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DEVELOPMENT

## And the verdict is...

**Raita Teerpu, a unique event organised in Bangalore recently brought together 28 farmers from across the state, who were in constant dialogue with researchers. The verdict by the green jury was that agricultural research should be farmer-centric rather than crop-centric, reports Anitha Pailoor**



“Our role is significant. We are the judges. There are people here who listen to our experiences and problems with concern,” says Gangamma, a Dalit farmer, even as she feels overwhelmed by her new role. Hers is the role of a jury member, who would offer a verdict on agriculture and research evolved around it.

Raita Teerpu, a unique event organised in Bangalore recently brought together 28 farmers from across Karnataka. The four-day event facilitated

them to debate and analyse the relevance of emerging research developments to small and marginal farmers. The event was part of a process to address the need of democratising agricultural research, and was the first of its kind in the world.

The occasion provided a platform to listen to the voices of those unheard so far. “If we were smart enough ourselves, we would not have to give up our farm and household work, and sit here for a week to talk about our requirements and role in agricultural research,” says Hemavva Lamana with pain in her voice. She was responding to a scientist who said, “You farmers are clever enough to judge what is right and wrong.” Hemavva has been witness to different trends in the farm sector in her 35 years of farming experience. She has seen jowar fields getting converted into maize farms; commercial vegetable seed production occupying a range of native vegetable plots; cotton crop ruining the life of farmers; overuse of chemical inputs destroying crops even in the neighbouring fields. She dreams of food sovereignty even as commercial crops damaged the natural resources in the region.

“This programme has provided us a platform where we can speak face to face with scientists, whom we have only listened so far,” says Laxmibai Kamble. A marginal tribal farmer in Gulbarga, Laxmibai owns two acres of dry land on which she grows red gram, sunflower and chick pea.

### Agricultural research without farmers

Modern agricultural practices introduced in the name of food security did not complement the traditional practices that have been evolved over generations. The recommendations of the scientists that aimed at increasing crop yield did not have a holistic approach. Agricultural research might have reached new technical milestones, but failed to recognise the needs of the local community. Even as the research projects spend crores of rupees in the name of farmers, they are struggling hard to get a square meal. Agricultural research which didn't establish a link with the farmer has shattered sustainable life in the villages.

A major contributor to the crisis is the focus of agricultural research itself, which is gradually moving away from farmers' concerns and is embracing agribusiness as the solution. Traditional farming practices are evolved considering the needs and limitations of agro-climatic and social dimensions of a region and the local community. Modern research is crop-specific. So the results vary with region and practice. The role of the farmer in agricultural research is always undermined. At this juncture, at the international arena, the concept of 'food sovereignty' is gaining momentum. This perception advocates that the farmer is self-reliant; grows his own food and also preserves bio-diversity.

Why cannot agricultural research be farmer-centric rather than crop-centric? With this objective, the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) in the UK

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initiated efforts to understand the necessity of participatory research in agriculture. In South Asia, Deccan Development Society is coordinating the activities. The Raita Teerpu programme was held as part of the process of Democratising Agriculture Research In South Asia (ADARSA). "Farmers have always been blamed for failures in the agriculture sector. Instead of pointing fingers at farmers, why cannot the research community do some introspection? Farmers have the right to know the problems that research has," points out P V Satheesh, Director, Deccan Development Society, and convener of ADARSA.

**Demanding their stake**

Fifty percent of the jury members were women, eighty percent were small farmers and seventy percent were from the backward communities. Very few among them were well-educated farmers. The event was modelled after the citizen jury processes organised in many parts of the world. They upheld social justice when they preferred those who had not spoken before to raise their voices first. So people like Syamavva, Shobhavati and Maruti Kamble realised that they can speak for themselves. The jury participated in the three-day proceedings where they listened to experts from various farm related fields representing State Agriculture Department, Agriculture University, farmer movements, civil society organisations, consumer movements, private sector, participatory and social science research. These special witnesses presented their case in front of the jury. The proceedings clearly showed that the language of research remains alien to the farmers. Upon hearing them for half an hour, the jury clarified their doubts and gathered evidence for one hour. Likewise, there were twelve sessions in three days.

Though they struggled to manage their new role for some time, they adapted to the changed situation early. They communicated their views with the witnesses with confidence. They also didn't hesitate to cross-question when they felt that a certain argument was not true in their case. For example, when a special witness was explaining the advantages of new varieties, a jury member gracefully questioned, "Native variety seeds can be stored for years, but new variety seeds are easily attacked by pests. What do you have to say?"

Then the jury sat together and debated issues in the light of farmers' experiences and the information they got in the process, and arrived at a 22-point verdict. An oversight panel, constituting dignitaries from different sectors and chaired by Justice M N Venkatachalaiah was formed to observe whether the entire process was carried out transparently. Sadashivaiah, a jury member felt that this programme would be the beginning of constructing a two-way bridge between farmers and researchers. "We are proud to be part of such a significant process. We have realised our strength. I will try to pass on my inspiration to friends and neighbours," said Shivamma, another jury member.

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