



MARKETING OF BT COTTON IN INDIA: AGGRESSIVE, UNSCRUPULOUS AND FALSE....

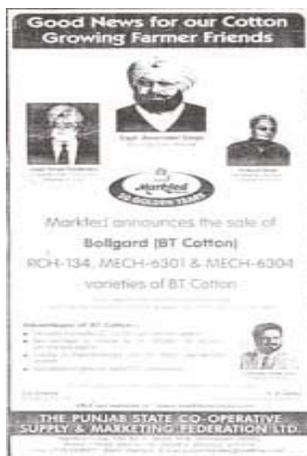


The biotech industry and its supporters like to present it as a science-based industry whose reputation has suffered only because its scientifically validated claims have been undermined by emotional appeals and disinformation campaigns. In fact, the reverse is the case. And nowhere can that be seen more clearly than in India, where Monsanto has been using every trick in the book to promote its GM cotton seeds.

The biotech industry and proponents of transgenics in general and Bt Cotton companies in particular are very often heard to argue that the rapid spread of Bt Cotton in India is an indication of its success on the ground. The expansion in Bt Cotton areas is an acceptance of the technology by farmers, they say.

We have a different story to tell. This is the story of how Bt Cotton is marketed in this country – aggressive and even unethical practices are adopted to lure farmers into the Bt Cotton trap. This has been the case right from the beginning and regulators have chosen to ignore this aggressive marketing despite reports of failure in many locations.

Many promises are made that are not fulfilled on the ground as evidenced by both official and independent reports. However, there is no mechanism to fix liability and accountability when the companies and their product fail to keep the promises. Farmers who feel dejected and disillusioned with Bt cotton are often seen doing nothing about the problem and living in despair while a large network of the companies' farmer-agents and other associates are busy spreading their false promises.....



In Punjab....

The Chief Minister of Punjab, Capt. Amarinder Singh saved the companies some expenditure on advertising by using public funds to put out large, prominent advertisements on Bt Cotton for several days in several papers. These advertisements promise several benefits to farmers with the purchase and use of Bt Cotton.

It is not clear however who is to be held accountable when Bt Cotton fails, as it is appearing to in many parts of the state.



Mr Sakattar Singh Barar, Sarpanch of Gumti Khurd village in Kotkapura block of Faridkot district has a story to narrate. On 12th March 2005, soon after the GEAC cleared some Bt Cotton varieties for the north zone, a Monsanto Mahyco van came into his village to publicise about Bt Cotton. They said that they wanted to give information about the new seeds to farmers. They chose to do this by bringing along some dancer girls with them, who danced to the tunes played on the public address system!

In Andhra Pradesh....

The company launched its product in 2002 by giving a big *daawat* to farmers in many villages. Chinnapu Reddy of Fatimapur village in Kothur mandal in Mahbubnagar had this story to narrate:

"The company guys and the dealers came right up to our doorstep to deliver the seeds. We should have known right then that something was wrong. One day, I came back to the village from the town to find a large gathering and much activity. There were also reporters from the local papers present. When I went closer, I discovered that this was about Bollgard seed. In this 'function', the discussions on the seed were held for one and half hours and more time was spent on a big feast. There was 95 kilos of non-vegetarian food cooked that day and there was biryani and chicken fry. On that very day, 'bookings' for the season's seed supply were made by the dealers and the company representatives. When parties like that are thrown, farmers like me tend to think that there must be something to what they are saying and agreed to buy the seed. The seeds have now brought farmers nearer to the gates of suicide deaths again".



Other farmers like Akki Ramulu of Mallapuram village in Kothur mandal also endorse these views. One farmer in Mallapuram said that after having eaten the food of the company, a farmer cannot refuse the seed ("*vaallu pettina buvva thinnaaka, vaari vithanam vaddantaama?*" – after having eaten from their hand, can we refuse their seed?).



