

Coalition for a GM-Free India

To:

August 8, 2013

All Political Parties of India.

Dear Sir/ Madam,

Sub: Our concerns and objections against Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in our food and farming systems – Urging all political parties to stand on the side of citizens and sustainable development

Greetings! We as concerned citizens from around the country are working to create an informed debate on modern biotechnology/ transgenics in our food and farming systems and environment. We also seek to ensure that farmer-controlled, safe and affordable solutions exist for production related problems and productivity enhancement in agriculture. We consists of farmers' unions, consumer groups, environmental and women's organizations, civil society groups promoting ecological farming on the ground, seed savers' networks, and many other concerned citizens, and members drawn from the scientific community spanning different disciplines and so on.

As general elections are coming closer for one of the world's largest democracies, we believe that it is important that the controversial issue of genetic modification (GM) technology and other hazardous, unsustainable technologies affecting food security, sovereignty and safety should be part of the electoral debate within the nation. We believe that our approach to agriculture and agricultural technologies will go a long way in determining the future of rural India's economy, India's millennium development goals, its food security and livelihood security of millions.

Genetic Engineering (GE) or Genetic Modification (GM) is a highly controversial agricultural technology that has been deployed in a handful of countries around the world while an overwhelming majority of nations have not adopted it or in many cases outright rejected it. It is a living technology which is irreversible, imprecise and uncontrollable and any deployment of this technology in the open environment has to be done with great caution and forethought. While the proponents tout it as a solution to various problems in our food and farming systems, evidence abounds that this technology is neither safe nor sustainable.

There is significant scientific evidence highlighting the adverse implications of transgenics on various fronts. The fact that this technology goes hand in hand with rigid intellectual property rights (IPRs), which allow controversial corporations like Monsanto to gain monopolistic control over seed is another major cause for concern. Given the huge lobbying power that these corporations hold, this has direct implications on whether farmers would have seed choices left, whether seed prices will remain affordable, whether public sector agriculture research will be affected due to patents held by these corporations, and whether regulatory systems will remain firmly on the side of citizens and their sustainable development.

The contamination potential of GM crops will mean that informed choices will be taken away forever from both farmers and consumers, once these are released into the environment.

In India, numerous credible bodies have emphasized the need for a precautionary approach to GMOs and have pointed out that the usual arguments that transgenics are needed for meeting the food security requirement of the country are fallacious. This includes the report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee

on Agriculture on “Cultivation of GM food crops: Prospects and Effects”, as well as the interim and final report of the Technical Expert Committee (TEC) of the Supreme Court of India. The need to be “responsible towards science and responsive to society” in this matter was laid down by the government of India’s own moratorium decision note on Bt brinjal in 2010.

On another front, there is convincing evidence about adopting agro-ecological approaches to farming, for addressing productivity as well as sustainable farm livelihoods, as showcased by the analysis of the IAASTD (International Assessment of Agricultural Science, Technology and Knowledge for Development) effort, in addition to other independent reports of the World Bank, the Food And Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and others. In India too, ASSOCHAM has been doing studies at the state level to assess the potential of organic farming. ASSOCHAM’s study of organic farming in West Bengal alone shows that it could lead to wealth accumulation of Rs 12000 crores, generate exports worth Rs 550 crores, create 20 to 26 lakh jobs, increase per capita income to Rs 15,680 pm in five years. India is ideally placed to meet the impressively-growing global demand for organic produce. Further, the threat to organic farming from GM crops is enormous and these two cannot co-exist.

Despite the promise of agro-ecology to deliver on numerous fronts, the political economy around commerce-driven agricultural technologies like transgenics has been such that sustainable alternatives have been given a short shrift. There has been a distinct lack of political will in promoting agro-ecological approaches and scaling up lasting solutions for farm livelihoods, for nutritious, adequate and safe food for all citizens and for ensuring that inter-generational equity is maintained when it comes to environmental resources.

It is in this context of the upcoming general elections and the heightened public debate on the issue of transgenics as well as ecological farming, that we walk up to you now. As a senior functionary of your party and as someone involved in the election coordination/strategy for the party, we hope that you will ensure that your party promises to the citizens of the country the following:

- that no more transgenics will be allowed in India in our food and farming systems and environment; that informed choices of producers and consumers will be protected; that there will be strict liability mechanisms put into place to ensure that GM developers do not endanger biosafety and livelihoods in any way; that a statutory legislative framework would be put in place to ensure that our approach to modern biotechnology is based on the precautionary principle and would protect biosafety and related socio-economic facets pertaining to citizens’ lives.
- That agro-ecological approaches would be given priority and scaled up in as many ways as possible in our farming – this includes due financial resources and appropriate institutional mechanisms, research effort, extension support and market development for the same.

The way your party approaches the above and the policy stance and perspective it will take on the same, will let citizens know whether you stand firmly on the side of sustainable development or not. We hope that you will fulfill the demand from the public as represented by hundreds of organizations and networks that we depend on agro-ecological approaches in our farming to ensure sustainable farm livelihoods and food security in this country and do not allow unsafe technologies like transgenics.

Yours Sincerely,