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## India divided over plans for GM aubergine



Protesters are concerned they will be used as guinea pigs if BT brinjal is approved

**India has denied permission for commercial cultivation of BT brinjal - a strain of genetically modified (GM) aubergine. Geeta Pandey reports from the southern city of Bangalore on how this humble vegetable has sharply divided public opinion.**

At Central College Campus in Bangalore about 100 protesters beat drums and shout slogans.

"BT brinjal, go back, BT brinjal, quit India," they chant.

Many of the protesters carry placards, expressing the same sentiment; others are dressed as aubergines or have painted their faces purple, like the vegetable.

Inside a crowded auditorium on the college campus, India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh is holding the last of a series of national consultations on BT brinjal to help him decide whether to allow the genetically modified version of the vegetable to be grown in India.

In October, India's genetic engineering approval committee (GEAC) approved the commercial cultivation of aubergines containing a gene from the *Bacillus thuringiensis* (BT) bacterium, designed to provide resistance against certain insects.

The decision has sharply polarised opinion in the country, forcing the environment minister to step in.

### Acrimonious

The hall is packed with farmers, scientists, agriculturists, doctors and activists. The two lobbies, pro- and anti-BT brinjal, are present in strength.

There are catcalls, jeers and cheers, whistles and claps. At times, the two groups squabble like schoolchildren, and the exchange gets acrimonious.

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"BT cotton has improved our life. Do not succumb to false propaganda - BT will not harm anybody," one farmer told the minister.

"BT as a protein is highly degradable and doesn't persist in the environment and hence is not a threat. Chemical pesticides used in regular crops do more damage to environment," said a pro-BT scientist.

The opponents are equally vocal.

"The consent of consumers and growers has not been taken into account. BT cotton hasn't reduced the use of pesticides or chemicals and the yield is not better," said Dr AS Anand, chairman of the Organic Farming Mission of Karnataka state.

"We are not guinea pigs - don't use us for research," said activist Ranjit Singh, who claimed that GM crops could cause cancer.

#### 'Successful'

Dr PM Salimath, director of research at the University of Agriculture Sciences in Dharwad in Karnataka state, led the field trials of BT brinjal.

Two sets of trials were held in 2008 and 2009 in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa and they were successful, Dr Salimath told the BBC.

Scientists chose six local varieties of aubergine preferred by consumers and transferred the Cry1Ac gene into these varieties to grow BT brinjal.

Non-BT brinjal is susceptible to "fruit and shoot borer pest", Mr Salimath said.

"To control the pest, farmers use 25 to 30 sprays of chemical pesticides which are very expensive. Moreover, they leave harmful residue in the vegetable and these sprays cause environmental pollution."

Mr Salimath said the objections raised about the health effects of BT brinjal are unfounded.

"There's hardly any danger to human health. This gene is used in corn, canola and soya for the past decade or more, and it's shown that it is totally safe," he said.

Critics, however, say no independent studies have been done to establish whether BT brinjal is safe for human consumption or not.

It's also not clear how it's going to affect the land and biodiversity of the country, they say.

India approved BT cotton in 2002 and it is grown widely across the country. Genetically modified soya and maize is grown in the US.

#### 'Fine line'

At a crowded news conference in the Indian capital, Delhi, on Tuesday, Mr Ramesh said he had "imposed a moratorium on the release of BT brinjal".

Refusing to set any time limit, the minister said it would remain until "such time independent scientific studies establish, to the satisfaction of both the public and professionals, the safety of the product... on human health and environment".

In the past few weeks, the environment minister has held consultations in West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Chandigarh and Karnataka states to test public opinion on the issue.



Some farmers say BT brinjal will improve their yield

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Jairam Ramesh has promised a fair decision

Mr Ramesh said he had heard from more than 8,000 people and dozens of Indian scientists.

The Environment Protection Agency of the US and several Chinese experts have also been consulted, he said.

"It will be a fair decision," Mr Ramesh had promised after concluding the consultations.

"I can't ignore public opinion, but I can't ignore science either. I have to tread a fine line," he said.

Several of the aubergine-growing states, including West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, have already said that they are opposed to the GM variety.

Mr Ramesh said his decision would make "50% of India happy, while 50% of India will be unhappy with me".

If approved, BT brinjal would be the first GM vegetable to be grown in India.



Several Indian states have already said no to BT brinjal

The decision to defer its commercial cultivation is bound to have implications for other GM vegetables and crops waiting for approval.

**HAVE YOUR SAY**

Another discouraging factor is the high pricing of GM foods

Officials say trials of BT tomato, okra and rice are at an advanced stage.

Aziz Merchant, Mumbai, India  
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But with BT brinjal now on hold indefinitely, it is unlikely that GM crops would find their way to dinner plates in India any time soon.

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