

What farmers want

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"When private/multinational corporations conduct farm trials on their own fields or on the fields of farmers, the effects of these trials on farmers' health, changes in soil and the impact on the surrounding environment must be monitored by citizens groups that include farmers. This information should be made known every year to the farming community through the media and gram sabhas. If there are negative consequences from such trials, the companies/corporations must be held responsible and accountable for those consequences."

Verdict of a 30-member farmers' jury, Bengaluru, 5 December, 2009.

DURING this conference held in Bengaluru, farmers and scientist sat face to face. They were discussing the future of millet farming in India. Farmers demanded that the research agenda for these grains should be led by them. The scientists resisted making it clear that policy does not make farming communities participants in university research.

Farmer's practices, knowledge and cultures have been under scientific and policy scrutiny for decades. Their living heritage has more often than not been minutely examined by governments, scientists and private companies. In almost all instances the scientific ability of farmers has been pronounced inadequate. Some regard for farmers' practices in the form of basic information which needs to be reformed, revamped or restored, exists. In many ways farmers have accepted the opinion of literate scientific experts with humble grace.

But what happens when such roles are reversed and scientists, private companies and government institutions with their agendas come under scrutiny for four intense days? The conclusions which emerge ask for a paradigm shift in the way agricultural policy and research are drafted and implemented in the country today.

Thirty farmers from different parts of Karnataka sat as a jury, hearing depositions from different people for four exciting days, a few kilometres from the city of Bengaluru. On the fifth day, they returned to the city to announce their verdict at the Institute for Agricultural Technology. The verdict included 22 simple yet clearly articulated points for action.

One statement highlighted the dilemma that farmers in India face. Policy and ground reality have ensured that they are neither able to return to traditional farming with ease, nor can they pursue expensive modern farming practices. To tackle this, they said there was a need for pro-farmer agricultural research which does not have the agenda of hybrids or Genetically Modified (GM) crops. Hybrid seeds, as we are all aware, are the high yielding varieties invented during India's Green Revolution.

The Green Revolution changed the face of agriculture and brought in underterred elements of pesticides, monoculture farming, heavy external inputs and complete loss of control on farm produce. GM



Farmers presenting their verdict to Justice Venkatachaliah

crops are being touted as the saviour crops for the world's farm and food crisis. Amongst raging debate and controversy GM crops have found place in India's plans for a second green revolution and are to be taken to areas that are still biodiverse and where traditional farming practices are thriving.

For the farmer's jury, this was not the way to move forward. Instead, they said, there is a need for seed banks or local seed varieties in every gram panchayat.

The women and men who sat in judgment opposed anti-farmer seed laws and land grab that are prevailing today. These are increasingly making it difficult for small and marginal farmers to continue to till their land. Such policies are killing biodiversity in agriculture and allowing for massive change of land use from agriculture to industry. Special mention was made of the land grab in the name of development and Special Economic Zones.

While many other points of the verdict can be reflected on, what is equally important to understand is the process through which such conclusions were arrived at. The farmers were not alone. The meeting was organised after discussions by a Steering Committee comprising agricultural scientists, media, representatives of farmer's organisations like the Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha and NGOs. They identified the farmers, contacted them and explained the entire exercise to them. While deliberations were taking place, a panel comprising of persons of national and international repute kept a careful watch on proceedings so that the farmer's jury was not taken lightly.

Those who withstood the scrutiny of farmers

included scientists from the University of Agricultural Sciences (UAS), government officials from the Department of Agriculture, Karnataka, media persons, researchers, international university professors, farmer's organisation representatives and others.

What is also interesting is that in their verdict, the farmers did not think only of themselves. This is not surprising. Farmers belong to a community of varied occupations. They cannot isolate fellow pastoralists, artisans and other members of the village. With this spirit, the 5 December statement remarked, "Small farmers, farm labour, artisan communities such as carpenters and potters who produce farm related implements must be taken into partnership in the formulation of agricultural policies that are location specific."

The role of a South Asian alliance is also noteworthy. The Alliance for Democratizing Agricultural Research in South Asia (ADARSA) is an effort to bring together farmers, farmers' organisations, scientists, NGOs, academicians, researchers and the media to collectively salvage research from the controls of the current institutionalised, neo liberal framework and restore it to the farming community. (<http://www.raitateerpu.com/adarsa.html>).

The lesson of this interaction was that by submitting scientists, seed companies and government institutes to the scrutiny of small farmers, the political economy of the current agricultural research can be rectified.

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