MAHYCO CONDUCTS GM RICE FIELD TRIALS IN BIRTHPLACE OF RICE

Contaminating Natural Rice

Suman Sahai

No containment of the crop was done by Mahyco as mandated by law to prevent mixing of seeds/grains from GM crop fields), no fencing or netting of any kind was provided. Post harvest crop stumps were left standing in the Trial Field.

Mahyco, a partner of Monsanto Corporation in India, has been conducting field trials in Jharkhand, flouting every prescribed regulation and condition laid down for field trials of GM crops. Gene Campaign staff made visits to the site of the Bt rice trial and spoke to the farmers in Saparong village to get details of how the trial was conducted. The details are as follows:

Bt Rice hybrids belonging Mahyco seed company were planted on approx 1 acre. Planting was done on March 29, 2008, the crop was harvested on August 11, 2008. This is not the main rice season in Jharkhand. The main paddy season is June to December. There are almost no rice pests at this time, so it is not possible to test the efficacy of the Bt induced resistance to pests.

Farmers had no idea what was planted in the trial field, they had never heard of Bt Rice of GM Rice. The company had told them nothing. The State Agriculture Department had no information about the proposed Bt rice trials. Farmers in Saparong told Gene Campaign staffers that Mahyco staff came to observe the trials and sprayed the crop (farmers did not know with what)

There was no physical containment or any kind of isolation of the trial field. No containment of the crop was done (mandated by law to prevent mixing of seeds/grains from GM crop fields), no fencing or netting of any kind was provided. The trial field is located in the midst of an agricultural area and is surrounded by farmers' fields on all sides. The boundaries of neighbouring fields are close together and it is impossible to prevent contamination of rice in other fields.

People walked regularly through the trial fields to other fields, increasing the possibility of contamination. Since the trials were done on high lying fields, the water flowed from there to lower fields, carrying soil, seeds, etc to fields below. Just one local farmer was appointed as caretaker to supervise the trials. Nobody from the company came to supervise the harvest and disposal of the crop residue.

Scientists of the Birsa Agricultural University in Ranchi refused to monitor the rice trials since they were not involved from the beginning but were asked to monitor the fields at a late stage. Senior scientists said that they were not informed about how the trials were conducted, adding that there was no way of knowing whether Mahyco was spraying its trial fields to show that pests were controlled in the Bt rice.

Post harvest crop stumps have been left standing in the trial field. These have thrown up tillers and seed has already set in the tillers. These rogue Bt rice seeds will start the process of contaminating other rice crops in the region as they multiply in each crop cycle. After the news of Mahyco's violations appeared in the media, the company rushed its officials to the field trial site in Jharkhand the next day and destroyed the evidence. Gene Campaign has photographs of the destroyed trial field. Mahyco has clearly conducted the field trials of Bt rice hybrids by violating every rule in the book.

Gene Campaign has spent the last several years, collecting and conserving the traditional rice varieties of these regions in village level Seed Banks , in order to save the genetic wealth and diversity of rice and return it to farmers' fields. The Gene Campaign Banks now have about 1,900 samples of traditional rice and roughly 600 samples of other traditional crop varieties. Reckless conduct by companies like Mahyco could end up contaminating such rice germplasm.

The planting of genetically engineered rice in Jharkhand is of special concern since Jharkhand along with Orissa and Chhattisgarh is considered the Centre of Origin, that is, the birthplace of rice and the maximum genetic diversity of rice is found here. Any genetic contamination from foreign genes like the Bt gene can very detrimental effects on the genetic diversity of rice.

India is Centre of Origin and diversity

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety urges countries that are Centres of Origin to exercise the utmost caution. Following this, other countries have decided to exercise the Precautionary Principle and have banned GM versions of the crop for which they are centres of origin. Mexico, the birthplace of corn does not allow planting of GM corn, Peru, the origin of potato has a ban on GM potato and China from where soybean originated, does not allow GM soybean. It is shocking that India, the birthplace of rice, does not exercise any caution with respect to rice

germplasm and is happy to allow companies to exploit, and perhaps destroy, this great genetic wealth.

