



Beyond the wall

In defeat, the Gandhi family is looking for scapegoats without owning responsibility

Failure is always an orphan, but the scramble among Congress leaders to stick the genesis of the party's devastating collapse in the Lok Sabha election on someone else is comical. What gives it a dark edge is that this evasiveness is being condoned, even promoted, by the reigning supremos. The Gandhis, Sonia, Rahul and Priyanka, were apparently shocked that the party lost as it did in the election. They would not be, had they been in touch with the political situation on the ground that they keep themselves ferociously insulated from, with the help of self-serving aides. This collapse was long in the making, and on their watch – and the signs were all around. It is true that the party was up against factors that were loaded in favour of its principal opponent, the BJP, such as money power and the partisan conduct of the Election Commission. Cataloguing only this is not, however, an honest route to an objective understanding of the party's degeneration. The lack of maturity, egocentrism, and sense of entitlement underlying Congress president Rahul Gandhi and his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's response in the aftermath of the defeat are disheartening for sympathisers and a boon for the BJP. Mr. Gandhi called out senior leaders for not supporting him and resigned as party president – but he should know that in politics, victory and power are commanded, not sought as a favour; Ms. Vadra told a meeting of Congress workers in Uttar Pradesh that they were responsible for the setback – she should know there is hardly any reason why anyone should be working for the party at all in U.P., unless the leadership inspires them to do so.

Blaming subordinates is bad leadership; simply threatening to walk away in the face of a setback is irresponsible brinkmanship. This is why it is revealing that in the midst of all this, the brother-sister duo met Navjot Singh Sidhu, a recent entrant from the BJP to the Congress who is publicly challenging Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, who led the campaign from the front and held the State for the party. Mr. Sidhu's photo-op gave sufficient grounds to assume that even in this moment of existential crisis, the Congress leadership is susceptible to machinations by courtiers who have a history of undermining strong regional leaders. On a more self-reflective note, Mr. Gandhi would realise that his obsession, to the exclusion of almost everything else, with elections in the party's student and youth wings was meaningless and self-indulgent. Good leaders know there is only one way to go when pushed to the wall. For that he needs to hold himself accountable to his party persons, and openly so. The Congress today needs a strong leader; and Indian democracy needs the leader of the largest Opposition party to be mindful of the responsibility that the position carries. Mr. Gandhi must decide whether he can be that leader.

Full disclosure

SEBI's new framework for financial disclosure by credit rating agencies may not be enough

Amidst the rising number of defaults by companies, the chief markets regulator is taking the fight to what it thinks is the enemy: ratings agencies. The Securities and Exchange Board of India has asked credit rating agencies in the country to, among other things, clearly state the "probability of default" of the instruments they rate for the benefit of investors. There have been a record 163 downgrades of debt instruments this year, according to data released by Prime Database this week. This is more than double the number of defaults over the whole of last year. Debt instruments issued by prominent companies including Yes Bank, Essel and Jet Airways have been downgraded this year. This spate of defaults, which may well be a sign of the turning of the credit cycle in the broader economy, may have forced SEBI to crack the whip on credit rating agencies. In a circular released on Thursday, SEBI laid down a new standard framework for financial disclosure by credit rating agencies that it believes will enhance the quality of information made available by these agencies to investors. Notably, the agencies will have to publish information on how their performance in the rating of debt instruments compares with a benchmark created in consultation with SEBI. The regulator believes this will help investors to better gauge the performance of credit rating agencies.

SEBI's aggressive regulatory approach seems to suggest a certain disappointment with credit rating agencies, which may not be unfounded. They have been caught napping on several occasions, including during the recent default by Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services on its debt commitments. They are also seen by many as being more loyal to companies whose instruments they rate rather than to investors who provide precious capital. These concerns need to be addressed. SEBI's attempt seems to be to align ratings methodologies with global best practices. The suggestion to revise the method of computing default rates and the precise definition of terms that raters should use in describing a client's liquidity position – strong, adequate, stretched and poor – are aimed at sharpening disclosure and leaving little room for raters to be ambiguous. What is not clear, though, is how the new framework will effectively resolve the conflict of interest issue that plagues the rating industry. The issuer-pays model where the ratings agency is paid by the issuer of the instrument that it rates is not a healthy one. But the problem is that a viable alternative is yet to be proposed. The bottomline is that the poor track record of credit rating agencies is known to most investors and is appropriately discounted by market participants.

