

The Anti-GM Coalition in India

This paper, based on six months of field research and over 50 personal interviews in India in 2007-08, attempts to outline the contours of the anti-GM coalition in India. In the second half of the paper I make some theoretical suggestions about the 'types' of politics involved, differentiating between the networks of NGOs and think tanks that both oppose and support GM and the 'traditional' politics of mediation focused on state and political party. I aim to raise the following questions for discussion at the workshop, and hopefully for international comparison:

- How do the different tiers of the oppositional movement in India cohere organizationally?
- To what extent do the interests and ideologies involved in the coalition cohere?
- Has the network politics on GM contributed to developmental outcomes? If not, what kind of politics would best serve India's poorest farmers?

Differentiating The Coalition Against GM crops in India

Below, I give an overview of the organizational tiers involved in the 'movement' against GM crops in India. For the sake of rough analytical leverage I start by mapping the coalition into four groups: cosmopolitan, nodal, regional and grassroots, and then map them again in accordance with the ideological orientation of members of the coalition. My aim is not merely taxonomic, but to highlight the tensions in the use these groups have made of Bt Cotton, and in doing so to question the coherence of talking about a coalition against GM crops at all.

Cosmopolitan Groups

There are four important organizations in Delhi that have a large 'transnational window', and whose day to day work involves a high level of interaction across national boundaries, but who have a tenuous relation to local NGOs. Their function is to lobby the state, take public interest litigation cases to court, get stories into the media and talk formally and informally to decision makers in international organizations and international bodies such as the World Bank and WTO, as well as their assorted 'counter fora' such as the World Social Forum. These are: GRAIN; Vandana Shiva's Research Foundation for Science and Natural Resource Policy; Suman Sahai's Gene Campaign and Devinder Sharma's Ecological Foundation.

These organizations are also funnels through which survey 'data' from nodal and regional organizations, about the 'failure' of Bt cotton for example, gets projected into the media and into global civil society. These groups sub divide into two categories, as I discuss below, with Sharma and Shiva taking a

combination of populist and romantic ruralist positions, seemingly hostile to the state, while GRAIN and Gene Campaign have concentrated on building up a body of 'technical' competence on patent issues and biosafety which has opened them up to accusations of incorporation from activists below.

Ironically, parts of the discourse of these cosmopolitan groups have been selectively adopted by state agencies in their efforts to maintain autonomy over biotechnology vis a vis corporate capital, especially when seed / IPR policies were being formulated in the late 90s. For example, government legislation was influenced by Shiva and Sahai's rhetoric on 'biosovereignty', but in a way that preserved the state's role as mediator, rather than allowing NGOs to voice the compensation claims of 'their' villages.

Funding for these groups is varied. Gene Campaign is heavily reliant on German NGO support, GRAIN is part of a Barcelona based INGO, Sharma and Shiva rely on personal fame and charisma to draw in international and Indian support, while Shiva also runs an organic products business in Delhi. My interviews also showed strong mutual suspicion between Suman Sahai, and Vandana Shiva, with both sides accusing the other of dubious allegiances, personalism and of being too tied up with transnational networks and travel as opposed to the Indian 'roots'.

In a recent move, Devinder Sharma has tried to broaden the anti-GM grouping to include religious leaders such as television saint 'Amma' in preparation for the introduction of edible GM products such as GM brinjal.

Nodal Groups

These include Greenpeace India, based in Bangalore and in Hyderabad the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, the Deccan Development Society and, more recently, Chetna Organic.

These organizations, unlike the cosmopolitan groups above, have day to day interactions with lower tier regional NGOs and with farmers themselves in a training, awareness raising capacity in organic and NPM village based projects. Farmers from these projects are sometimes recruited for rallies in the capital and at regional centers via these nodal groups. These organizations also have a large transnational window, mediated through their own linkages to regional and global anti-GM campaigns rather than through the cosmopolitan Delhi groups. For many campaigners, in Europe especially, these groups have been the main source of empirical information about Bt Cotton, through video productions, farmers' tours of Europe, and web sites.

Three of these groups work in close synergy – the CSA, Greenpeace and Chetna Organic – and these links are founded partly on family connections. (the head of Greenpeace India's wife works on GM issues at CSA and her brother in law heads Chetna Organic). The DDS is not as integrated into the particular networks that the CSA operates due to disagreements over philosophy and perhaps, access to resources (with which the CSA is better endowed), though both, separately maintain links with pan Asian umbrella groups and global networks.

