

Genetically Modified disaster

Mahesh Bhatt's documentary *Poison on Platter* brings forth the perils of biologically modified foods that are making inroads in our country. ASRP Mukesh reports

As vehicles come to a screeching halt at a traffic intersection, eight-year-old Simran starts displaying her gymnastic skills to earn money. After a grueling day's work, as she sits down to eat her meal, she is hardly aware that the food she is eating can be life threatening. And she is not alone. Across the globe, millions of people who also have a meal of the Genetically Modified (GM) foods expose themselves to such a threat.

The scenario marks the beginning of *Poison on Platter*, a documentary by filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt that takes the theme of this global menace a step further by showing how these genetically modified foods are making inroads into the Indian markets.

"The GM food is threatening our very existence and India is no longer immune to their invasion. Thousands of cattle died in Andhra Pradesh in 2006 after eating BT cotton, farmers in Punjab were exposed to non-curable allergies due to modified pesticides in 2007—they are just few examples," says Bhatt, while launching a scathing attack on biotech multinational companies and regulatory bodies for unleashing what he describes as 'bio-terrorism' in the country. He was speaking after the screening of this documentary in the Capital recently.



(left) Ajay Kanchan Mahesh Bhatt

Directed by Ajay Kanchan, the film makes a mockery of Indian government's claim of not allowing import of any GM foods in the country. The film through cut-to-cut frames shows supermarkets flooded with harmful biotech stuff and exposes how MNCs are cashing on the ignorance of unsuspecting consumers in India.

Says Bhatt, "While we are in dark, the corporations are hatching strategies to cash in on our ignorance. Therefore, the film is an attempt to generate awareness among consumers and kick start an informed debate on the issue." Adds Kanchan, "In their mad rush to capture the multi-billion dollar

Indian food industry, the MNCs are bulldozing warnings by scientists about the adverse impact of such foods on health and environment, and hurtling the mankind toward a disaster that will be far more destructive than what the world has seen so far, simply because it will affect every single person living on this planet."

When the film crew approached one of the companies practising GM technology for their side of the story, they refused to come on records. Says Kanchan, "We had asked for their permission to shoot and know if their products were genetically modified. It was obvious that they would reject

but a few even threatened us with dire consequences if we went ahead with the movie."

Trials of GM foods on lab animals across the world have repeatedly shown that they cause stomach bleeding and adversely affect brain, lungs, liver, kidney, pancreas and intestines. They have even been linked to higher offspring mortality and infertility. Ironically, in India, there is not even any facility to test GM foods. So the claims of regulatory bodies that they have thoroughly checked the food don't hold any ground.

"That's what the film points at," says Bhatt. "Now it's for people to decide whether they want to eat food that has the

potential to stunt our growth and impair our vital organs or not?" he asks further.

Adds Jeffrey M Smith, author of *Seeds of Deception* and *Genetic Roulette* (international best sellers on health impact of GM foods), "There is irrefutable evidence that GM food is harmful and not evaluated by the governments. This is one of the most dangerous technologies ever introduced on earth and deployed in our food supply."

So is India now a dumping ground for such foods? "Undoubtedly, it is," says Bhatt. Echoes Devinder Sharma, a food policy analyst, "We are told that these crops are essential for feeding the growing population, but show me at least one GM crop that produces higher yields. In fact, many of these crops produce less than the existing crops. And yet, as many as 56 foods crops are being modified in India at present."

In spite of a number of scientific studies pointing out the potentially damaging impacts of BT crops, there are reports that government is about to approve the first genetically modified crop in India, BT brinjal. "So far, we were told that by washing the vegetables, you could rid of the harmful residues. That may not, because with genetic modification, the toxins will be right inside the vegetables," warns Sharma.