Strengthen regulation of GM food; 'Ban GM food'-demand unreasonable

What is the issue?

The anti-GMO activists demand to scrap the draft Food Safety and Standards (Genetically Modified or Engineered Foods) Regulations, 2021 is certainly ill-founded and unscientific.

What is the draft regulation for GM foods?

- (FSSAI) has released draft regulations to bring regulatory clarity on genetically modified foods.
- The regulations will apply to
    - Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)
    - Genetically Engineered Organisms (GEOs)
    - Living Modified Organism (LMOs) intended for direct use as food or for processing.
- The regulations will apply to food products made using food ingredient or processing aid derived from GMOs even if GM content is not present in the end-product.
- It outlines the procedure for
    - prior approval.
    - safety assessment.
    - labelling norms.
- It also specifies norms that labs will need to adhere for testing GM foods.

What are the regulations?

- GMO or GEO shall not be used as an ingredient in infant food products.
- No person shall manufacture, store, distribute, sell or import any food or food ingredient derived from GMO without prior approval of the Food Authority.
- Labelling norms – Food products having individual Genetically Engineered (GE) ingredient 1% or more shall be labelled —Contains GMO/Ingredients derived from GMO.

What are the concerns raised?

- The activists contend that the move to allow food products with GMO label is a tacit approval of imports of GM food.
- So they demand the FSSAI to scrap its draft Regulations and ban GM food/ingredients.

Why banning GM-food products look obsolete?

- Indian consumers are already exposed to GM-food products, directly and indirectly.
- 32% of the 65 food products available in the market and tested by the Centre for Science and Environment had GMO content.
- Nearly 80% of these products were imported.

- Besides GM-crop based animal feed and imported animal and plant produce that likely have GM origins/exposure are currently marketed in India, though very likely adhering to provisions of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.
- Against this backdrop, labelling GM origin food benefits the consumer, helping her decide between a GM product and a non-GM alternative.

What can be done?

- Genetic modification plays a larger role in food technology. It is unavoidable in the long run.
- Also India has high levels of Vitamin-A-deficiency-related vision loss. So, India aims to boost nutrition levels among its vulnerable population.
- In such as case product like golden rice (rice fortified with Vitamin A) is essential.
- Without a scientific attitude towards GM-foods, we won't be able to benefit from the development of genetically-engineered golden rice.
- At the same time, the regulatory landscape should inspire faith among the masses through scientific rigour.
- So FSSAI must relook and plug gaps in the regulations by strengthening the it.

How can we strengthen the regulations?

- **GM content -** FSSAI should mandate the explicit mention of GM content.
- The package must indicate the exact degree to which the product contains each individual GM ingredient.
- This is in line with Delhi High Court's recently direction to mention the vegetarian/animal origin of each ingredient in a dish/food product.
- **Reduction of Threshold limit -** India has the laboratory capacity to detect as low as 0.01% GM content. So, the 1% threshold is indeed too high.
- This is because the standards must not just enable food safety but should also be choice for the wise consumer.
- **Approval -** FSSAI needs to clearly list the jurisdictions/authorities whose approval will be acceptable.
- Approvals by other authorities that may not have an acceptable rigour of testing must not be allowed.
- **Conduct local studies - C**onsumables such as gut biome enhancers, microbes-based food supplements, may contain multiple Living Modified Organisms
- In such case there is a need to conduct local studies to determine that the interplay of such organisms is safe.
- **Infants -** GM-based ingredients can't be used for any infant food. Running safety tests on infants is a near-impossibility.
- However if the FSSAI has reservations about GM-content in infant consumables it can put a hold in the years of early development.

Reference

1. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/strengthen-regulation-of-gm-food/2416613/



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