

Chor Bt cotton: It's unofficially official

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Yavatmal: “Just look down, the grass is all gone but the crop stands. This is BG-III,” says a farmer at Rampur village in Ghatanji taluka of Yavatmal. “Come a little before sowing begins next year, I can arrange a few packets of BG-III seeds from a nearby outlet for you,” he adds. The field is parched with barely a few blades of grass but the crop is still green with plenty of cotton bolls.

BG-III or Chor Bt, as it is called, is the herbicide resistant (HT) Round-Up Ready (RR) variety of the genetically modified (GM) cotton seed. It does not have government sanction for cultivation but is fast becoming the mainstay of cotton-growers in Vidarbha.

It is resistant to glyphosate used in herbicides. So, even if doses of herbicides are sprayed, the cotton plant is safe and the weeds are cleared without engaging labour. In the approved varieties, the herbicide can kill the crop. Weeds have to be removed so that the crop can draw maximum nutrition from the soil.

The RR variety was developed by US giant Monsanto which already sells Bt cotton. It is available only through illegal channels, hence the name Chor Bt. During TOI's visit to fields and incognito talks with farmers, it was found that Chor Bt is an open secret in Vidarbha's cotton belt. “It is sourced from Gujarat as well as Telangana,” say locals.

The Chor Bt crop has certain telltale signs. “The crop looks greener as compared to other varieties and grass aro-

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und the plant is dry,” inform farmers. Chor Bt is sold for Rs1,100-1,500 a packet as against Rs800 for BG II, the approved variety of GM cotton seeds made by Monsanto. “It's costlier than BG-II, the legal variety, yet it makes sense to buy this as one saves a lot on de-weeding wages,” said a farmer in Rampur.

Farmers are aware that Chor BT is illegal. “The government is not sanctioning it as they want to protect the jobs of farm hands but we have heard that in a year it will be cleared,” said a farmer. Villagers also pointed out to an estate, which they said belonged to a political leader, on which Chor Bt is grown on all 200 acres. The crop was seen in villages like Karegaon and Runjha along the state highway. “As much as 90% crop is Chor Bt here,” the farmers said, while explaining a well-oiled chain in the grey market which brings the illegal seeds right to their doorstep.

Farmers can name more than half-a-dozen brands of the illegal Bt. “One can chose from the pack depending on the soil conditions. You can make out from the names if the variety is from Gujarat or Telangana,” said a farmer who had grown Chor BT in his six-acre farm.