Reversing the scale of priorities

The Chennai-Salem highway case will test the judiciary's assessment of environmental and economic interests



SUHRITH PARTHASARTHY

In the weeks ahead, the Supreme Court will hear arguments on an appeal filed against a judgment of the Madras High Court in *P.V. Krishnamoorthy v. The Government of India*. There, a series of notifications acquiring land for a proposed eight-lane expressway connecting Chennai to Salem were quashed. The Supreme Court has already denied, with good reason, the National Highway Authority of India's urgent request for a stay of the judgment. Such an order would have rendered unavailing the High Court's lucidly reasoned ruling. Indeed, the quality of the High Court's verdict is such that, when the appeal made against it is heard, the Supreme Court could find that the judgment demands a wider, national embracing.

Question of procedure

The eight-lane highway is part of the "Bharatmala Pariyojana", a centrally sponsored highways programme, aimed chiefly as a corridor for more efficient freight movement. The intended highway between Chennai and Salem will cover more than 250 km, and, once constructed, will cut its way through a slew of agricultural and reserve forest lands. Although the High Court framed a series of questions that required answering, the ultimate controversy in the case came down to this: was an environmental impact assessment (EIA) required before efforts were made to acquire land for the highway project? If not, at what stage of the project was such an assessment required?

According to the petitioners, many of them landowners, the state had failed to obtain an environmental clearance for the project before acquiring land and had thereby violated its responsibilities. What is more, in any event, such permission, they argued, could hardly be obtained since it was clear that the project would have a deleterious impact on the forests, the surrounding water bodies and the wildlife of the region.

The government denied this. It argued that its power to acquire land under the National Highways Act, 1956, was unconditional. There was, it said, no law mandating an EIA before efforts are made to acquire private land. In its belief, a notification under the Environment (Protection) Rules, 1986, which required an EIA for the construction of a new highway, did not decree such an assessment for the purposes of securing the land.

Sustainable development

For some time now, it's been evident that the environment is in a state of utter ruin. Recognising this, in 1987, a United Nations-backed committee led by the former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Brundtland proposed a long-term strategy which called for sustainable development, among other things. This programme, radical at the time, titled "Our Common Future", defined the principle as an endeavour to ensure that any development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs." Since then, sustainable development has been viewed as something of a mantra in environmental jurisprudence. So much so that in India, even before the principle crystallised into a binding international norm, the Supreme Court in *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum* (1996) read the idea as intrinsic to India's constitutional structure.



E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

"The traditional concept that development and ecology are opposed to each other is no longer acceptable," wrote Justice Kuldeep Singh. "Sustainable Development" is the answer."

But grand as this statement sounds, in practice it's proved scarcely useful. For the courts have invariably seen sustainable development as demanding a balancing exercise, as requiring a calculation of trade-offs between the environment and the economy. What this has meant, as Nivedita Menon has argued, is that the courts of neoliberal India wound up fashioning a sliding scale of priorities in which the environment, particularly the urban ecosystem, always trumped people, but where eventually development trumped it all. This approach, she showed, was typified in the Supreme Court judgment in a case concerning industrialisation at the Kudremukh National Park (*Godavaram*, 2002). Holding that any development would have an adverse effect on the ecology and the environment, a balance, wrote Justice Arijit Pasayat, had to be struck. "Where the commercial venture or enterprise would bring in results which are far more useful for the people, difficulty of a small number of people has to be bypassed," he wrote. "The comparative hardships have to be balanced and the convenience and benefit to a larger section of the people has to get primacy over comparatively lesser hardship."