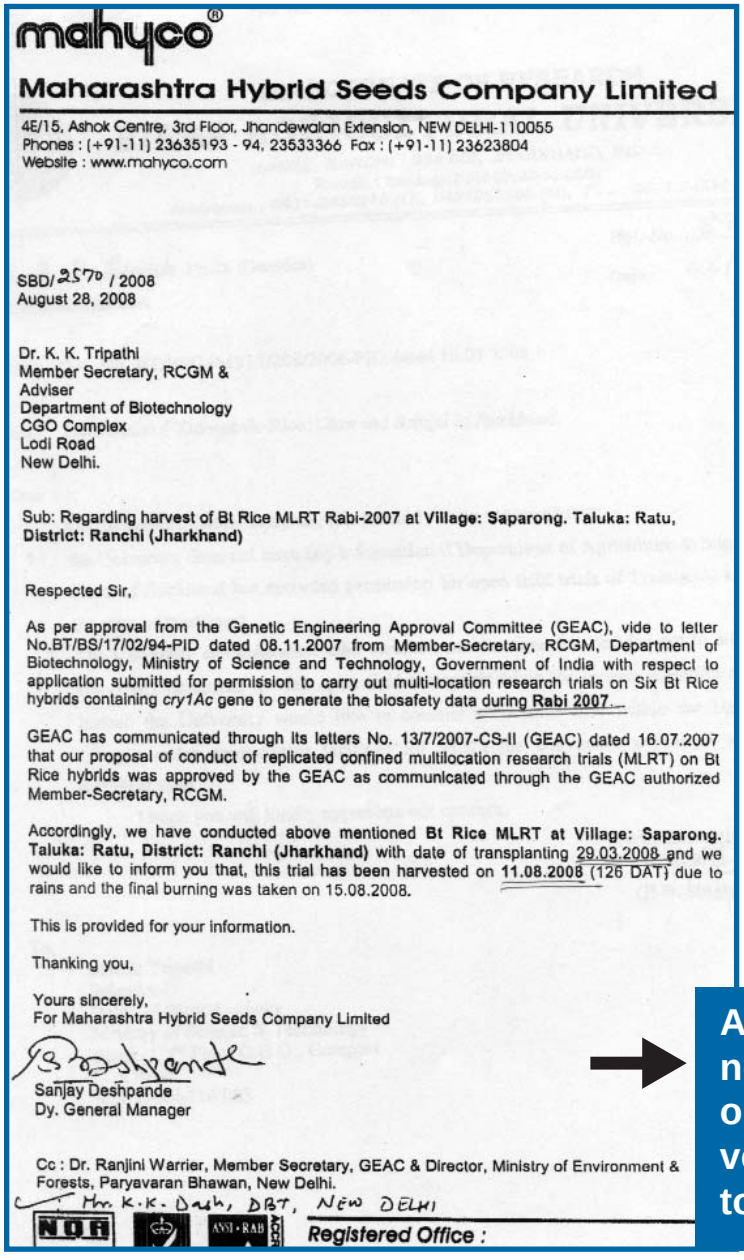
It is even more shocking that Mahyco's reckless GM rice trials are being conducted in one of the three states (Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh) which may be considered the central core of the genetic diversity of rice--the very place that should be off limits to GM rice!

Jeopardising markets

Apart from that , careless field trials like the Mahyco trial can result in GM rice entering the market and this can contaminate rice consignments meant for export. This will spell doom for rice exporters who will lose their markets in Europe, Middle East and Africa, all regions that are opposed to GM crops and foods and do not allow it in their markets.

A few years ago, we saw in the US, that rice from a single field trial conducted by the Ventria company, found its way into US rice exports and was detected in places as far apart as Germany and Japan. This necessitated the recall of all US rice, costing the US several million dollars. It also led to the crash of the rice markets that had been carefully built up by the US.

Gene Campaign is particularly distressed at the callous negligence displayed by Mahyco in a backward tribal region where rice is the staple crop and where the genetic wealth of rice has been created and nurtured over generations by the Adivasis here. Rice is everything to them, their food, their drink, the very basis of their cultural and religious identity. The rice germplasm of this region is a national heritage and must be safeguarded. It cannot be opened up for exploitation of unscrupulous companies.



mahyco®

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August 28, 2008

Dr. K. K. Tripathi
Member Secretary, RCGM &
Adviser
Department of Biotechnology
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New Delhi.

Sub: Regarding harvest of Bt Rice MLRT Rabi-2007 at **Village: Saparong. Taluka: Ratu, District: Ranchi (Jharkhand)**

Respected Sir,

As per approval from the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), vide to letter No.BT/BS/17/02/94-PID dated 08.11.2007 from Member-Secretary, RCGM, Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India with respect to application submitted for permission to carry out multi-location research trials on Six Bt Rice hybrids containing *cry1Ac* gene to generate the biosafety data during Rabi 2007.

GEAC has communicated through its letters No. 13/7/2007-CS-II (GEAC) dated 16.07.2007 that our proposal of conduct of replicated confined multilocation research trials (MLRT) on Bt Rice hybrids was approved by the GEAC as communicated through the GEAC authorized Member-Secretary, RCGM.

Accordingly, we have conducted above mentioned **Bt Rice MLRT at Village: Saparong. Taluka: Ratu, District: Ranchi (Jharkhand)** with date of transplanting 29.03.2008 and we would like to inform you that, this trial has been harvested on 11.08.2008 (126 DAT) due to rains and the final burning was taken on 15.08.2008.

This is provided for your information.

Thanking you,

Yours sincerely,
For Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company Limited

Sanjay Deshpande
Dy. General Manager

Cc : Dr. Ranjini Warrier, Member Secretary, GEAC & Director, Ministry of Environment & Forests, Paryavaran Bhawan, New Delhi.
Mr. K.K. Dash, DBT, NEW DELHI

NQA ANSI-RAB ISO 9001 *Registered Office :*

As our cover picture shows, new GM rice shoots or secondary tillers are visible in the very field that Mahyco claimed to have burnt in this letter.

Swaminathan panel recommendations

In recognition of both the scientific and trade aspects of rice and the threat of GM rice to these interests, the Agbiotechnology task force chaired by Dr MS Swaminathan, had made explicit recommendations that GM rice should be kept far away from centres of rice diversity and that crops in which India had a trading interest, like rice and soybean, should not be genetically engineered, for fear of losing assured markets.

Gene Campaign demands that all field trials of rice must be stopped immediately. This is a crop, which is crucial to global food security.

- The Mahyco seed company must be fined heavily for jeopardising this precious genetic wealth and putting at risk the future food security of the country and the livelihoods of countless farmers dependent on rice cultivation.
- Given the grave nature of Mahyco's violation, the company should be barred from testing any transgenic crops for at least five years.
- Any further violations by Mahyco should lead to the suspension of its license. ■