

(A No. 169) GM Crops for India: Future or Unrealistic Dream?

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ABSTRACT

India's agriculture is at a critical crossroads. On one hand, the country must feed a rapidly growing population, ensure nutritional security, increase farmers' income, and cope with climate change. On the other hand, it faces stagnating crop yields, shrinking landholdings, rising input costs, pest resistance, and environmental degradation. In this context, **Genetically Modified (GM) crops** have emerged as a highly debated technological option.

GM crops involve the **direct modification of a plant's genetic material** to introduce desirable traits such as pest resistance,

herbicide tolerance, drought tolerance, or enhanced nutritional value. While many countries have adopted GM crops on a large scale, India remains deeply divided over their use. This raises a fundamental question:

Are GM crops the future of Indian agriculture, or merely an unrealistic and risky dream?

Understanding GM Crops

Genetically Modified crops are developed using modern biotechnology techniques where specific genes are inserted into a plant to express desired traits. Common traits include:

- Insect resistance (e.g., Bt gene)
- Herbicide tolerance
- Disease resistance
- Abiotic stress tolerance (drought, salinity)
- Nutritional enhancement (biofortification)

Globally, GM crops such as soybean, maize, cotton, and canola are cultivated on millions of hectares, particularly in countries like the **USA, Brazil, Argentina, and Canada.**

Status of GM Crops in India

India approved its first GM crop, **Bt Cotton**, in **2002**. Bt Cotton is genetically engineered to resist bollworm pests. Since then:

- Bt Cotton has been widely adopted and currently covers **over 90% of India's cotton area**
- It initially led to increased yields and reduced pesticide use

However, apart from Bt Cotton, **no other GM food crop** has been commercially approved in India. Crops such as **Bt Brinjal, GM Mustard, and Golden Rice** have faced regulatory hurdles, public opposition, and political resistance.

Potential Benefits of GM Crops for India

1. Enhancing Crop Productivity

India's crop yields for major staples like rice, wheat, and pulses are lower than global averages. GM crops offer the potential to **increase yields** by reducing crop losses due to pests, diseases, and abiotic stresses.

Higher productivity is crucial as arable land is shrinking and scope for horizontal expansion is limited.

2. Reducing Pest Damage and Pesticide Use

Insect-resistant GM crops can significantly reduce reliance on chemical pesticides. The early success of Bt Cotton demonstrated:

- Reduction in pesticide sprays





- Lower cost of cultivation
- Improved farmer safety

For small and marginal farmers, this can translate into higher net incomes and reduced health risks.

3. Climate Change Adaptation

Climate change is increasing the frequency of droughts, floods, heat waves, and salinity stress. GM crops can be engineered for:

- Drought tolerance
- Heat resistance
- Salinity tolerance

Such traits can make Indian agriculture more **climate-resilient**, especially in rainfed and stress-prone regions.

4. Nutritional Security

GM technology can address “hidden hunger” through **biofortified crops**. Examples include:

- Golden Rice enriched with Vitamin A
- Iron- and zinc-enriched crops

Given India’s high levels of malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency, GM crops could play a role in improving public health outcomes.

5. Reducing Import Dependence

India imports large quantities of edible oils and pulses. GM crops like **GM mustard or GM soybean** could increase domestic production, reducing import bills and strengthening food security.

Concerns and Challenges Associated with GM Crops

Despite their potential, GM crops face serious concerns in India.

1. Biosafety and Environmental Risks

Critics argue that GM crops may pose risks such as:

- Gene flow to wild relatives
- Loss of biodiversity

- Development of pest resistance
- Impact on non-target organisms

India is a **centre of origin and diversity** for many crops, and any genetic contamination could have irreversible consequences.

2. Human Health Concerns

Although scientific consensus globally suggests GM foods are safe, skepticism persists in India regarding long-term health impacts. Lack of long-term independent studies fuels public distrust.

3. Farmer Dependence and Corporate Control

One of the strongest arguments against GM crops is the fear of **corporate monopoly over seeds**. Concerns include:

- High seed costs
- Dependency on multinational seed companies
- Loss of farmers’ traditional seed-saving practices

The experience of Bt Cotton seed pricing disputes has intensified these fears.

4. Regulatory and Governance Issues

India’s regulatory system for GM crops is often criticized as:

- Slow and inconsistent
- Politically influenced
- Lacking transparency

Frequent court interventions and moratoriums have created uncertainty, discouraging both public and private research investment.

5. Socio-Political Opposition

GM crops face strong opposition from:

- Farmer unions
- Environmental activists
- Consumer groups
- Certain political parties



Public protests and misinformation have further complicated rational debate, turning GM crops into a politically sensitive issue.

Case Study: Bt Cotton – Success and Limitations

Bt Cotton is often cited both as a success story and a cautionary tale.

Successes

- Increased cotton production
- Reduced initial pesticide use
- Higher farmer incomes in early years

Limitations

- Emergence of pest resistance
- Secondary pest outbreaks
- Rising seed costs
- Regional disparities in benefits

This mixed experience shows that **GM crops are not a silver bullet**, but a tool that must be used carefully.

GM Crops vs Alternatives

India has other agricultural pathways that compete with GM technology:

- Agroecology
- Organic farming
- Natural farming
- Precision agriculture
- Integrated pest and nutrient management

Critics argue that investing in these approaches may be safer and more socially acceptable. Supporters counter that **GM crops and sustainable practices are not mutually exclusive** and can complement each other.

Is GM Crop Adoption in India a Future Necessity?

From a scientific and food security perspective, GM crops offer significant promise. However, their success in India depends on:

- Strong biosafety regulations
- Transparent decision-making
- Public-sector-led GM research
- Farmer-centric seed policies
- Clear labeling and consumer choice

Without these safeguards, GM crops risk becoming socially unacceptable and politically unviable.

Way Forward: A Balanced Approach

India needs a **pragmatic, evidence-based strategy**:

1. Strengthen biosafety testing and regulatory institutions
2. Promote public-sector GM research to reduce corporate dominance
3. Conduct transparent, region-specific field trials
कृषि विज्ञान को मासिक पत्रिका
4. Educate farmers and consumers with scientific information
5. Allow coexistence of GM, non-GM, and organic farming systems

Rather than blanket approval or rejection, a **case-by-case approach** is essential.

Conclusion

GM crops in India represent **both opportunity and uncertainty**. They are neither a guaranteed future nor an unrealistic dream. When used responsibly, backed by science, and governed by strong institutions, GM crops can contribute to productivity, sustainability, and nutrition security. However, without public trust, farmer protection, and ecological safeguards, they risk deepening inequality and environmental stress.

The real challenge for India is not whether GM crops should exist, but **how, where, and under what conditions** they should be adopted. India's agricultural future lies in integrating biotechnology with sustainability, farmer welfare, and food sovereignty - ensuring that innovation serves people, not the other way around.