Utilitarian reckonings of this

kind, perhaps, represent a problem inherent in seeing sustainable development as a virtuous model. It could easily be argued that by its very design the principle calls for a form of calculation that tends to see growth as outplaying all other concerns. As Amartya Sen wrote, while the prominence accorded to sustainable development may be laudable, we must equally ask whether "the conception of human beings implicit in it is sufficiently capacious". A project, for example, which might defer future generations the opportunity to breathe fresh air may well be defended on a simple application of the norm if those future generations are likely to be rich enough to enable them to live comfortably without breathing fresh air. In this illustration, the principle overlooks, as Prof. Sen wrote, "the need for anti-emission policies that could help future generations to have the freedom to enjoy the fresh air that earlier generations enjoyed."

Primacy to the environment

Sustainable development can, therefore, work only if the environment is seen as valuable for its own sake. The Madras High Court does this in its judgment in *Krishnamoorthy*. To argue, as the government did, that an EIA wasn't required before land was acquired for a highway, as the court recognised, was to effectively place the cart before the horse. As the court pointed out, the highway in question here was a greenfield project that was intended as an altogether new road to be constructed on virgin land. In such a case, to eschew an EIA before land was obtained would have created irreversible effects that would have had a bearing not only on the environment, but also on the social and economic life of the landowners.

"The land of an agriculturist," wrote Justice T.S. Sivagnanam, for

the court, "is vital to sustain his livelihood... The land provides dignity for the person." The judgment, therefore, not only holds the state accountable for the violation of basic notions of due process, in exercising the power of eminent domain, but also sees the possession of farmlands by farmers as an article of faith. But most importantly, the ruling deepens a commitment to the protection of forests and waterbodies. It places the environment in a position of primacy over unthinking measures of ostensible development.

When a highway passes through a reserve forest would it not, the court asks, "pave way for establishments in the near vicinity"? Would it not "pave way for poaching of endangered species of birds and animals"? Would it not "pave way for illicit felling and transportation of valuable timber"? The rigours of the country's environmental laws, the judgment therefore holds, ought to outweigh those of procedural laws concerning acquisition of land, for "the protection of environment stands in a higher pedestal when placed on scale with that of the economic interest."

By so holding, the Madras High Court has effectively reversed the prevailing scale of priorities. This is especially remarkable since it comes at a time when the government is seeking to further weaken the existing norms for environmental clearance. That such efforts at diluting environmental protections are underway when it has become increasingly apparent that climate change represents an existential threat ought to alarm us into action. One way to act is to compel the state to look beyond exercises of balancing, as the High Court does, and to see nature as intrinsically valuable.

Suhrith Parthasarthy is an advocate practising at the Madras High Court

Shaky building blocks

The draft National Education Policy reinforces outdated ideas about the goals of a foundational literacy programme



SHAILAJA MENON

Many children in elementary classrooms across India cannot read and write proficiently, as demonstrated on an annual basis by the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER). This affects other school-based learning, as well as functioning in societies and economies that prize literacy.

Capabilities of young children

It was heartening, therefore, to see a chapter devoted to "Foundational Literacy and Numeracy" in the draft National Education Policy, 2019. The focus it places on the early years is welcome, and the continuity it recommends between the pre-primary and primary years is necessary. Likewise, its emphasis on mother tongue-based education and oral language development are critical. However, the analysis presented on why children fail to learn to read and write largely points to factors surrounding the teaching and learning process – the health and nutritional status of children, high student-teacher ratios, and so on.

While each of these factors is undoubtedly important, they do not address with sufficient clarity curricular, pedagogical and teacher education-related issues that plague the teaching and learning of early literacy in many Indian classrooms.

Most classrooms across India view the task of foundational literacy as teaching children to master the script, and being able to read simple words and passages with comprehension. Higher order meaning making, critical thinking, reading and responding to literature, and writing are typically reserved for later years of schooling. This draft reinforces such restrictive and outdated ideas about the goals of a foundational literacy programme.

Research evidence from around the globe demonstrates unequivocally that even very young children are capable of using early forms of reading, writing and drawing to express themselves and to communicate; they are also capable of inferential meaning-making, critical thinking, and so on. This entire body of scholarship, referred to as "emergent literacy", has been ignored in the draft. This has powerful consequences for the recommendations that follow, which propose largely oral activities for the pre-primary grades, reading hours for Grades 1-3, with an additional hour for



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

writing starting only in Grades 4 and 5. It contradicts evidence suggesting that young children be taught listening, speaking, reading and writing simultaneously and not sequentially.

