

'Holy' seeds threaten to halt biotech project

Heritage and the humble brinjal have come in conflict in India's southern Karnataka state, with the controversy even threatening to halt a US funded biotechnology project.

Under this project, researchers at the University of Agricultural Sciences in Dharwad will be conducting field trials with brinjal varieties carrying the *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) gene. The Bt-brinjal will resist insect attack and so help farmers save on pesticides.

But Ramesh Bhat, one of India's leading biologists and former deputy director of the National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad, has sounded a warning.

He says field trials of Bt-brinjal carry the danger of the Bt gene contaminating the native variety of brinjal called Mattu gulla which people consider 'sacred' because its seeds were reportedly given to the people of Mattu village by the 15th century Hindu saint Vadiraja.

In a recent report in the journal *Current Science*, Bhat says that Mattu gulla dishes are invariably used for a festival held every alternate year in the Udupi Sri Krishna temple since the 15th century and feature in traditional meals.

Grown in Mattu village of Udupi district, Mattu gulla is a unique variety of brinjal with small spines on the stalk. It has a special flavour and is round and green in colour unlike the elongated and pink or white varieties common elsewhere. The skin of the Mattu gulla is thin, and virtually gets dissolved on boiling.

'Preserve the heritage of sacred Mattu gulla' is a new slogan that is threatening to derail the biotechnology project in Karnataka.

According to Bhat, brinjal (*Solanum melongina*) originated in India and has been used as a vegetable in the country since time immemorial. 'The classic Ramayana contains reference to the brinjal,' he said.

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