In states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, Monsanto-Mahyco Biotech is also known to have distributed free pesticides with Bt Cotton seed! Advertisements of this "Scheme" had a title screaming: "In addition to two kinds of benefits, two kinds of savings also!". The advertisement promises the following: "Now, in addition to the heavy savings you are making on the sprays that you would use for bollworm prevention, you can also save on expenses on pesticides used for sucking pests. The advantage of the booking: Please pay only Rs 200/- for booking two boxes of Bollgard MECH 12 and MECH 162 varieties. At the time of purchase of seeds, get one TATA MIDA (100 ml) completely Free. Get your booking done with your nearest seed dealer today. Make good use of the offer of 'two kinds of savings'".

In the 2005 sales season, free bags were distributed to people who had participated in village level publicity meetings in Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh.

The companies are also known to put out advertisements in local newspapers which have an uncanny resemblance to regular media reports (probably to lend them as much credibility as a regular news story?!). Interestingly enough, in many of these advertisements, relatives of seed dealers are showcased as successful farmers who have benefited greatly by the use of Bt Cotton!



Further, there are also many instances of farmers from one district being portrayed in advertisements that appear in other districts. Is this a way to prevent farmers from verifying the veracity of the advertisement since they cannot be bothered to travel long distances to check out the information put out by the company?, we wonder. For instance, farmers of Warangal are lured by stories of successful Bt Cotton farmers in Guntur and Medak district.

There is also a wide network of Agents placed at the village level, who are entitled to a small commission on the sales that they ensure by promoting the seed with fellow farmers. These are usually well-known influential farmers at the village level. We met a couple of such farmer-agents in Chintanekkonda village in Warangal district, who are well-recognised by other farmers in the village.

There is also a system of “advance bookings” of seed practised in the state by the companies and seed dealer network. Here, farmers are warned of possible shortage of seed during sowing time given the ‘high demand’ for Bt Cotton seed all around – farmers, afraid of being left behind in the race, opt to pay a certain advance to the dealers in return for an assured supply of seed during sowing period.

In Maharashtra....

Many of the above practices are used to sell Bt Cotton in Maharashtra too. Nana Patekar, a popular actor, has been used by the company in its television advertisements and posters in several states. Further, these advertisements were put out during prime time and before news bulletins. In addition, in Maharashtra, the company engaged him to address farmers’ meetings in several places, urging them to use Bt Cotton.



Maharashtra also has other kinds of opinion leaders promoting Bt Cotton. For instance, a religious leader called Sant Satyapal Maharaj is known to urge his followers to adopt Bt Cotton in places like Akola. It is not clear how the *Sant*, who is not a farmer, is vouching for the product!

In this state, dealers have been showing small video clippings of some cotton plots as Bt Cotton plots to farmers who throng their shops. They tell the farmers who are watching that the video clippings are of Bt Cotton and that Mr XYZ has obtained very good yields from growing Bt Cotton.

In Madhya Pradesh....

Posters appeared in many places in Madhya Pradesh before sowing time, featuring a person who claimed to have used Bt Cotton seed the previous years with great benefits accruing from his Bt Cotton crop. These advertisements urged "other farmers" to benefit similarly from the use of Bt Cotton. Investigations revealed that this "farmer" was incidentally a "paan dabbahwala" (a petty shop owner selling betel leaves and cigarettes) who is not even a farmer, leave alone a Bt Cotton farmer!!! (Source: Charkha, July 2005)



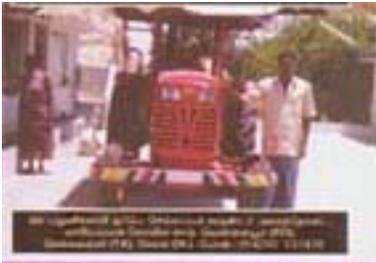
In the same state, other posters had farmers claiming very good yields from growing Bt Cotton. For instance, Ravinder Narain Patidaar of Sarangi village, Jhabua is shown in the poster as having obtained 20 quintals of yield per acre of Bt Cotton! In reality, Ravinder Narain, who had sown 3 packets of MECH 184 Bt and 2 packets of MECH 12 Bt has obtained only 25 quintals for all the five acres of Bt Cotton he had sown! He is aghast that the company is misusing the photos that were taken from him in this manner.



A third farmer called Pyarelal Patidaar (from Jamli village) also regrets the fact that his photo appears on posters which extol the virtues of Bt Cotton – "I said do not put my photo because I do not think that Bt Cotton is better than other varieties – however, they did not listen to me", he explains.



