

Bt cotton not to blame for Indian whitefly epidemic

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Widespread damage to cotton from whiteflies in North India has led many to blame it on Bt gene technology. Environmental activists like Vandana Shiva have held Bt cotton responsible for creating new pests — as some farmers who grow non-Bt or desi varieties through organic practices do not suffer whitefly attacks. But as director of Nagpur's Central Institute for Cotton Research K.R. Kranthi has pointed out, these claims are misleading. The problem, is not in Bt technology per se, but in the cotton hybrids into which the genes have been introgressed. Over 90 percent of cotton hybrids planted in states like Punjab are susceptible to whitefly and leaf-curl virus. That being so, the havoc wreaked by whitefly shouldn't have surprised, especially in a year when the conditions were most hospitable for an epidemic.

But the larger point raised by Kranthi is about regulation. Prior to Bt cotton's introduction in 2002, farmers mostly grew public sector-bred varieties that were certified for resistance against whiteflies or leaf curl virus. This system broke down when private-sector hybrids incorporating Bt genes took over more than 90 percent of India's cotton area. Free from government certification schemes, most hybrids were commercialised without any testing for whitefly or leaf curl virus tolerance. Bt wasn't the villain; these genes, in any case, control only for bollworm and not whiteflies. Bollworm larvae were a huge menace during the 1980s and '90s; the success of Bt cotton in controlling yield losses from them is well-established.

The real lesson from the recent whitefly epidemic is that the country needs a regime of compulsory registration and uniform certification of all seed varieties and hybrids, whether bred by government or private enterprise.

Read full, original post: [Whitefly lessons](#)