

Warangal Bt cotton leads to de-skilling

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NEW DELHI: Bt cotton may not be a silver lining for farmers in the Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh who are using the GM crop as a solution to virulent pest attacks.

A multi-year ethnography by Glenn Davis Stone from Washington University shows that Warangal Bt cotton farming has led to 'agricultural deskilling'. The Bt seed fads do not have an environmental basis, and farmers generally lack recognition of what is actually being planted. This is a contrast to the highly strategic seed selection processes in areas where technological change is learned and gradual.

In Gujarat, the loss of corporate control over the Bt technology has led to an increased involvement of farmers in local breeding, and an apparent increase in knowledgebased innovation.

The findings of Stone imply more woes for the district that is a key cotton growing area of the country. Farmers here commit suicide every year due to repeated crop failures owing to virulent pest attack. The crop failure increases the cost of cultivation and leads to high debts. Reports compiled by farmers' wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) show that during a single month in 2006 about 279 farmers had committed suicide.

In fact, the 'deskilling problem' precedes the use of Bt cotton, Stone points out. Its root causes are reliance on hybrid seed, which must be repurchased every year, and a chaotic seed market in which products come and go at a furious pace and farmers often cannot tell what they are using.

Farmers' desire for novelty exacerbates the turnover of seeds in the market, Stone argues, and seed firms frequently take seeds that have fallen out of favour, rename them, and resell with new marketing campaigns.



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