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Seed Control Order (1983) and New Policy on Seed Development (1988)

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The agricultural sector of India has long been the backbone of its economy, sustaining millions of farmers and contributing significantly to national food security. The introduction of the Seed Control Order in 1983 marked a pivotal legislative milestone in regulating the quality, distribution, and commercial trade of seeds across the country. Building upon this regulatory foundation, the New Policy on Seed Development in 1988 further expanded the scope of seed governance by liberalizing import norms, encouraging private sector participation, and promoting the adoption of high-yielding varieties. Together, these two policy instruments redefined the Indian seed sector by transitioning it from a state-dominated framework to a more commercially dynamic and scientifically progressive system. This article critically examines the provisions, objectives, challenges, and long-term impact of both legislations, exploring how they collectively shaped modern agricultural productivity in India. Special attention is paid to the roles of the National Seeds Corporation (NSC), State Farms Corporation, and the entry of multinational seed companies in the post 1988 era.

Introduction

Seeds are the most fundamental input in agriculture. The quality, genetic purity, and germination capacity of seeds directly determine crop yield, pest resistance, and nutritional output. In developing nations like India, where agriculture employs nearly half the workforce and sustains the livelihoods of over 600 million people, the management of seed quality is not merely an agricultural issue it is a matter of national security.

Prior to 1983, the Indian seed industry operated in a relatively unregulated environment. Seeds were produced and distributed through informal channels, with little oversight regarding their genetic composition, moisture content, germination percentage, or disease-free status. This absence of standardized quality control resulted in widespread crop failures, inconsistent yields, and farmer exploitation by unscrupulous traders. The government recognized the urgent need for a comprehensive legislative mechanism to bring order to this critical sector.

The Seed Control Order of 1983, issued under the Essential Commodities Act of 1955, was India's first concrete attempt to regulate the seed trade through mandatory certification, licensing, and quality benchmarks. Five years later, the New Policy on Seed Development (1988) went a step further, recognizing that quality alone was not enough varietal improvement, international collaboration, and private investment were equally essential to meet the demands of a growing population.

Together, these two instruments laid the legal and commercial foundation for India's seed revolution, setting the stage for the adoption of hybrid varieties, Bt cotton, and eventually the era of genetically modified (GM) crops. Understanding these policies is essential for any student, researcher, or policymaker interested in Indian agricultural law, rural development, or food security governance.

1. The Seed Control Order, 1983

The Seed Control Order of 1983 was promulgated under Section 3 of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, empowering the Central Government to regulate the production, supply, distribution, and trade of seeds of notified varieties. Its enactment was a direct response to growing concerns about substandard seeds flooding markets across states, particularly in the wake of the Green Revolution, which had increased farmers' dependence on certified, high-yielding varieties.

a) Licensing of Seed Dealers: One of the central provisions of the 1983 Order was the mandatory licensing of all seed dealers. No person could sell, keep for sale, offer to sell, barter, or otherwise supply any seed of a notified variety unless they possessed a valid license issued by the appropriate authority. This provision introduced accountability into the seed supply chain, ensuring that only certified individuals and entities could operate as seed merchants.

b) Minimum Seed Standards: The Order prescribed mandatory minimum standards for notified seed varieties, covering critical quality parameters such as germination percentage, genetic purity, physical purity, moisture content, and freedom from weed seeds and inert matter. These standards were aligned with the specifications laid down by the Seeds Act of 1966 and provided a unified quality benchmark across all states and union territories.

c) Labelling Requirements: Every container of notified seed was required to bear a label specifying the kind and variety of seed, lot number, germination percentage, date of test, net weight, and the name and address of the dealer or producer. This transparency measure allowed farmers to make informed purchasing decisions and provided a traceable paper trail for enforcement agencies.

d) Inspection and Seizure Powers: The Order vested Seed Inspectors with wide powers to inspect premises, draw samples from seed lots, test samples in designated laboratories, and seize consignments found to be below standard or falsely labeled. Violations were punishable under the Essential Commodities Act, with penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment, making the enforcement mechanism legally robust.

2. The New Policy on Seed Development, 1988

Announced in 1988 by the Government of India, the New Policy on Seed Development (NPSD) represented a paradigm shift in how the country approached seed production and varietal development. Where the 1983 Order focused on regulation and quality control within an existing state-led system, the 1988 Policy sought to transform the seed sector's structure, opening it up to market forces and foreign expertise.

a) Liberalization of Seed Imports: One of the most transformative provisions of the 1988 Policy was the liberalization of import norms for seeds and planting material. Prior to this, seed imports were heavily restricted through quantitative controls and canalization through state agencies. The new policy allowed private companies to import seeds of new varieties for testing, multiplication, and commercial sale, subject to phytosanitary clearances and the release procedures of the Central Variety Release Committee (CVRC).

b) Encouragement of Private Sector Participation: For the first time in India's post-independence agricultural history, the private sector was formally invited to invest in seed research, hybrid variety development, seed processing, and marketing on a national scale. The policy enabled both domestic private companies and foreign seed companies to enter into joint ventures and establish seed production facilities in India, catalyzing rapid growth in the commercial seed industry through the 1990s.

c) Promotion of High-Yielding and Hybrid Varieties: The 1988 Policy placed a strong emphasis on the development and popularization of hybrid varieties across major crops including paddy, maize, sorghum, pearl millet, sunflower, and vegetables. Hybridization was seen as the primary tool to achieve quantum leaps in productivity, and the government incentivized both public research institutions and private companies to invest in hybrid breeding programs.

d) Strengthening of Seed Testing Infrastructure: To ensure that the increased volume and diversity of seeds entering the market met acceptable quality standards, the 1988 Policy provided for a significant expansion and modernization of the national seed testing infrastructure. New seed testing laboratories were to be established at the state level, and existing laboratories were to be upgraded with modern equipment to handle molecular and biochemical testing alongside conventional germination and purity tests.