Many pedagogical approaches

Another concern is that the recommendations are based on generic theories of early childhood education, such as multiple age groups learning together in flexible, play- and activity-based ways. They don't draw upon ideas specific to the teaching and learning of early literacy. Early literacy requires a "balance" between helping children to acquire the script, and engaging them with higher order meaning making. It also requires knowledge of a variety of pedagogical approaches, such as reading aloud to children, guiding children in their efforts to read and write, encouraging independent exploration, helping them learn about different genres of texts, and so on. Further, it needs

a balance of materials – moving beyond textbooks and workbooks to high quality children's literature, material created by the children themselves, and the like.

Teachers need to know how to differentiate instruction for learners at different levels and how to provide specific help to students who are struggling. This also requires sufficient time – an average of two-three hours per day, as per the recommendations of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). While it may be beyond the scope of a policy document to detail specific curricular and pedagogical approaches, it must provide sufficient direction for a national curriculum framework to pick up from – in this case, it should signal the need for a balanced and comprehensive approach to foundational literacy and knowledgeable teachers for its implementation. Earlier documents addressing this issue (for example, MHRD's Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat, 2014, and Ambedkar University's position paper on Early Language and Literacy in India, 2016) have been far more specific in recommending a comprehensive approach with expanded time, and a balance of goals, methods and materials.

Teaching literacy

This brings me to a third concern, which is a lack of discussion about

what it takes to prepare teachers to successfully teach foundational literacy in a multilingual country. Instead, the document recommends recruiting volunteers and community members to support the acquisition of early literacy (even remedial instruction!) in the primary grades, albeit under the guidance of teachers. This lends credence to a dangerous and erroneous idea that any literate person can teach literacy, and undercuts sophisticated understandings related to children's development and literacy learning that teachers ideally bring to their jobs. Volunteers can be used, but cannot be a primary mechanism that a national policy relies upon to deliver foundational literacy to students.

In focusing on the limitations of the non-academic nature of anganwadi experiences on the one hand, and the inappropriate curricular and pedagogic practices followed by many private pre-schools on the other, the authors of the draft appear to have not engaged with the advances made by scholars, practitioners and policymakers in the field of early literacy.

Shailaja Menon is Professor and Programme-in-Charge, Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad, and Faculty, School of Education, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

State of the media

Over the years, political parties in power have learned how to influence and even silence the media ("Democracy can die in daylight too", June 14). More than print media, it is mostly TV channels that have lent themselves to easy manipulation. Facts and real issues have been relegated to the margins and only biases are perpetuated. It is sad to see many intelligent people falling for fake news and propaganda. Since 2014, one sees TV channels targeting not the government for its failures but the Opposition. Even the Rafale disclosures in this newspaper were not

picked up by much of the media for further analysis.
V. NAGARAJAN,
Chennai

The disdain that some sections in the country have for the judgment of the common people is only too evident in sentences like "the BJP's logic-defying triumph...". The party has the people's support. What other logic is required to understand the BJP's victory?

M.S. SAGAR REDDY,
Hyderabad

The narrative reinforced by the media that there is no alternative, or the TINA factor as it is called, was accepted by most people

who wanted a "powerful" Prime Minister and not a performing democratic government.

G.B. SIVANANDAM,
Coimbatore

No free will

One cannot be forced to accept a custom and then call it 'free will' ("Liberals need to think again", June 14). It is an entrenched system of domination that led to the institutionalisation of many regressive social customs. Men at the forefront of society always decided what women must do. Every time we justify such customs by calling them acts of 'free will', we are letting down the women

who suffered silently and even gave up their lives because of following these customs and practices.

VRINDA RAJVANSHI,
New Delhi

When a nation is confronted with terror attacks, it adopts strong measures to tighten its national security. We must be unified in our fight against terrorism. If we argue that certain measures being taken hurt for safety hurt our religious sentiments, it will dilute our fight against terrorism.