In Tamil Nadu....



A variety of marketing strategies are being adopted by the Bt Cotton companies in Tamil Nadu also, our investigations revealed. And once again, suggestive false claims by Bollgard farmers seem to be the way to reach out to other farmers!

A farmer called S Palanisamy s/o Chellapa Gounder Agarathodai of Vellaiyur of Salem district appeared on a poster proudly displaying a tractor that suggests that he had bought it after using Bt Cotton. We went to investigate. At the beginning of this season, Mr Palanisamy was approached by a company representative who urged the farmer to register for a contest that could take him to Mumbai. That is when the company took a picture of Mr Palanisamy in front of a tractor. However, what the poster does not reveal is that the farmer was not informed that this photo was for an advertisement of Bollgard and that this tractor was in fact taken by the farmer on a private loan! The farmer says that "with the yields that I get from Bt Cotton, I would not be able to buy even two tractor tyres"!



This episode, not surprisingly, appears on a poster called "TRUE STORIES OF FARMERS WHO HAVE SOWN BT COTTON"!

In Tamil Nadu, another method for popularizing and spreading the market for Bt Cotton seems to be through “Bollgard Mandram” or Bollgard Clubs. Signboards of member farmers spreading the message of Bollgard appear all over many villages here.

Some of the other methods adopted here include:



Booklet on Success Stories: Seed companies are using booklets of success stories that include last year's Bt Cotton farmer photos and stories about their high yields and profits. The Companies are distributing these booklets to the farmers through seed dealers.

Village Meetings and Feasts: The companies conduct meetings in select villages and bring farmers from neighboring villages by arranging vehicles etc. Here, they provide food for the farmers and in some cases, a small per diem is

also distributed. To gain credibility, the village head and influential farmers are also brought into the meetings where they put out their messages on the benefits of Bt Cotton.

Advertisements: The companies are putting out advertisements in local newspapers, through cable television, in videos in private buses and even videos in *haats* (rural weekly markets). They also use vinyl (digital) hoardings and cloth banners. Four wheelers with advertisements and film songs go around the villages, publicizing Bt Cotton amongst farmers.



Prizes: The Bt Cotton companies gave gold and silver prizes to the top retail seed seller and top wholesale merchant for their sales in 2004.

Discount Schemes for Advance Bookings: The companies sell the seeds with a discount of around hundred rupees, for farmers who have booked seeds in advance.

They also conduct some lottery draws for the pre-booked farmers - the prizes distributed are two-wheelers and school bags.

Free Gifts: The companies distributed a school bag each for 5 packets of Bt Cotton as a free gift.

Handbills: The companies distribute handbills in temple festivals and village bazaars.

To sum up....

Unabashed by what science has been disclosing about the ineffectiveness of the Bt technology, Monsanto's Indian subsidiary Monsanto-Mahyco and its sub-licensee Bt Cotton seed companies have been busy hyping GM seeds to India's poor farmers as magical, as celebrity-endorsed and even as sexy!

There's a striking contrast between the lavish nature of Monsanto's brash promotional campaigns in India and its flat refusal to pay any compensation to the farmers who have suffered often terrible losses as a result of cultivating its seeds. Such aggressive marketing also means fewer and fewer choices in front of farmers.

In this context,.....

The Monitoring and Evaluation Committee [MEC] to monitor Bt Cotton across the country was set up by Adivasi Ekta Sangathan, AKRSP, CEAD, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, Grameen Vikas Trust, Greenpeace India, Jan Saahas, Kheti Virasat Mission, Krishnadevaraya Rythu Sankshema Sangam, Krushi, MARI, Navajyothi, Pasumai Tayagam, Prasun, Rashtriya Satyagrah Dal, Sampark, Sarvodaya Youth Organisation, SECURE, VASPS and YUVA to monitor Bt Cotton in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab and Tamil Nadu.

The MEC demands the following in this context:

- that the aggressive and even false marketing of Bt Cotton be stopped immediately
- that the Bt Cotton companies reveal the total amount spent on marketing the seed so far
- that liability be fixed on the companies in all those cases where they resorted to unscrupulous and false marketing
- that the governments pro-actively put out information to farmers about how to protect themselves from such companies