

'Save India from genetically modified rice!'

From Karnal to Coimbatore, genetically modified (GM) crops are becoming a matter of great concern for Indians worried about safety as well as loss of biodiversity.

Various groups in Tamil Nadu, such as Pasumai Thayagam, an NGO supported by the PMK party, Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA) and Socio Education Trust, are protesting against GM crops.

They have the support of Greenpeace India, Care Earth, Eco-Science Research Foundation, Tamil Nadu Farmers' Technology Organisation, Erode District Organic Farmers' Association and several others that have launched a week-long campaign for a Tamil Nadu free of GM crops.

CASA is the official arm of 24 Orthodox and Protestant churches in India with 57 years of humanitarian aid experience. It has a vast following in southern India.

The PMK too has a sizeable following across the state, especially among the farming and trading communities in northern Tamil Nadu.

A Pasumai Thayagam official said Friday: 'Tamil Nadu must be kept free of all genetically modified crops.'

'Rice is Tamil Nadu's main crop and Monsanto (a major producer of GM seeds) is now trying to capture this crop,' a PMK leader said.

Quoting a popular Tamil proverb 'If you sow one kind of seed, you reap only one kind of harvest' the PMK leader said: 'Research in England has shown that Bt crops yield less, need more pesticide, are bio-pollutants and poisonous.' He alleged that Bt cotton leaves have killed goats.

The protesters demanded that Tamil Nadu farmers suffering losses from the cultivation of Bt cotton should be compensated.

They noted that seeds for one acre of Bt cotton cultivation cost as much as Rs. 1,250 and that Tamil Nadu farmers would have to pay such large sums for seeds if they cultivated genetically engineered (GE) rice.

On Nov 10, more than 200 farmers led by the Tamil Nadu Farmers' Association (TNFA) and the Tamil Nadu Agriculture Protection Group, destroyed crops in a rice field in Coimbatore district where field trials of *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) rice by the controversial company Mahyco were in progress.

The protest came barely two weeks after agitating farmers burnt down a GE basmati rice trial field in Karnal, Haryana.

'Genetically engineered seeds are detrimental to sustainable agriculture and food security and harmful to people and the environment. We will agitate to prevent GE seeds from being used in the state,' said V. Duraimanickam, general secretary of the Communist Party of India-affiliated TNFA.

'We will not allow a Vidarbha to happen in Tamil Nadu,' added TNFA president K. Chellamuthu, in a

reference to the large number of farmers who have committed suicide in that part of Maharashtra following failed crops.

In 2005, Bt rice field trials were conducted in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. In 2006, trials were carried out in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

'They just want to destroy the traditional varieties of seeds and promote the sale of hybrid varieties developed by foreign companies,' said Chellamuthu.

Greenpeace India, supporting the campaign, noted that rice has been the staple diet for man for 10,000 years and is cultivated in 113 countries. Ninety percent of rice is grown in Asian countries.

'Biotech giants like Beyer have let loose untested and potentially harmful strains of GE rice into the environment,' said a Greenpeace spokesperson.

Vietnam and Thailand recently rejected GE rice completely. Greenpeace India today called upon Indian rice exporters (world's third largest) to press for a ban on GE rice 'to stop flooding vulnerable markets with GE rice'.

'If India is serious about protecting at least its export, it needs to put some serious laws in place and stop field trials of GE crops now,' the group said.

The 'Save the Rice' campaign from March 2-9 will comprise street corner meetings and hall meetings at different venues across the state.

Experts like Sulthan Ahmed Ismail and Ranjit Daniels spoke on the dangers of introducing GM crops to India at a time when most of [Europe](#) has opposed them on its shelves, even blocking imports from the US.

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