SNEHA THAKUR,
New Delhi

Take responsibility

Congress general secretary

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's castigation of party workers for the dismal performance of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh is really unfortunate ("You let party down, Priyanka Gandhi tells Congress workers", June 13). It shows that Congress leaders squarely place the blame on the workers if they lose, but if they win, then all credit goes to the Gandhi family and the leadership.

ARUN MALANKAR,
Mumbai

Water conservation

Singapore is known to conserve water in multiple ways, Israel's water management has made its agriculture less dependent

on rain and freshwater resources, and China is making huge investments in water conservation projects. In comparison, policymakers in India have consistently failed to accord due importance to water conservation initiatives ("Rainwater harvesting could have saved city from crisis", June 14). Mindless exploitation of groundwater resources and failure to recharge existing water aquifers are why many parts of Tamil Nadu are facing severe water shortage. It is high time we made this issue a priority.

M. JEVARAM,
Sholavandan

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:
www.hindu.co.in/opinion/letters/



Ishar Saini prepares his field to sow the season's kharif crop after uprooting and destroying the GM brinjal crop that he had planted on his farm in Nathwan village, Fatehabad district, Haryana. (Below): Seeds of various vegetables are sold in a shop in Dabwali. Ishar's son bought the brinjal saplings from a vendor in the vicinity. ■ AKHILESH KUMAR

The mysterious case of GM brinjal cultivation

Last month, genetically modified brinjal was found in a farm in Haryana. While the government insists that this is a one-off case, activists wonder how widespread the problem could be. The spotlight is back on an old debate, reports **Vikas Vasudeva**

Braving the stifling June heat, Ishar Saini is busy preparing his half-acre field to sow the season's kharif crop. Ishar has unwittingly been in the limelight in Haryana for over a month, ever since genetically modified brinjal, the cultivation of which is illegal in India, was found planted on his rented farm. Saini was forced to destroy the crop in the presence of local officials and activists in Nathwan village, Fatehabad district. What remains a mystery is the source of the seeds of the transgenic variety.

Ishar asserts that neither he nor his son Jeevan Saini, who bought the saplings of brinjal in December 2017, was aware that the saplings were of a genetically modified variety. The Sainis had procured them from a roadside vendor in Dabwali, a town nearly 100 km from Nathwan.

Samples were collected from Ishar's field by the Haryana horticulture department on April 29 this year, following a complaint by activists. They were then sent to the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR) in New Delhi for testing.

In the eye of the storm

"What is our fault? My son bought saplings that were available in the market. If they were of an illegal variety, it's for the government agencies to answer how this variety came to be sold in the market. We are the victims here, not the culprits," says Ishar. After the brinjal crop was uprooted, Ishar sowed Bt cotton in his field. Apart from the half acre that the Sainis have rented, they also own one acre of land.

"First, we had to bear the loss caused by the uprooting of the brinjal crop, which was ready to be plucked. We had spent about ₹25,000 on the crop's maintenance this season. Now we have to spend additional money on sowing the new crop. This will cost us at least another ₹5,000. The government should compensate us for this as farming is the main source of our livelihood," says Ishar.

Jeevan, 33, pleads ignorance. He says he had no idea that sowing this variety of brinjal was illegal: "How could I possibly know whether the saplings were a genetically modified variety or not? The vendor told me that the brinjal plant would be free from insects. The price, though, was high. It cost me seven to eight times more than the regular varieties, but because he assured me of better quality produce and good returns, I decided to cultivate it." Jeevan was a motor mechanic for 20 years. It was only a couple of years ago that he joined his family occupation of farming.

"In April and May last year, I harvested the first produce of the crop," says Jeevan, as he assists his father on the farm. "The quality was good, though I had to spray pesticides. I sold the brinjal in the local markets of Ratia and Tohana



My son bought saplings that were available in the market. If they were of an illegal variety, it's for the government agencies to answer how this variety came to be sold in the market. We are the victims, not the culprits.

ISHAR SAINI
Farmer

and they fetched good returns. We consumed the same brinjal at home and it seemed fine. One of my friends in the neighbourhood had also procured the saplings along with me, but he destroyed the crop in 2018 after he found that it got infested."