Legal and Institutional Architecture

Both the 1983 Order and the 1988 Policy were implemented within the framework of the Seeds Act, 1966, which remains the primary legislation governing seed regulation in India. The Seeds Act established the Central Seed Committee, Central Seed Certification Board, and State Seed Certification Agencies, creating a three-tier regulatory architecture. The 1983 Order supplemented this architecture by addressing commercial trade, while the 1988 Policy complemented it by introducing developmental dimensions.

Notified Varieties Under the 1983 Order

Not all seeds fell under the purview of the Seed Control Order. The Order applied only to 'notified varieties' those varieties of seeds formally listed by the Central Government through official notification in the Gazette of India. Initially, a limited number of varieties of food grains, oilseeds, and vegetables were notified. Over time, the list was progressively expanded to cover a wider range of crop species as the regulatory capacity of states improved. Key notified crops included: wheat, paddy, jowar (sorghum), bajra (pearl millet), maize, groundnut, mustard, sunflower, cotton, and major vegetable crops. The certification standards varied by crop, with cereals requiring a minimum germination percentage of 85%, while some vegetable crops had standards as low as 70%, reflecting natural variability in germination capacity.

Role of National Seeds Corporation (NSC)

Established in 1963 under the Ministry of Agriculture, the National Seeds Corporation (NSC) played a central role in implementing both policy instruments. It functioned as the apex agency for production, processing, and distribution of certified seeds at the national level. Under the 1988 Policy, NSC was encouraged to enter into collaborative arrangements with state seed corporations and private companies to scale up seed production capacity. NSC also maintained buffer stocks of breeder seeds received from Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) institutions, acting as a bridge between agricultural research and farm-level adoption.

Seed Certification Process

Seed certification under the Indian system follows a structured four-generation system of seed multiplication: **Breeder Seeds → Foundation Seeds (FS-I) → Foundation Seeds (FS-II) → Certified Seeds**. Each generation is subject to field inspection and laboratory testing by State Seed Certification Agencies. The 1983 Order reinforced this system by making the sale of uncertified seeds of notified varieties illegal, and the 1988 Policy sought to streamline and accelerate the certification pipeline to reduce the time from variety release to farmer availability.

Impact on Indian Farming Community

The combined effect of both policies was significant, though not without contradictions. On the positive side, crop productivity improved substantially as farmers gained access to certified, high-germination seeds. The coverage of certified seed expanded from approximately 10% of cultivated area in the early 1980s to over 25% by the mid-1990s. Hybrid varieties of maize, sunflower, and vegetables showed yield increases of 30–100% over open-pollinated varieties. However, the liberalization brought by the 1988 Policy also gave rise to concerns about corporate monopolization of the seed supply, erosion of traditional seed varieties, and the growing dependency of small farmers on purchased seeds

particularly for hybrid crops where saving seed for the next season is not economically viable. These tensions would eventually inform the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Act (PPVFRA) enacted in 2001.

International Dimensions and WTO Compliance

India's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its obligations under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement added a new dimension to seed regulation post-1995. The 1988 Policy's invitation to multinational seed companies had already set the stage for debates around plant breeders' rights, patenting of biological material, and access to genetic resources. These debates, rooted in the liberalization commenced in 1988, shaped India's approach to biodiversity conservation, traditional knowledge protection, and the controversial Geographical Indications framework for indigenous crop varieties.

Conclusion

The Seed Control Order of 1983 and the New Policy on Seed Development of 1988 represent two complementary chapters in the evolution of India's agricultural governance. The former established the regulatory discipline that the seed sector urgently needed mandatory licensing, quality standards, and enforcement mechanisms that protected farmers from fraudulent or sub-standard seeds. The latter provided the developmental vision opening the sector to innovation, competition, private investment, and international collaboration to accelerate varietal improvement and seed availability.

Together, these policies contributed meaningfully to India's food security achievements of the late twentieth century. The expansion of hybrid varieties, improved seed quality infrastructure, and the growth of a professional seed industry all trace their origins to these two landmark interventions. India's agricultural success in becoming self-sufficient in major food grains and a significant exporter of various crops owes much to the seed policy architecture built between 1983 and 1988.

Future seed policy in India and indeed in developing countries broadly would do well to revisit the foundational principles embedded in these two instruments: the 1983 Order's emphasis on accountability and quality assurance, and the 1988 Policy's commitment to varietal diversity and institutional partnership. A synthesis of regulatory rigor with developmental ambition remains the most promising path toward a seed sector that is both competitive and just.

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