts of the country. While the debate [5] on the suitability of GM cotton seeds continued amongst public servants, professionals and activists opposing manipulation of inputs, Bt cotton seeds were already extensively sown.

Instead of taking measures against this violation, the government approved [6] the use of Bt cotton. The subsequent extensive crop failure of Bt cotton opened the eyes of the farmers for the first time. Yet the use of Bt cotton is not banned. Many senior public officers push GM seeds both openly and stealthily, as can be observed in the case of the GM potato.

A route to the debt trap

Farmers and consumers are opposed to cultivating GM seeds for a number of reasons. The farmers lose their right to select the seeds they have found from experience to be most suitable. They already have a large variety of seeds to choose from. For example, more than 100 rice varieties are available in the country. Quite often a farmer will cultivate more than one variety on his farm. Resort to GM seeds takes away their freedom to select the variety.

The custom of taking seeds from the earlier crop enables them to apply their cultivation plan without having to resort to the market. The expensive GM seeds, by contrast, require them to find money to buy the seeds at a time when they hardly have any cash in hand. The local seed trader is all too willing to supply seeds on credit. So farmers fall into a debt trap; they become pawns to market forces. Until now, the Indian farmer has saved himself from this trap by avoiding going to market for inputs and by deciding to cover his needs before disposing off his surplus produce.

Awareness of the deleterious effect of commercial farming based on maximum use of hazardous chemicals is growing amongst farmers. The farmer has started to realise that use of chemicals and expensive seeds increases cost beyond his capacity to retain produce for his and his family's consumption. GM seeds therefore are antagonistic to sustainable agriculture.

As rightly stated by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall [7] in his article – GM crops? Not in my backfield [8] — published in *The Observer*: 'The only conceivably acceptable pro-GM argument, that it might help us feed the starving in the poorer parts of the world, turns out to be the most cynical and reckless of all. Far from offering hope and independence to the Third World farmers and growers, GM represents the new economic enslavement of the Third World — neo-colonialism by proxy.'

Let them eat slogans

'Feeding the poor' is a bogey that is used by everybody from big business and government to multilateral agencies. To put the record straight, India produces enough food items [9] to feed all

the 1 billion plus population. Yet about one-third of its population is condemned to living in abject poverty without even the minimum required to stave off hunger.

It is the high cost of food that keeps food from the hungry mouth. The prices of food items, even when heavily subsidised [10] through public distribution schemes (PDS), are too high for the poor. The World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Bank, and International Monetary Fund have sucked the primary food items from the farmer at throwaway prices and in return have flooded packaged and processed trash food which only the higher middle class citizen can afford.

Practically all the food giants of the world are now engaged in processing and packaging food and marketing it, on average, at a minimum of five to ten times the basic cost. In addition, the artificial cutting down of food items through heavy subsidies by the developed countries makes poor farmers in poor countries all the poorer.

The emerging world trade pattern dictated by the WTO compels India to sell cereals and pulses at a CIF [11] price lower than the PDS price [12] prescribed for delivery to the poor. Government warehouses are full of cereals rotting in absence of demand. But the government will rather export and expose its citizens to death and starvation. It is the jinxed distribution dictated by market forces that makes the poor face such tribulations.

By its very nature, GM produce would take away the last morsel from the poor. Why talk of feeding the poor?

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[4] <http://ngin.tripod.com/060402a.htm> target=_blank

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