GM Cotton Controversy

What is the issue?

- India’s cotton growers are keen to buy illegal herbicide-tolerant Bt (HTBT) cottonseed varieties at black market rates.
- The organised seed industry and the anti-GM groups are dismayed by it.

What is the reality?

- The moratorium imposed in 2009 on approval of all GM crops remains.
- But, the ground realities with respect to cotton cultivation have undergone a significant change.

What is there a demand for HTBT seeds?

- The demand for the unapproved HTBT cottonseeds has arisen.
- This rise is because India’s dominant BT strain (BG-II) is falling prey to pink bollworm pest attacks in recent years.
- [BG-II - Accounts for most of India’s cotton acreage.]
- Cotton farmers have been faced with falling yields, while dealing with constant or rising costs.
- The HTBT cotton plant is resistant to the usage of glyphosate-based weedicides, a popular labour-saving product.
- This weedicide has been allowed for use in very restricted conditions in India for its alleged carcinogenic effects.

What is the fear?

- According to the organised seed industry, illegal trade in HTBT seeds is of ₹300 crore, with 50 lakh packets of 450g each in circulation.
- They fear it has been used over 15-20% of cotton area.
- This is a straightforward case of market forces rising to meet a genuine demand.

What are the implications?

- The implications of unregulated seed trade are indeed serious.
- This is because the farmers in search of high yields may suffer a dead loss if the expensive seeds (selling at over the maximum rates fixed by the Centre) are spurious.
Bonafide seed distributors and producers suffer as well. The farmers’ groups have stepped up protests seeking HTBT approval, allowing for reduced costs and quality control.

**What are the actions of the Centre?**

- The Centre has said that glyphosate-based weedicides must be applied in the presence of a pest control operator.
- This is an effort taken to curb the use of HTBT seeds.
- However, the sowing season is close to completion.
- Meanwhile, the use of glyphosate in India has increased since 2016-17.
- The Centre must take a clear position on the HTBT issue (GM-based seed technology).

**What could be done?**

- India should have a credible regulator to assess these issues on a case-by-case basis, involving all stakeholders.
- India’s initiatives on this count should be driven by public-funded research.
- The development of indigenous varieties and strains must be given more emphasis, given our gene pool in seeds.
- A pragmatic response to GM is long overdue, with a distinction being made between food and non-food crops.

**Source: Business Line**