

Activists escalate efforts to stop Indian farmers from using GMO seeds

Anti-GMO activists in India have escalated their war on the country's resource-poor farmers by moving their efforts to stop genetically improved seeds into the nation's Supreme Court.

On Jan. 6, India's top court [heard arguments from lawyers](#) acting on behalf of anti-GMO activist Aruna Rodrigues that farmers should be prevented from using unapproved genetically modified (GM) cotton and eggplant (brinjal) seeds.

India's biosafety regulatory system has been at a standstill since activists succeeded in persuading politicians to impose a moratorium on GM Bt brinjal in 2010. In response, farmer groups have begun distributing unapproved seeds to their members.

As the Alliance for Science reported in previous coverage, a farmers' collective called Shetkari Sanghatana launched a Gandhi-inspired ["satyagraha" civil disobedience](#) movement where members openly planted unapproved herbicide-tolerant cotton seeds on their land, mainly in Maharashtra state, last June.

The actions followed the discovery that farmers in Haryana state had been planting unapproved Bt brinjal — grown legally now for several years in neighboring Bangladesh — in an effort to save money by reducing insecticide sprays.

Anti-GMO activists succeeded in getting authorities to destroy the unapproved Bt eggplant crops, and leading Indian activist Vandana Shiva [called the farmers "criminals"](#) and demanded that they be given jail sentences for their civil disobedience campaign.

Undeterred, Shetkari Sanghatana stepped up its efforts, and this week held a showcase event at Hiwari village in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the unapproved cotton seeds.

"We want to show it to everyone that the use of herbicide tolerant cotton is quite beneficial for farmers as it not only gave us higher yield but also cut our cost substantially," farmer Vijay Niwal of Hiwari village [told the Indian press](#).

The farmer group has also reportedly begun distributing a second generation of GM cotton seeds to its members, again in defiance of the authorities.

The use of GMOs in India is [also opposed](#) by far-right organizations such as the [RSS-affiliated](#) Swadeshi Jagran Manch, which is linked to the Hindu nationalist government led by current prime minister Narendra Modi.

This puts the Indian nationalist far-right into an uneasy alliance with the activist far-left in opposing the use of modern science in crop breeding and innovation. Both tend to indulge in conspiracy-theorizing about "foreign" organizations supposedly "pushing" GMOs on farmers.

Indian farmers have been permitted to cultivate Bt cotton since 2002. It too, was initially approved only after farmers had begun widespread illegal cultivation. Although it has been a huge success, anti-GMO activists such as Vandana Shiva have spread myths that Bt cotton has aggravated farmer suicides.

GM mustard, developed by Indian scientists in an effort to increase yields of the vital oilseed crop, was approved by the country's regulators but has still been [blocked from release](#) after furious campaigns by anti-GMO activists — including a Supreme Court lawsuit by Aruna Rodrigues.

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