Funding for these groups is varied, with the CSA and Chetna Organic having succeeded in accessing state funds set aside for alternative agriculture. The CSA is part of a family of development NGOs that are well funded with fungible assets, including monies earned from micro-financing projects. The DDS gets funding from Oxfam UK for its village based work.

Crucially, these nodal groups, especially the triad of CSA, Greenpeace and Chetna operate using a sophisticated 'marketing' approach to organization building. I expand on this in the section on 'market environmentalists' below.

Regional Groups

These are the work horses of the coalition, in that they run village based projects promoting organic agriculture as an ideal and are also the source for most of the negative news stories about Bt Cotton. Their links to the field give these groups a legitimacy, which NGOs at a higher tier of the coalition lack. These groups are highly concentrated geographically, with the largest and most significant based around Warangal in Andhra Pradesh, a few more in the Vidharbha District of Maharashtra and some in Karnataka. They tend to work primarily with farmers from 'tribal' areas, which some critics see as ironic, given that these farmers have used historically lower levels of pesticides and inputs. Criteria for foreign funding may be part of the reason for this demographic choice.

These groups, such as MARI, SYO and CROPS in Warangal train farmers with technical assistance from the DDS in Hyderabad and funding from Oxfam UK and HIVOS in the Netherlands. The NGOs that run these programs are multi-purpose organizations, that sometimes also run micro-finance, womens' rights and consumer advocacy programs. Based on my interviews I believe there was something opportunistic in some of these groups that had existed as service providing NGOs as far back as the 1980s adopting the organic / anti-GM agenda when international and state level funding became available. However, some leaders, of MARI Warangal, for example, have a background in Gandhian social foundations and saw the organic movement as the latest way to promote self-sufficiency and cushion villages from what they perceive primarily as a sociological crisis in the countryside, in which the cash nexus has replaced mutual aid (as they perceive it) and young farmers are tempted to abandon the countryside for manual labor in the cities. For example, on a visit to CROPS, I was told that the NGO has consciously tried to replicate what they see as the traditional practice of farmers gathering daily at a central venue in the village to discuss farming techniques. While farmers on these projects spoke enthusiastically of the increased interest they get from NPM and organic methods, they also admitted that without the NGO inputs to help with increased labor needs and livestock management they would find it difficult to pursue this path.

In terms of the anti-GM coalition, I found that these groups are cited as the sources for many of the anti-Bt stories that circulate in the Indian press. In particular rumors of allergies and livestock deaths originated from 'nearby' to villages supervised by MARI and CROPS. When I went to some surrounding villages, not incorporated into the NGO programs, I found that farmers had heard nothing positive about these claims.

The political role of these groups also consists in press releases with the local regional language press, sending groups of farmers for lobbying and rallies in state capitals and Delhi and even abroad to meetings of anti-globalization groups. They also produce anti-Bt video showings in villages to try and counter what they see as Monsanto's hyper aggressive marketing techniques in the countryside. Farmers with these NGOs have also participated in negative films about Bt Cotton, produced by the DDS that are shown in Europe.

Grassroots

By grassroots I refer to the farmers and low level activists who participate in NGO activities, to Left farmer Unions that have contributed to anti-Bt campaigns and to organizations with strong 'popular bases' as well as to the general political culture of those places where anti-GM campaigns have thrived, especially Telengana in AP and Vidharbha in Maharashtra.

The Telengana region of AP has long been associated with rebellious politics. In an interview, a senior Monsanto official was keen to associate the opposition to Bt with this tradition, which has included a strong Naxalite presence until recently in the countryside around Warangal. There is some support for this suggestion of a correlation. One activist I spoke to had previously worked with the political wing of the Naxalite movement, for example. However it would be an exaggeration to suggest that this means Left groups have adopted the Bt issue in a purely instrumental way, perhaps to hook their fading organizational capacities onto a newly fashionable issue that gets media attention. Some (though a minority of) interviews with farmers unaffiliated to any NGO in the Warangal area did show some base level of hostility to foreign interventions in agriculture, some farmers spontaneously making arguments similar to those of Prof. Glenn Stone, on 'deskilling', others launching a tirade of insults against foreigners staying in a/c accommodation and marketing seeds that 'damage the soil'. Clearly a history of base level agitation against seed dealers and various 'middle men' in the Warangal area

