

GUEST COLUMN

Genetically modified foods

A public overview

The issue of genetically modified foods has gathered an intense and passionate debate about their probable pros and cons. However, the most important criteria for their acceptability depends on public perception of these products as evident from various public surveys, especially in Europe



Genetically modified crops find themselves in a vortex of criticism. Will they stand the fury?

By SUJOY SAHA

Development and evolution of genetic modification in food production is market-driven rather than science. The major objective in growing genetically modified crops is to enhance nutritional quality besides providing better resistance to pest attack. Enhancing and keeping quality of food products are major focal points of the transnational corporations. During the recent years, these biotech products, have acquired an important position in international business but their success is totally consumer dependent. Ultimately, it is the consumer who will decide whether to purchase these genetically modified foods. Consumer negativity will result in absolute rejection.

However, to make food biotechnology commercially viable, approval is needed not only from the consumer but the government as well. Consumer response depends on perceptions about risks and

benefits of genetically modified foods. This perception, in turn, will be contingent of the information communicated to the public regarding the technology. Public acceptance streamlines not only on questions of "who fears what and why?" but also "who trusts whom and why?" The consumers must have an effective understanding of biotechnological products so that they have a choice over whether or not to consume genetically modified food products. The consumer must trust those responsible for regulating the risk of the technology. In order to maximise trust it is essential that the risk and the benefits of genetic modification in food be effectively communicated to reach all consumers

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and not just stockholders in the debate about risk.

Approximately, 65-70 per cent of European consumers support biotechnology and are willing to accept food enhanced by genetic engineering. This fact is derived from consumer research conducted during 1996-97. In the survey, it was clear that, there was no response or concern regarding the food products that have been introduced in those countries. It was also cleared that consumers, especially in the US seem to be less aware of biotechnology now, than in 1992-93. What is striking about this result is that this lack of awareness comes despite the introduction of a number of a biotechnology products.

The development of effective risk communication about genetically modified foods, and food risk issues in general, is particularly important for hazards which have the potential to affect individual health, the environment or other 'risk' targets over a wide and undefined area. Such trans-boundary risks,