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Modi government likely to allow Bt brinjal, other GM crops soon

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Just two months after overturning a regulatory approval to conduct field trials of 15 genetically-modified (GM) crops, the Narendra Modi government appears to have made a Uturn. In fact now the government wants to woo both foreign and Indian investors to make heavy investments to produce GM seeds within the country.

The change in the government policy has been noticed during the "Make in India" program launched by the government on September 25, 2014.

The "Make in India" campaign and website (www.makeinindia.com), which were launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday just before leaving for USA, calls for investments in Hybrid seeds, including GM seeds. Biotechnology is one of the 25 important sectors that have been identified as focus areas under the "Make in India" campaign.

The section under investment opportunities lists "Hybrid Seeds, including GM Seeds, represents new business opportunities in India based on yield improvement". This is good news for the agri sector considering the fact that there has been a major stalemate on the issue of GM seeds, especially in the area of food crops.

In fact, in a clear signal about a government rethink about the banned Bt brinjal, the official website says, "India has the potential to become a major producer of transgenic rice and several genetically modified or engineered vegetables." It appears that the National Democratic Alliance government is junking the leading party BJP's election manifesto which had favored a "cautious approach" to the introduction of GM crops in the country.

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GM seeds, GM rice and GM vegetables are touted as attractive areas for foreign and Indian investors to "make in India."

It may be recalled that the current government decided to put on hold the regulatory approval taken by the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) on July 18, 2014, where 15 approvals for confined trials were granted. Out the 15 approvals by GEAC, four were for food crops -- mustard, brinjal, rice and chickpea.

It also permitted the import of GM soybean oil by three MNCs -- Monsanto, Bayer BioScience and BASF. Organizations like the Swadesi Jagaran Manch (SJM) and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS), which are known to be close to the BJP, have been against cultivation of new genetically modified (GM) crops in the country and have been calling for a ban.

Meanwhile, farmer leaders from 10 states in August urged union environment minister, Mr Prakash Javadekar, to expedite the field trials of GM crops to ensure farmers prosperity. Farmers from National Farmers Empowerment Initiative (NFEI), an umbrella body of various farmer organizations from across the country, also submitted a signed petition to Mr Javadekar. "Allow us to take this opportunity to congratulate you for making a bold statement that 'Science cannot be stopped' and clearly showcasing the need to allow scientific trials of GM crops. This has rekindled Indian farmers' hopes of receiving new technologies in our fields," the petition said.

Punjab farmer leader Mr PPS Pangli, president of NFEI said, "We fear that a moratorium on research into biotechnology will ultimately have a ruinous effect on us farmers, as we will be denied crucial technology that will enable us to better our lives."

Now just hours after the website was unveiled, Vijnana Bharati, a non-governmental organization of India, in an open letter appealed to the Prime Minister not to invite any sort of investments in the field of genetic engineering technologies to produce seeds in India.