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Scientist bends rules for wife's GM trial

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New Delhi: In a clear case of conflict of interest in clearing GM crop trials, a member of the environment ministry's statutory appraisal body and senior agriculture ministry scientist Swapan Kumar Datta has pushed and got clearance for trials of GM rice to be conducted by his wife, Karabi Datta, faculty with the botany department of Calcutta University in which he too will be participating.

Environment ministry's statutory Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) at first cleared the trials for GM rice with the Supreme Court mandated condition that the isolation distance of 200 metres must be maintained during experiments. This is done to ensure contamination does not take place.

The trials were to be done at Chinsurah Rice Research Station, West Bengal. However, the research station authorities said such trials could not be conducted at their facility under the given conditions. They also said, under an RTI reply, that they held hundreds of traditional varieties of rice – which activists always worry about getting contaminated by GM crops.

On the insistence of Datta, who is a member of GEAC and also deputy director general at the Indian Council for Agricultural Research, the appraisal body re-opened the case. Datta insisted that the isolation distance was too much and cited a non-relevant seed certification standards rules to claim the safety barrier should be reduced from 200 metres to 10 metres. The seed certification standards are not the norm followed in cases of GM food crop trials where the threat of contamination remains unchecked. The GEAC went against the Supreme Court orders and was persuaded by Datta to rework the clearance and permit Karabi Datta to carry out trials at 10-metre isolation distance instead. Datta, when contacted by TOI, admitted that he was also involved in the GM rice trials with his wife but denied any conflict of interest.