The political economy of agitation differs in Vidarbha. In this region, populist farmers' groups were influential in the 80's and early 90's, especially the Shektari Sangatana. Unlike in AP, where the state government (and Congress in particular) has had historically strong political links to farming communities, and where Left unions have been strong, in Vidarbha the State government is perceived to belong to the Mumbai urban lobby and to well organized sugar producers in the west of the state. This is one reason why populism and direct action have thrived in eastern Maharashtra, although in both Warangal and Vidarbha rebellious capacities pre-existed the anti-GM agitations to be harnessed by NGOs or retrospectively 'claimed' as NGO based campaigns.

In Vidarbha the most influential 'populist' organization is the Vidarbha Jan Andolan Samiti, led by Kishore Tiwari. This organization has been the source for the dubious conflation of farmer suicides and Bt Cotton, a connection that higher tier NGOs have been wary of making themselves, though have arguably made 'between the lines'. Tiwari operates very differently than the regional or nodal NGOs. He has used the legitimacy that comes from his grassroots support to push a series of openly economic-political claims on state and central government. These claims include higher minimum purchase prices for cotton and quotas on foreign cotton imports and, more generally a perceived need for the state to

regulate the way the global market impacts the poorest farmers, especially cotton farmers who are vulnerable to decisions about subsidy regimes in the USA and Europe over which they have no control. These political claims have met some success, according to neutral observers in the district, in that Tiwari has drawn the attention of senior politicians to agrarian crisis (broadly conceived) where political parties had been neglectful and NGOs apolitical.

In an interview Tiwari expressed contempt for cosmopolitan activists and environmentalists in general, arguing that his position was about economic and material conditions in the countryside not about biosafety issues, that he classified as strictly urban concerns. Despite his focus on Bt Cotton I garnered, from his interview, that Tiwari was using this 'hot button' issue strategically, in a manner quite different from the higher tier nodal NGOs, for whom larger socio-economic resonances are anathema, since they aim to forge coalitions between groups, such as urban consumers and farmers, with very different economic interests. It also differs from the regional NGOs who see socio-economic problems leading to local level solutions and an NGO supervised withdrawal from global markets. In fact, Tiwari saw his own research and activism being exploited by these NGOs to further their campaigns, even though he himself attends meetings of the anti-GM umbrella groups.

Four Types of Organization

Below I outline a possible categorization of the ideological composition of the anti-GM coalition in India:

Romantic Ruralists: such as Vandana Shiva, Devinder Sharma and some of the regional NGOs see the anti-GM campaign as part of a wider movement against technological capitalism in the countryside and a 'return' to mutual aid, and non commodified social relations. The flip side of this is a frequently paternalistic attitude to the farmers they claim to represent, with the withdrawal from the market being mediated through NGOs, often funded from abroad.

Rural Populists: such as Kishore Tiwari and the remnants of the anti-market SS in Maharashtra see the anti GM campaign socio-economically, but in terms, not of withdrawal from markets altogether, but of the necessity for state mediation of market forces. As Tiwari put it in his interview, if the government of India can provide effective regulation in the telecoms market, why is it that small cotton farmers are exposed to predatory and collusive practices from textile manufacturers and receive little support from the state on price?

Market Environmentalists: such as the key nodal NGOs, the CSA, Greenpeace and Chetna Organic, see things differently. There are two aspects to market environmentalism: Firstly, they have adopted a networking strategy drawn from the successful European campaign against GM crops. This strategy appeals to the lowest common denominator among diverse, tenuously connected groups, such as basmati producers in UP, upper middle class consumers in the cities, shepherd and goatherd unions in AP. The GP officer I spoke with admitted that their strategy was to forge such short term connections for immediate campaigning purposes, whether press releases, rallies in Delhi or the various 'stunt' like spectacles that GP specializes in. The second aspect of market environmentalism involves the

incorporation of the organic / non GM movement into global markets themselves. Chetna Organic told me that, in the admitted absence of a 'popular base' the best route for the anti-GM movement was to turn to the corporate sector in the West. Chetna specializes in inviting cutting edge fashion companies in Europe and the USA to forge marketing links with particular Indian villages producing organic cotton, pictures of which they can use in their advertising campaigns. New technologies that allow the tracing of cotton from source to high street assist with this. The market for organic cotton is a niche market, and my research showed that some of the regional NGOs, less well connected to the transnational fashion industry resented Chetna and the CSA's connections to these marketing opportunities for 'their' cotton.

