

CHURCH OF SOUTH INDIA

Synod Ecological Concerns Committee

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Press Release

Protest against the decision of GEAC

Chennai: Church of South India (CSI) Ecological Concerns Committee (SECC) strongly protests against the decision of the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), in approving the commercial cultivation of genetically modified (GM) Bt brinjal. The CSI SECC has the opinion that the GEAC had "mindlessly" gone ahead and approved Bt Brinjal even when informed scientists and citizens of the country raised serious concerns on the nature of the safety studies.

The church cannot be indifferent to issues that vitally affect life on this planet and the integrity of creation. Its response to the recommendation of the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) permitting the commercial cultivation of Bt. Brinjal must be consistent with its general position on Genetic Engineering (GE) in agriculture. By unnaturally intervening into the order of creation, we are not only playing God, but also destroying the integrity of God's creation, and meddling with biodiversity and the life-sustaining interdependence among species. "Mixing genetic material from species that cannot breed naturally, takes us into areas that should be left to God. We should not be meddling with the building blocks of life in this way." (Prince Charles, quoted in the BBC News, Online Network: 26 February 1999)

It is obvious that the introduction of Bt Brinjal would contaminate the large number of traditional Brinjal varieties available to us, particularly those with unique medicinal properties. This would also shift the control of seeds from the farmers to profit hungry corporations that have already established virtual monopoly over seeds through the new patent regime. As a nation and communities, what is at stake is not only our food security but also our food sovereignty. The inevitable consequences would be the disempowerment of small and marginal farmers, and their displacement by aggressive models of corporatized agriculture.

This is only the beginning. The flood gates are opening. Bt Brinjal is a test case that must not go unchallenged. Several more food crops are under various stages of field trials. GEAC clearances are in the offing for crops like cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, corn/maize, ground nut, bhindi/okra, potato, rice, tomato, mustard and sorghum.

Insertion of genes into the genome of a particular organism can result in unintended effects. The native genes of the crop could be affected in unpredictable ways. Unknown toxic/allergenic components could be generated. The available tests look only for known toxic elements. Scientists of all persuasions warn us that Genetically Modified (GM) foods can have unforeseen negative consequences on the health of animals and human beings. Such effects will elude the conventional test regimen. The GEAC clearances are hinged on the *scientific* evidence provided by seed companies. This mode of determining the bio-safety of GE crops is unacceptable and unethical, when evidences to the contrary keep coming from the scientific community. The voices of caution may not be the establishment mandate. True science is not based on majority views but on commitment to truth and objectivity. Dissenting voices in the scientific establishment need to be heard while dealing with potentially hazardous technology.

Acknowledging the position of the World Council of Churches and the Courts of many civilized nations, we appeal to the government to apply the precautionary principle in the introduction of GE crops and not to be influenced by corporate entities that strive to establish their monopoly on every aspect of agriculture. It is important to decide whether the introduction of Bt. Brinjal serves the farming community in India or the seed corporations. There must be clarity about how the problem has been framed and who has done it and who the ultimate beneficiaries are. We must also know whether there are better, safer and more viable solutions. The adoption of a new technology calls for a process of deep interrogation, especially when there are apprehensions on potential hazards.

While science and technology have immense potential to further the cause of life, we also recognize that they can also be used to destroy life in the pursuit of profit and power. It is the inalienable obligation of a responsible government to ensure that the people are not subjected, even unwittingly, to “bio error or bio terror”.

Joining the Justice, Peace and Creation Concerns of the World Council of Churches we affirm the following statements from the AGAPE document (3:3):

“We believe that God’s economy of solidarity and justice for the household of creation includes the promise that the people of the world have the right to produce their own food and control the resources belonging to their livelihoods, including biodiversity. It is therefore the right and responsibility of governments to support the livelihoods of small farmers in the South and in the North. It is their right to refuse the demands of agribusinesses that seek to control every aspect of the cycle of life. Such an approach requires respect for indigenous spiritual relationships to land and the bounties of mother earth.”

*Signed by 1) Rt.Rev.Thomas Samuel, Chairman of CSI Synod Ecological Concerns Committee,
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