The Future of GM Crops in India: Opportunities and Challenges

Shivanand S. Itnal
College of Agriculture, University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad
Corresponding Author: shivananditnal21@gmail.com

Introduction

Genetically modified (GM) crops have been a subject of global debate since their inception, balancing promises of higher yields and resilience against concerns over biosafety and socio-economic impacts. In India, the discourse around GM crops is particularly nuanced, shaped by the success of Bt cotton, the stalled journey of food crops like GM mustard, and emerging genome-editing technologies. With growing population pressures, climate change challenges, and evolving regulatory mandates, India stands at a crossroads regarding its biotechnology policy. This article explores the historical context, current status, regulatory landscape, technological advances, opportunities, challenges, and future outlook for GM crops in India.

Historical Context and Past Experiences

India's experience with GM crops began over two decades ago, with Bt cotton becoming the first and only GM crop approved for commercial cultivation in 2002. Bt cotton offered resistance against bollworm pests, leading to yield increases and reduced insecticide use, benefiting many farmers. However, the adoption also highlighted issues such as seed costs, resistance management, and equitable access. Attempts to introduce GM food crops, notably GM mustard developed by Delhi University, have faced legal and public scrutiny. Despite demonstrated agronomic potential, GM mustard's approval was challenged in courts, leaving its commercial release in limbo as of mid-2025. This mixed legacy underscores both the technical achievements and regulatory/social hurdles encountered in India's GMO trajectory.

Current Status of GM Crops in India

As of mid-2025, Bt cotton remains the sole commercially cultivated GM crop in India, covering large acreage and contributing to cotton productivity. Field trials for other GM or genome-edited crops have been conducted under strict regulatory oversight, but none have reached widespread commercialization. Recent developments include the introduction of genome-edited rice varieties (DRR Dhan 100 and Pusa DST Rice 1) released in May 2025, developed using CRISPR-Cas9 without transgenic DNA insertion. These varieties aim to enhance yield and stress resilience, marking a shift toward precision breeding approaches. Meanwhile, GM mustard remains under judicial review following environmental petitions, delaying its potential commercialization. Overall, India's pipeline of biotechnology-derived crops includes both transgenic and genome-edited candidates, but societal acceptance and regulatory clarity remain critical determinants of their future.

Regulatory Landscape and Policy Developments

India's regulatory framework for GM crops is overseen by multiple bodies, chiefly the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. In March 2025, the Supreme Court directed the government to formulate a comprehensive national policy for GM crop regulation and adoption, recognizing the need to harmonize scientific potential with biosafety and public concerns. The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, together with rules under the Biosafety framework, governs the approval of field trials, environmental release, and commercial cultivation of GMOs. For genome-edited crops that do not contain foreign DNA, India has adopted a simplified regulatory approach, exempting them from stringent biosafety rules applicable to transgenics in certain cases. However, debates persist regarding the adequacy of risk assessment protocols, transparency in decision-making, and harmonization with international regulations. The Supreme Court's call for policy formulation offers an opportunity to develop clear guidelines, public engagement strategies, and streamlined processes that balance innovation with safety and public trust.

Technological Advances: From Transgenics to Genome Editing

While traditional transgenic approaches introduce foreign genes for traits like pest resistance or herbicide tolerance, genome editing techniques such as CRISPR-Cas9 enable precise modifications without necessarily inserting exogenous DNA. In India, research institutions (e.g., ICAR, universities) have developed genome-edited rice varieties targeting yield enhancement and stress tolerance, leveraging simplified regulatory pathways for non-transgenic edits. This shift reflects global trends where gene editing is seen as a “new wave” of crop improvement—potentially faster, more precise, and often perceived as less controversial than transgenics. Yet, questions around intellectual property (e.g., patented CRISPR tools), biosafety evaluation, and public communication remain pertinent. India’s capacity-building efforts, including CRISPR trainings and investments in biotech research, position the country to harness these technologies for climate-resilient agriculture. However, the integration of genome-edited crops into the regulatory and commercial landscape requires robust oversight frameworks and stakeholder dialogue.

Opportunities for Indian Agriculture

Biotechnology holds significant promise for Indian agriculture by enabling the development of crop varieties with enhanced productivity and resilience to biotic and abiotic stresses. For instance, genome-edited rice with improved drought tolerance can help stabilize yields under erratic monsoon patterns, thereby contributing to national food security across diverse agro-climatic zones. Similarly, crops engineered for pest or disease resistance—such as varieties incorporating Bt traits—can reduce dependence on chemical pesticides, improving farmer health, lowering input costs, and lessening environmental pollution; future genome-edited disease-resistant lines may further extend these benefits. Biofortification through genetic modification or precision editing also offers a pathway to address widespread micronutrient deficiencies, although earlier efforts like Golden Rice have encountered regulatory and public acceptance challenges; recent advances in genome editing may provide more acceptable routes to enhance nutrient profiles.