Jeevan says he has not met the vendor from whom he purchased the saplings after that one time. "Most of the vendors come with saplings during the sowing season. They leave after selling the saplings. It's difficult to track them," he says.

Beeru, 60, who has three and a half acres of farmland adjacent to Ishar's land, says: "Though I have not seen anyone else apart from Sainis sowing this variety of brinjal in the village, it can't be ruled out that this variety is not being cultivated elsewhere. I am sure those vendors or dealers must have sold the saplings and seedlings to many other farmers. Government agencies should ensure that such seeds are not sold in the market. They must find out the origin of the seed supply."

'A one-off case'

Samples from Ishar's farm that were sent to the NBPGR in Delhi for testing were shown to be of a genetically modified variety. Soon after, a committee of experts was set up by the Haryana government and chaired by the Vice Chancellor of the Haryana Agricultural University to analyse the NBPGR's findings. They government confirmed the findings and said genetically modified brinjal had been sold in the market.

Ranbir Singh, joint director at Haryana's horticulture department, insists that this is a one-off case, however. "The crop from Ishar's field was destroyed

and buried deep inside the earth to avoid any contamination. Growing and selling genetically modified brinjal is a violation under the rules of the Union Environment Ministry. We have also surveyed fields across the State and we have found no trace of genetically modified brinjal anywhere else. A report in this regard has been sent to the Union Agriculture Ministry," he says. R.K. Chauhan, joint director in Haryana's environment department, says an interim report based on the observations of the expert committee has been sent to the Union Environment Ministry.

The test results of the sample collected from Ratia's fields establish that genetically modified brinjal did not come from the line that was developed by Mahyco, the Maharashtra-based seed company that developed Bt brinjal. Mahyco's Bt brinjal is commercially grown in Bangladesh. In India, Mahyco's Bt brinjal was cleared in 2009 for commercial cultivation by the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, the apex body that decides on genetically modified organisms in the country. But in 2010, former Union Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh put an indefinite moratorium on Bt brinjal on the grounds that there was scientific and public disagreement on its safety.

The extent of illegal cultivation

While the government insists that this is a one-off case, activists are anxious over the extent of genetically modified crop cultivation in India and blame government agencies for adopting a casual attitude in dealing with the situation. Rajinder Chaudhary, a former professor in the Department of Economics at M.D. University, Rohtak, says: "If the government was really serious about protecting India's biodiversity and consumer health, it should undertake an extensive strip-testing of brinjal and map the extent of genetically modified brinjal cultivation in the country," he says. "It should get further tests done, such as an

'event test'. [Event is a term used to describe the point on a chromosome where a genetic tweaking has happened – an addition or deletion, for instance. By identifying the 'event', scientists can say exactly which line the crop came from.] But neither the State government nor the Central government has done this." Chaudhary is associated with Kudrati Kheti Abhiyan which conducted the preliminary tests, using the 'lateral flow strip method', on the brinjal produced in Ishar's farm.

He cautions that if immediate and stringent steps are not taken, the story of Bt cotton could very well be repeated in the country. "Bt cotton entered Indian fields illegally and then was accorded post-facto approval. Today non-Bt cotton seeds are practically out of the market and can only be procured with great difficulty. Moreover, the adverse impacts of genetically modified food are not evident immediately, they are evident only in the long run. So, the fact that the Sainis have been consuming genetically modified brinjal without any visible adverse effects does not mean it is safe," he says. Chaudhury adds that there is a grave danger of illegal genetically modified brinjal cultivation proliferating if the Central and State governments do not act swiftly. "The seedling supply of this suspected genetically modified brinjal happened last year. It is not clear what the extent of illegal cultivation of this unapproved crop is."

Chaudhary narrates how he was able to trace the field where the suspected cultivation of genetically modified brinjal had taken place. "A resident of Ratia town went to a local nursery to fetch saplings of brinjal. When he was discussing the shoot and fruit borer [the most destructive pest of brinjal], the nursery merchant told him about a local farmer [Saini] who had planted a brinjal variety that is resistant to the shoot and fruit borer. When he tipped us off about the variety, I visited the farm in April this year and bought a few kgs of the sus-

pected brinjal. A lateral flow strip test [a preliminary test conducted using a kit] was conducted and it indicated that the sample was of genetically modified brinjal. The lateral strip method is not a confirmatory test though. So I sent samples to the Ahmedabad-based SGS Private Limited, a laboratory accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories. A report on May 8 by the laboratory confirmed that the brinjal samples were genetically modified."

