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Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA)

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Press Release

“Eminent individuals, citizen groups and environmental groups ask Maharashtra’s CM to cancel clearance given for field trials of GM crops”

Mumbai, March 13: Mr Shailesh Gandhi, former Central Information Commissioner and well known RTI activist released a letter to Maharashtra’s Chief Minister and Agriculture Minister written by leading NGOs and eminent citizens, at a press conference today at the Press Club. The letter questions the need for GM field trials and the propriety of clearances being given when the Supreme Court is presently considering its Technical Expert Committee (TEC) recommendations. The TEC’s five eminent scientists have recommended a moratorium on all field trials of Bt in food crops till their long term safety is established, a ban on herbicide tolerant GM crops and crops for which India is a centre of origin or diversity. The letter also points out that a ban on GM field trials was unanimously recommended by a multi party Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture (PSCA) in 2012.

The letter states “We are deeply concerned that 28 applications for open air field trials of transgenic (GM) crops have been approved in the state of Maharashtra“. It deplores the secret deliberations and the haste in giving clearances just before the elections. The letters have been sent by leading organizations such as the Bombay Natural History Society, Council for Fair Business Practices, AGNI, Avaaz, V Citizens Action Network, Kalpavriksh, SRUTI, ASHA, ITRHD, Yusuf Mehraly Centre and Hamara Beej Abhiyan. Eminent individuals who have written are former Judges of the Supreme Court namely Justice Sujata Manohar (who was also a Member of the National Human Rights Commission), Justice M B Shah (who was also President of the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission), Justice S N Variava and Justice B N Srikrishna, as also Prof Armaity Desai, the Former Director of TISS and Chair of UGC, Mr S K Misra, former Secretary Agriculture, GOI, and Principal Secretary to the PM, Padma Bhushan Julio Ribeiro and Mr Shailesh Gandhi, former Central Information Commissioner.

The letter debunks “agri biotech corporations claims that India will be ‘left behind’ if it does not adopt this ‘modern’ and ‘scientific’ technology” by stating that “A majority of ‘modern’ countries – including Europe, Japan, Russia, Korea etc - reject or severely regulate GM crops. Only 5 countries – USA, Brazil, Argentina, India and Canada - account for 90% of area under GM. Even China plants less GM area than India. These countries have assessed claimed GM benefits against risks to health, environment, farmer livelihoods, seed diversity and national seed sovereignty.” The letter points out that there are now several hundred peer reviewed scientific studies of the adverse impacts of transgenic crops/foods, and that there is no crisis that demands any hasty decision. India has sufficient food grain stocks, much of it rotting or exported. They indicate studies which show that GM crops do not significantly increase yields.

Citing from official data, the letter points out that in India increased area and irrigation for cotton has increased production, but cotton yield per hectare has been almost stagnant. Yield had increased significantly before and not after the spread of Bt cotton. Overall pesticide use has not decreased and Bt cotton has greatly increased the cost of seed, indebtedness and risks for farmers in rainfed areas. They query why so many Bt cotton farmers commit suicide, but organic cotton growers do not. The signatories question the need for GM, questioning its economic viability by pointing out that “Billions of dollars of subsidies in USA prop up just 2% of the population who are in agriculture. Over half goes for GM crops.”

Releasing the letter, Mr Shailesh Gandhi added that “It is shocking that Maharashtra is one of only 3 States to have granted clearance for 28 GM crop field trials which includes foods like rice, wheat, maize and brinjal.” A number of States such as Rajasthan, MP, Bihar, Orissa, Karnataka, Chattisgarh, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala have outright refused permission for GM field trials. Signatories praised the transparent public debates organized by Mr Jairam Ramesh, himself a scientist, which allowed a wealth of scientific, medical and socio economic information to surface” Mr Gandhi said. “Studies show that corporate funded research never finds fault with GM, whereas independent research indicates possible linkages between GM and cancer, kidney and liver dysfunction, allergies, asthma, obesity and other illnesses”.

Mrs Dilnavaz Variava, former CEO of WWF India, was a member of a Maharashtra Government Expert Committee on Agriculture in 2003 and is one of the Co-convenors of the Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), a wide pan India network. She says “There is increasing rejection of GM crops in developed countries. GM planting fell by about 2 per cent in industrialized countries last year.” She points out that “The IAASTD Study, done by over 400 scientists on behalf of the World Bank and UN, is the world’s largest study on agricultural science and technology. It indicates that ecological agriculture by small farmers and not GM is the best way to increase food security and reduce poverty. “Why is our Govt not promoting farmer self reliance and so keen on promoting GM?” she asks. “Around 99% of GM crops today have either a toxin producing trait or a herbicide tolerating trait. Pests and weeds are becoming resistant faster than anticipated. In the US about 61 million acres of farmland are estimated to be plagued by herbicide resistant weeds” said Mrs Variava.

The letter concludes by saying “Every citizen and every farmer must have the right to be free of GM if they wish. The Secretary Agriculture, GOI, admitted to the Technical Expert Committee of the Supreme Court that it will not be possible to segregate GM from non GM crops. The Maharashtra Government is unable to enforce even the regulations it had laid down for refuge areas for Bt cotton. How will citizens’ rights – consumers and farmers - to remain free of GM be guaranteed? Until there is a convincing answer to this, there is no justification for hastening GM field trials.”

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