In the context of climate change, biotech approaches can accelerate the development of climate-smart varieties with enhanced tolerance to heat, salinity, and other stresses more quickly than conventional breeding, helping to safeguard yields amid increasing variability. India’s robust research and innovation ecosystem—anchored in strong public institutions, private enterprises, and international collaborations—can drive the discovery, validation, and deployment of valuable traits. Ultimately, the successful adoption of these improved varieties has the potential to boost farm productivity and profitability, especially for resource-poor smallholders, by reducing input costs and stabilizing yields; additionally, biotechnology-driven agro-industries in seed production and related services can spur economic growth and generate employment in rural areas.

Challenges and Concerns

1. **Biosafety and Environmental Risks**: Potential unintended effects—such as gene flow to wild relatives, development of resistant pests/weeds, or impacts on non-target organisms—require thorough environmental risk assessments. India’s ecological diversity heightens the need for localized risk evaluation protocols.
2. **Public Perception and Acceptance**: Surveys indicate significant public skepticism toward GM foods in India, often due to perceived health risks, lack of awareness, or distrust in regulatory transparency. Building public trust demands transparent communication of scientific evidence, participatory risk dialogues, and engagement with farmers, consumers, and civil society.
3. **Regulatory Hurdles and Legal Challenges**: The legal standoff over GM mustard exemplifies how regulatory approvals can be delayed or overturned by litigation. Clear, science-based, and transparent regulatory processes are essential to avoid protracted uncertainties. The Supreme Court’s directive to frame policy is a critical step, but implementation must ensure timely and credible decision-making.
4. **Intellectual Property and Access**: Many biotech tools and trait technologies are under patent protection. Ensuring affordable access to proprietary technologies (e.g., CRISPR platforms) and negotiated licensing for public-sector breeding programs is crucial to prevent cost barriers for researchers and farmers.
5. **Infrastructure and Capacity**: Effective biosafety assessment requires well-equipped laboratories, skilled personnel, and monitoring systems. Resource constraints in regulatory agencies may slow review processes. Strengthening institutional capacity for risk assessment, monitoring, and post-release surveillance is vital.
6. **Socio-Economic Equity**: Benefits of GM crops must reach smallholders and marginalized farmers. Seed pricing, distribution networks, and extension services need to be inclusive.

Past experiences with Bt cotton indicate that while many benefitted, issues like seed affordability and local adaptation arose.

7. **Trade and Market Dynamics**: International trade of agricultural commodities can be affected by GM status. Export markets with stringent GM regulations may restrict shipments from India if GM traits are present. Co-existence strategies and traceability systems are needed to manage trade risks.
8. **Regulatory Convergence for Genome Editing**: While genome-edited crops without foreign DNA are exempted from certain regulations, ambiguity remains regarding which edits qualify for simplified oversight. Clear guidelines distinguishing transgenic, SDN-1/SDN-2, and SDN-3 edits (site-directed nuclease approaches) will help avoid confusion.

Case Studies

- **Bt Cotton Success and Lessons**: Bt cotton's widespread adoption demonstrates biotech's potential in India, with many farmers experiencing reduced insecticide use and higher yields. Yet, issues like resistance management (e.g., bollworm resistance evolution) and seed cost debates highlight the need for integrated pest management, stewardship programs, and equitable seed pricing strategies.
- **GM Mustard Controversy**: Developed to boost mustard yields and oilseed self-sufficiency, GM mustard received conditional approval but was challenged in the Supreme Court due to environmental and procedural concerns. The legal impasse underscores the necessity for transparent risk assessment data sharing, stakeholder consultations, and clear guidelines for environmental release.
- **Genome-Edited Rice Varieties**: The recent release of DRR Dhan 100 and Pusa DST Rice 1 showcases adoption of CRISPR-based breeding in India. These varieties, free of foreign DNA, aim to improve yield and stress resilience. Their deployment under a simplified regulatory regime illustrates the potential for rapid innovation, but also raises questions about post-release monitoring and farmer awareness.

