

# Reports of Bt contamination stains premium organic cotton exports

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Widespread reports in Europe that premium organic cotton exported by India is contaminated with genetically modified (GM) cotton have tarnished the image of a fast-growing segment of the country's textile export\*

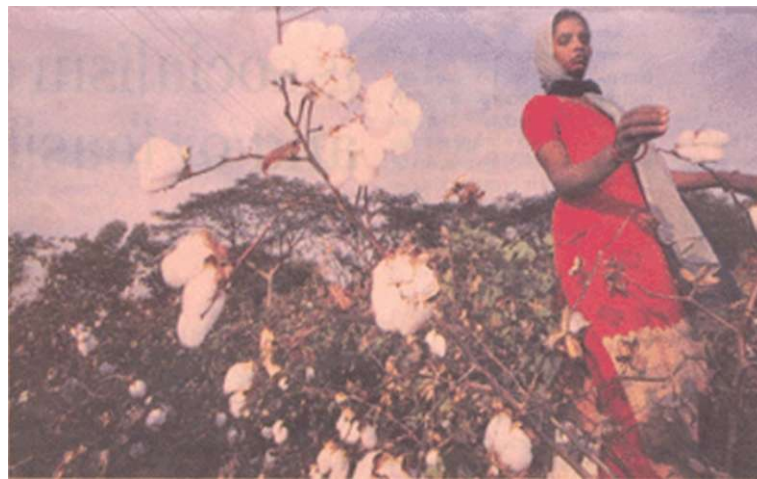
The scare in Europe was sparked by a report in the German edition of *Financial Times* a couple of weeks ago that a 'gigantic fraud' was taking place in the sale of cotton garments marked as organic by leading European retailers like H&M, C&A and Tchibo, but which actually contained GM cotton. The source of fabrics, it said, was India.

According to Organic Exchange, an international non-profit organisation that promotes the growth of organic farming, India accounted for as much as 65 per cent of the 175,113 tonnes of organic cotton produced worldwide in 2008.

The report quoted Lothar Kiur, director at RITiithaven-based independent testing laboratory Impetus, as saying that around 30 per cent of the samples were contaminated with GM cotton.

Interestingly the paper quoted Sonjay Dave, director of Ape-da (Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority), the nodal agency for exports of organic, as saying that the fraud was on a large scale and that two European certifying agencies had been fined for lax processes. Since then a clutch of leading European textile trade journals has been splashing the story, casting a cloud over the burgeoning exports of organic products from India, of which cotton is the leading item.

In an interview with *Business Standard*, Dave said he



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had been misquoted in the report. There was a problem of contamination in 2008 but that had been resolved last year, he said. "To maintain the strict standards and two European certifying agencies — Control Union Certifications and Eco-cert — were fined Rs 15 lakh and Rs 7.5 lakh each for failing to take proper procedures. I am surprised why this issue is cropping up again."

It appears that the Indian subsidiaries of the two European certifying bodies have failed to check the seeds being used by organic farmers who have used seeds of Bt cotton as the GM cotton in India is popularly referred to as GM cotton. It is strictly taboo for industrial users and consumers of organic cotton.

According to P. V. S. M. (journalist), organic cotton fetches a premium of 15-20 per cent over conventional cotton and accounts for 10 per cent of the total cotton production. There has been a tremendous increase

in the past two-three years of organic cotton production, but there is a problem of availability of non-Bt seeds," she says. However, the bigger concern is contamination from Bt cotton fields.

Measures to prevent contamination through strict implementation of a 50-metre refuge (buffer zones around farms growing Bt cotton to prevent the pollens from contaminating neighbouring farms) are absolutely essential, says Gouri. "If Bt fanning practices are regulated strictly we can keep contamination at manageable levels, especially if farmers use non-cotton as a buffer."

But, with around 65-75 per cent of the production in the country coming from Bt cotton, contamination is a fairly widespread concern. This is especially so since most of India's farms are tiny, of 1-1.5 hectares each. Says Jitender Kumar, assistant vice president of Alok Industries, a textile firm: "The is-

ssue of contamination has not been addressed seriously. We need a clear-cut policy on the issue on how much segregation is necessary. And no standards have been developed in the country for the permissible amount of contamination in organic cotton."

The problem is serious, concedes G. V. Ramanjaneyulu, executive director of Hyderabad-based Centre for Sustainable Agriculture. "Gene flow for Bt cotton is highest at 50 metres, but even at 100 metres there is possibility of contamination. Even if one plant in a one-acre plot can have 4,000 plants — is contaminated, the chances of contaminated seed in the next season are high," says the scientist who was earlier with ICAR.

It is a concern for textile companies who have organic cotton in their portfolios. Alok Industries, one of the largest integrated textile companies with sales of Rs 2,160 crore in 2007-06 (exports accounted for dose

to half). It is a major user of organic cotton that it contracts for from farmers in Warbha in Maharashtra and Adilabad in Andhra Pradesh. Of its total consumption of 50,000 bales (One bale = 165 kg) last year, 20 per cent was organic cotton, specially grown for the company. It exports small quantities of organic cotton yarn, but is a major supplier of fabrics to top retailers like H&M.

Kumar, who is in charge of the company's unique programme to use ethical cotton, subscribes to Fair Trade, a process which guarantees fair remuneration to farmers and other stakeholders in the textile chain, points out that there are "no appropriate policies or measures to protect organic cotton farming" although "more farmers will be converting to organic because of its long-term sustainability".

Alok Industries says reports of contamination could have a serious impact on the potential of organic cotton exports that is immense if stricter standards are maintained. Dave says Ape-da is already doing this by "keeping a closer look at organic cotton certifications". Currently, certification is being done as per OOTS, or global organic textile standards, but India is formulating its own standards.

The biggest innovation is TraceNet, a web-based traceability system that has been introduced in the country to trace and track all organic certifications for exports to ensure purity. Inspectors employed by certification agencies will use GPS devices for capturing data so that wrong certifications are eliminated.

Organic exports should be secure with TraceNet, says Daw who predicts that exports of organic products should double to Rs 1,000 crore in the next two years.

## Agency finds traces of GM in Indian soya

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India may lose a huge export market for its soya as CERT ID, an independent global certifying agency for non-GM crops, has found that Bt Cotton is contaminating it.

CERT ID has informed Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh in a letter that it has found Indian soya being con-

taminated with GM materials on three occasions.

Says Richard W. Rran, MD of CERT ID Europe, "India being the only country that produces non-GM soya, has an advantage in the global market which demands non-GM soya and that is now in jeopardy as CERT found on three occasions contamination of Indian soya by GM material".

IT\* leorpxs on to add that

while research and production evidence of mycotoxins of GM soya in India, investigations led to GM cotton as the source of contamination. The letter, dated January 22 this year, seeks a meeting with the minister at the earliest date to sort out the issue.

He wants that unapproved GM presence will be a major global media issue, causing irreparable and permanent damage to Indian soya industry.

India exported 352,600 tonnes of soya meal in 2007-08 to countries like Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia and Thailand. Brazil and Argentina are its main competitors.

Meanwhile, agricultural economist Bhaskar Goswami, who is with Delhi-based Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security, has warned that maize may lose market share as Mahyoco Monsanto has applied for

approval of GM maize. "GM maize is round the corner and Mahyoco Monsanto is bringing it. That would mean the end of mere exports from non-GM countries which depend solely on India for that." CERT ID has been certifying Indian soya against the Cert ID Non-GM Standard for almost 10 years enabling Indian soya processors and traders to confidently access EU food manufacturer