

Drive To Force GM Crops On India Intensifies

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It was a case of Modi mania when Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) “swept” to power in last year’s Indian general election.

It was however hardly the sweeping endorsement from the voters that much of the corporate media liked to portray it as. The BJP might have taken 282 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, but it gained only 31 per cent of the vote.

Parts of corporate India and the well-off middle classes nevertheless celebrated Modi’s rise to become prime minister in the belief that they would materially benefit from a “Thatcherite” revolution. And many ordinary folk also swallowed the guff about Modi’s “vibrant Gujarat” PR campaign, which has been shown to be anything but vibrant.

Writer and activist Rohini Hensman has exposed the fact that GDP growth in Gujarat under chief minister Modi was nothing special compared with many other states in India — and it was supported by wholesale privatisation of public assets.

The state government therefore abdicated responsibility for decisions that affect millions of people’s lives, handing them to elite interests.

In terms of poverty, rural population displacement, hunger, farmer suicides, corruption, disease and debt, the economic neoliberalism practised was anything but a resounding success.

Now at the political helm nationally, Modi and his government are helping to accelerate a process that could eventually result in the selling of the economic and social bedrock of the country — agriculture — to foreign genetically modified organisms (GMO) agribusiness, not least by pushing for open-field trials of various GM food crops.

Some might find it perplexing that a nationalist outfit like the BJP would appear willing to hand over food sovereignty and security to foreign agribusiness.

But facilitating powerful Western corporations' entry into India is not unique to the current administration. The Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture helped the likes of Monsanto, Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill and Walmart's push into India's seed, trade and retail sectors in return for concessions on nuclear power.

Under the current administration, however, there is a stated commitment to clear away "blockages" that the previous government was unwilling or unable to do and would no doubt hinder the type of economic neoliberalism Modi presided over in Gujarat.

And it is increasingly apparent those "blockages" include restrictions on GM crops.

Campaigner Aruna Rodrigues has noted that the technical expert committee (TEC) final report is the fourth official report exposing the lack of integrity, independence and scientific expertise in assessing GMO risk. There is a remarkable consensus here.

The TEC recommended an indefinite moratorium on the field trials of GM crops until the government devised a proper regulatory and safety mechanism.

No such mechanism exists, but open-field trials are being given the go ahead.

The BJP-ruled Maharashtra government has just granted "no-objection certificates" for GM open-field trials of rice, chickpeas, maize, aubergines and cotton. Some regard this as a game-changer in the push to get GM crops into India.

The negative health, environmental and potential dangers of GM crops have been well documented, while those who legitimately oppose and campaign against GMOs have been smeared and portrayed by India's internal intelligence agency as working against the national interest.

The GMO biotech sector peddles the myth that GM food is necessary to feed the world's burgeoning population. It is not.

A report by NGO Grain last year concluded that small farms, family and peasant farms are more productively efficient than large industrial-scale farms and that the former can (and do) feed the world.

The World Bank-funded International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge and Science for Development report also stated that smallholder, traditional farming can sustainably deliver food security in low-income countries.

No-one can be in any doubt that there is an agenda at the highest level to push GMOs into India at any cost. It is clear the “national interest” and foreign “corporate interest” are being conflated.

The GMO agribusiness sector has gained a strategic and influential foothold in India and many of its national public bodies. Along with US food processing giants, it threatens to destroy the rural economy by recasting it (and thus Indian society, given that hundreds of millions depend on it for a living) according to its own needs.

In the mainstream media and among many politicians and economists, handing over an economy to private interests symbolises the promotion of growth and development.

In the West, decades of such policies have culminated in austerity, disempowerment and increasing hardship for populations and the concentration of ever more wealth and power in the hands of the few.

The evidence doesn't lie where global agriculture is concerned. Last year, the Oakland Institute stated that the first years of the 21st century will be remembered for a global land rush headed by institutional investors of a nearly unprecedented scale, often at the expense of local food security and land rights.

Small farmers are currently squeezed onto less than a quarter of the world's farmland and the world is fast losing farms and farmers as land is concentrated into the hands big agribusiness and the rich and powerful. Grain has stated that the concentration of fertile agricultural land in fewer and fewer hands is directly related to the increasing number of people going hungry every day.

Monsanto already dominates the cotton industry in India and is increasingly shaping policy by funding agricultural research at public universities and institutes.

Moreover, public regulatory bodies are now severely compromised and riddled with conflicts of interest where decision-making over GMOs are concerned.

Responding to the decision to sanction the Maharashtra field trials, Monsanto India share prices jumped 18 per cent at the start of February and the firm was headed towards its biggest daily gain since September 2014.

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