Unable to differentiate crops

In Dabwali, where Jeevan bought the seeds, seed suppliers and dealers say they do not know about the sale or availability of illegal genetically modified seedlings in regulated markets. Some, however, do not rule out the possibility of such saplings or seedlings being sold in unregulated markets.

"If a genetically modified crop has been found on one farm, it means that saplings or seedlings are being sold. Saplings are sold in nurseries. Many mobile vendors sell seedlings. This means anyone can be involved in selling the banned seeds. We have the example of Bt cotton before us," says Rakesh Garg, a vegetable seed dealer who has been in the business for over 15 years in Dabwali's vegetable market. Garg adds that it is important for government agencies to trace the entire supply chain – from seed developers to intermediaries – to find out the origin of seed and sapling supply.

At Garg's store, Ram Swarup, a farmer from a nearby village called Rajpur Majra, points out that it's difficult to differentiate between saplings of a genetically modified plant and those of a normal variety plant. Hence it's not difficult to sell genetically modified seeds in the market, he says. "Also, when a farmer grows genetically modified brinjal, the harvested crop is similar to any other variety. Even the consumer can't make out the difference," says Swarup, who has 11 acres of farmland.

Umendra Dutt of Kheti Virasat Mission, an organisation promoting organic farming, says the government should take legal action against the suppliers of these seedlings or saplings. "Curbing the supply network of illegal genetically modified brinjal is something that should not be ignored at all. However, it's equally important that no penal action should be taken against farmers who have been duped into cultivating these illegal seeds. Instead, they must be fully compensated for the destruction of their standing crop," he says.

Support for GM brinjal

Meanwhile, others are demanding that the Central government should allow cultivation of genetically modified crops, including of brinjal, across the country as they claim that the crops are absolutely safe for consumption. Also,

The crop from Ishar's field was destroyed and buried deep inside the earth to avoid any contamination. We have also surveyed fields across the State and we have found no trace of genetically modified brinjal anywhere else.

RANBIR SINGH
Joint director, Haryana horticulture department

they put forth the argument that farmers should be allowed to reap the benefits of modern technology, which would help them boost their income by fetching better returns.

On June 10, a few hundred farmers gathered at Akot village in Maharashtra's Akola district to protest against the ban of cultivation of genetically modified crops. "To show our anguish against the ban we sowed herbicide-tolerant Bt cotton in the field of one of our fellow farmers," says Gun Parkash, Bharatiya Kisan Union's Haryana unit president, who participated in the protest. The protest was spearheaded by Shetkari Sanghatana, a farmer body which has been opposing the government's ban of genetically modified crops.

Stating that a similar kind of protest will be launched in Haryana and Punjab in the days to come, Parkash says, "These genetically modified crops are in use in many parts of the world. Countries like the U.S. and Canada are using this technology. With the use of genetically modified technology, costs are reduced, pest attacks are lower and production is higher. Farmers who are in distress in our country are not able to reap the benefits of genetically modified crops because these crops are banned." He adds that farmers and consumers in Bangladesh have been safely reaping the benefits of Bt brinjal, but in India successive governments have preferred to keep quiet.

"The ban on genetically modified crops is not just restricting farmers from accessing technology but is also promoting an illegal market to flourish. The adverse consequences of an unregulated market are far more dangerous. Even though in our country no genetically modified food crop has been given a nod due to bio-safety issues, genetically modified substances have already entered our food chain," he says.

Therein lies the irony. "Bt cotton cultivation is allowed in India as a non-food crop but then cotton seed oil is extracted from these plants and is being consumed in parts of the country, especially in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Not only this, canola oil and soybean oil are both extracted from imported seeds, which are produced from genetically modified crops abroad. It's high time our government realises that genetically modified crops have already entered the food chain," Parkash says.

The debate is far from settled.