

Asian Age, New Delhi, 10th July 2009

Research trends worry agriculture scientists

Rashme Sehgal

New Delhi

July 9: Senior scientists have expressed concern that research in India's cash-strapped 51 agricultural universities is increasingly being funded by agri-business giants.

Speaking at a press conference, experts with the Deccan Development Society (DDS) regretted that the critical thrust of agricultural research had moved to areas of genetic modification, biofuels and contract based horticulture that no longer reflected the concerns of the common farmer.

P.V. Satheesh, director of DDS, highlighted the example of the Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) which had recently entered into an agreement with a US-based company to do extensive research in jowar.

"At present jowar is a protein source for lakhs of poor farmers. The sorghum variety being promoted by them is not a food crop but a biofuel," he pointed out.

Similarly, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) has entered into an agreement with a firm to develop modified GM papaya seed. TNAU has also entered into a research agreement to produce jatropha related technologies with a foreign private university.

"Papaya is grown by small and marginal farmers and will impact them adversely since papaya seeds will subsequently be sold to the farmers at exorbitant prices," he said.

Dr Sargari Ram Das, veterinary scientist and director of the Karnataka-based Antara, pointed out.

"All the GM technologies are patented. The corporates are using our public research institutes to produce GM technology which will then be repackaged and sold to our farmers at exorbitant rates," Dr Sargari Ram Das said. Again, the thrust areas of GB Pant University of Agriculture and Technology with its 278 projects are biofuels and biotechnology units.

Dr T.N. Prakash, professor in agricultural science from the Agriculture University in Bengaluru, believes, "Corporatisation of public research runs against the interests of farmers. Greater accountability is required from these mega business houses otherwise our food security stand imperilled," he said.

Food expert Dinesh Sharma warned, "Agricultural universities are in such a dire

state that both Pant Nagar and Jabalpur Agricultural University had been forced to sell their land in order to fund projects."

He said, "It is for the government to help reclaim their sovereignty by keeping research in the public domain or else they should sell these agricultural universities along with their assets to corporate houses so they can work whatever field they want."

Bhopal-based bio-technologist Dr Debashish Bannerjee felt that many of these changes had come about following the setting up of the Knowledge Initiative in Agriculture.

The Alliance for Democratizing Agricultural Research in South Asia had been launched to allow farming communities a greater voice in agriculture-related matters.

Dr Umendra Dutt, the spokesperson of one such initiative launched in Punjab under the title of Kheti Virasat Mission, said, "Foreign companies pushed BT cotton telling us that its yields would be ten quintal per acre and more. But BT cotton yields have not proved higher though costs of seeds and fertilisers are much higher. In the bargain we have lost our traditional open pollinated cotton seeds which farmers could keep free of cost."

Source:

<http://www.asianage.com/presentation/leftnavigation/news/india/research-trends-worry-agriculture-scientists-.aspx>