Technocratic Groups: such as GRAIN in Delhi and to some extent, Gene Campaign, and some of the nodal NGOs, see the anti-GM movement as an exercise in incorporating civil society groups inside the networks of experts and committees that make decisions on GM. Technocratic leanings obviously are compatible with the above inclinations, except populism.

Mediation versus Networks?

My research suggests that the debate on GM crops in India comprises two forms of political action: political mediation and networks. This can be briefly illustrated by two episodes of activism in AP.

In one episode, the state government of AP, in 2006, managed to force Monsanto to reduce the price of Bt cotton seeds to 750 rs / packet, down from the 1750rs that it had previously been charging due to a high trait value being charged to seed dealers. It did this by taking Monsanto to the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices committee (MRTP) and extracting a compromise deal from Monsanto. Although some interviewees argued that the seed company Nuziveedu was behind this move, my research suggests that specifically political factors were foremost: a new Congress government had been elected on the back of a strongly pro-farmer electoral campaign, and when a new and energetic agriculture commissioner was appointed, farmers' complaints about high seed price at the local level were addressed by the state government. This price change was soon adopted in every other cotton growing state, having the additional positive effect of curbing the sale of illegal Bt Cotton.

In a parallel episode, the GEAC – the regulating body for GM crops in India, decided in 2005 to ban the three Monsanto Bt cotton hybrids from sale in AP. This was followed by a state government ban on licenses for the sale of these hybrids in the state. This decision, unlike the price decision, was immediately claimed as a victory by the anti GM NGO coalition, which had been specifically targeting the GEAC, over claims of Bt cotton failure in Warangal District. Unlike the price decision, this ban was temporary and had little effect on the ground, as farmers continued to farm Bt cotton illegally.

Both these episodes can be traced to spontaneous, or Left farmer union led agitations at the local level, for example attacks on seed shops when crops failed, for whatever reason. But in the first case, spontaneous anger was mediated through the state into an economic move against Monsanto, in the second into a ban that may have had more resonance with transnational anti-GM campaigners than with Indian farmers and which had little practical value.

I believe this brief example may be indicative of the different results that mediation and networks are able to achieve. My research suggests that Indian cotton farmers require state mediations at various levels:

- On price – minimum support prices for when global market price changes dramatically and government action to curb the collusive practices of cotton buyers during harvest time.
- To calibrate the level of competition among seed dealers and the specific hybrids that should be sold in each climatic and soil region. For example, the market has gone from three hybrids to hundreds in a short time and there are downsides to both too little and too many products being on the market.
- Agricultural Extension: on neglected biosafety requirements such as refugia and especially to curb excess pesticide use, even with Bt Cotton, that will lead to resistance developing. More generally, the state has been seen to devolve education about Bt cotton to the private sector itself – with most farmers learning about Bt through Monsanto’s advertising campaigns. This also relates to the need for geographically differentiated approaches to GM crops – especially given the homogenizing gloss put on Bt Cotton by both the corporate sector and its research foundations *and* the NGO discourse about Bt.
- Interactive research: at the moment some interviewees believe that the agricultural research establishment is passive and fails to engage with farmers’ needs. For example the CICR in Nagpur has been promising to bring out a cheap Bt cotton variety, so that farmers can keep their seed, for many years, but has so far not brought it to market.

In conclusion, this brief paper has outlined the internal incoherences in the anti GM coalition in India. It has argued, that contrary to some of the rhetoric about international civil society giving a voice to the powerless, the introduction of transnationally oriented network politics into the developing world may mean a short termist politics that fails to confront hard socio-economic issues head on. Poor cotton farmers in India may be better served by a politics of mediation carried out by government, and even encouraged by populist rural groups making claims of dubious scientific value. However, my research suggests that this mediating politics may be the exception rather than the rule in India.