

BBC- India divided over plans for GM aubergine

India has denied permission for commercial cultivation of BT brinjal - a strain of genetically modified (GM) aubergine. Geeta Pandey reports from the southern city of Bangalore on how this humble vegetable has sharply divided public opinion.

At Central College Campus in Bangalore about 100 protesters beat drums and shout slogans. "BT brinjal, go back, BT brinjal, quit India," they chant. Many of the protesters carry placards, expressing the same sentiment; others are dressed as aubergines or have painted their faces purple, like the vegetable.



Inside a crowded auditorium on the college campus, India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh is holding the last of a series of national consultations on BT brinjal to help him decide whether to allow the genetically modified version of the vegetable to be grown in India.

In October, India's genetic engineering approval committee (GEAC) approved the commercial cultivation of aubergines containing a gene from the *Bacillus thuringiensis* (BT) bacterium, designed to provide resistance against certain insects. The decision has sharply polarised opinion in the country, forcing the environment minister to step in.

Acrimonious

The hall is packed with farmers, scientists, agriculturists, doctors and activists. The two lobbies, pro- and anti-BT brinjal, are present in strength.

"BT cotton has improved our life. Do not succumb to false propaganda - BT will not harm anybody," one farmer told the minister.

"BT as a protein is highly degradable and doesn't persist in the environment and hence is not a threat. Chemical pesticides used in regular crops do more damage to environment," said a pro-BT scientist.

The opponents are equally vocal.

"The consent of consumers and growers has not been taken into account. BT cotton hasn't reduced the use of pesticides or chemicals and the yield is not better," said Dr AS Anand, chairman of the Organic Farming Mission of Karnataka state.

"We are not guinea pigs - don't use us for research," said activist Ranjit Singh, who claimed that GM crops could cause cancer.