Building a Robust Biosafety and Regulatory Framework

1. **Science-Based Risk Assessment**: Develop comprehensive, context-specific protocols for environmental and food safety evaluation, integrating international best practices while addressing India's unique agro-ecologies.
2. **Transparency and Stakeholder Engagement**: Publish data from trials, risk assessment studies, and decision rationales in accessible formats. Engage farmers, consumer groups, scientists, and NGOs in dialogues to address concerns and build trust.
3. **Clear Guidelines for Genome Editing**: Define regulatory categories for different genome-editing outcomes (e.g., edits mimicking natural mutations vs. novel gene insertions) to streamline approvals and ensure safety.
4. **Capacity Strengthening**: Invest in training regulatory personnel, expanding laboratory infrastructure, and establishing networks for post-release monitoring (e.g., tracking pest resistance, environmental impacts).
5. **Intellectual Property Management**: Encourage public–private partnerships and licensing arrangements that facilitate access to essential technologies for public-sector breeding. Support open-access platforms for genome-editing tools where feasible.
6. **Co-existence and Traceability**: Develop strategies for co-existence of GM, genome-edited, and conventional crops, including isolation distances, labeling norms if needed, and traceability mechanisms to manage supply chains and trade requirements.
7. **Economic and Social Safeguards**: Implement measures to ensure smallholder access to improved seeds, possibly through subsidy schemes or community seed banks. Provide training and extension support to maximize benefits and manage risks.
8. **Monitoring and Adaptive Management**: Establish systems for continuous monitoring of GM and genome-edited crop performance, environmental effects, and socio-economic outcomes, enabling policy adjustments based on real-world evidence.

Public Communication and Awareness

Effective communication strategies are essential to address misinformation and build informed public opinion:

- **Educational Campaigns**: Use mass media, social media, farmer workshops, and school curricula to explain biotechnology concepts, benefits, risks, and regulatory safeguards in local languages.
- **Transparency Portals**: Maintain online platforms where stakeholders can access trial data, risk assessment reports, and regulatory decisions.
- **Participatory Approaches**: Involve farmer groups and community representatives in field demonstrations, allowing firsthand observation of benefits and potential issues.
- **Dialogue with Civil Society**: Organize forums where scientists, policymakers, activists, and consumers can discuss concerns, evidence, and trade-offs openly.

Economic and Market Considerations

- **Cost-Benefit Analyses**: Conduct region-specific studies to quantify the economic impact of adopting GM or genome-edited varieties, considering yield gains, input cost savings, and market dynamics.
- **Market Access Strategies**: For export-oriented crops, assess target markets' acceptance of biotech products. Develop segregation and certification protocols to meet importing countries' regulatory requirements.
- **Value-Chain Development**: Foster linkages between seed producers, extension services, processors, and markets to ensure that improved varieties reach farmers effectively and that produce is marketed appropriately.
- **Incentive Mechanisms**: Consider subsidies or price support for initial adoption phases, especially for smallholders, while ensuring long-term sustainability and avoiding market distortions.

Future Prospects and Strategic Directions

1. **Integrated Breeding Platforms**: Combine genomic tools, phenotyping, and agroecological research to develop varieties tailored to local conditions, integrating both conventional and biotech approaches.
2. **Climate-Resilient Crops**: Prioritize traits for drought tolerance, heat resistance, flood tolerance, and pest/disease resistance aligned with climate projections for various regions of India.
3. **Nutritional Security**: Explore genome-editing solutions for biofortification (e.g., micronutrients, vitamins) while ensuring consumer acceptance and transparent safety evaluations.
4. **Digital Agriculture Integration**: Use digital tools (e.g., remote sensing, big data analytics) to identify areas where biotech interventions can have maximal impact, monitor crop performance, and provide real-time advisory services to farmers.
5. **Public–Private Partnerships and Collaborative Research**: Leverage synergies between government research institutions, private seed companies, and international organizations to pool resources, share risk, and accelerate product development.
6. **Regulatory Harmonization**: Align India's regulatory approach with international best practices (e.g., Codex Alimentarius, Cartagena Protocol) while tailoring to national contexts, facilitating trade and cross-border cooperation.
7. **Capacity Building and Education**: Invest in training the next generation of plant biotechnologists, regulatory scientists, and extension professionals to sustain innovation and oversight.
8. **Monitoring and Innovation Ecosystem**: Establish feedback loops from field data into research and regulatory refinement, fostering an adaptive system that evolves with technological advances and stakeholder needs.

Conclusion

The future of GM crops in India hinges on striking a balance between harnessing the potential of biotechnology to address critical challenges—such as food security, climate resilience, and farmer incomes—and managing biosafety, socio-economic equity, and public trust. India's experience with Bt cotton demonstrates both the promise and pitfalls of transgenic crops, while emerging genome-editing technologies offer new avenues for precise, potentially more acceptable crop improvements. The Supreme Court's directive to develop a comprehensive national policy presents an opportune moment to build a transparent, science-based, and inclusive regulatory framework. By investing in capacity building, stakeholder engagement, rigorous risk assessment, and equitable access mechanisms, India can navigate the complex terrain of GM and genome-edited crops. If managed wisely, biotechnology can become a pivotal tool in India's quest for sustainable, resilient, and profitable agriculture, benefiting farmers, consumers, and the environment alike.

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