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Is growing Bt. cotton merely a fad?

K. Venkateshwarlu

Washington University scholar explores how GM crops affect ryots in developing nations

HYDERABAD: For all the hype over the rapid adoption of Bt cottonseed in Warangal, a key cotton growing district of Andhra Pradesh known for suicides by farmers, a new study by a scholar of Washington University has found that the acceptability was nothing more than a fad.

In his study published in the February issue of Current Anthropology, Glenn Davis Stone explores how the arrival of genetically modified crops has affected farmers in developing countries, taking Warangal, as an example.

In 2003 to 2005, the market share of Bt cottonseed rose from 12 per cent to 62 per cent in Warangal. Genetically modified to produce its own insecticide, Bt cotton has been claimed by its manufacturer, Monsanto, as the fastest-adopted agricultural technology in history.

The firm has been interpreting the rapid spread of the modified strain as the result of farmer experimentation and management skill - similar to mechanisms that scholars cite to explain the spread of hybrid corn across American farms.

But Mr. Stone's multiyear ethnography of Warangal cotton farmers shows an unexpected pattern of "localized cottonseed fads." Rather than a case of careful assessment and adoption, Warangal was plagued by a severe breakdown of the "skilling" process by which farmers normally hone their management practices, he argues.



"Warangal cotton farming offers a case study in 'agricultural deskilling,'" wrote Stone in the transnational journal, sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. The seed fads had virtually no environmental basis, and farmers generally lacked recognition of what was actually being planted, a striking contrast to the highly strategic seed selection processes in areas where technological change is learned and gradual. According to him, farmers' desire for novelty exacerbates the turnover of seeds in the market, and the firms frequently take seeds that have

massive amounts of food super cheap



fallen out of favour, rename them, and sell them again with new marketing campaigns. Stone argues that the previously undocumented pattern of fads, in which each village lurches from seed to seed, reflects a breakdown of the process of "environmental learning," leaving farmers to rely purely on "social learning." Bt cotton was not the cause of this "deskilling," but in Warangal it has exacerbated the problem.

"On the surface, [Warangal] appears to be a dramatic case of successful adoption of an innovation," Stone explains.

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