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Ã¢â?¬Å?Jairam Ramesh failed to uphold his duty to feed millionsÃ¢â?¬?

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Known as a well known journalist, author of many books and environmentalist, Mark Lynas is a frequent speaker around the world on climate change, biotechnology and nuclear power. During a recent trip to New Delhi, he shared his thoughts with the BioSpectrum. Read on for exclusive details:

Q: How did this change of heart on GM crops happen? Do you regret that lot of precious time is getting wasted in debates over such issues?

Key thing to remember is that self introspection is very important. While I was writing a book on climatic changes, I came across lot of literature on the topic as well. Realization came during 2008 and 2009 when I was writing my book 'God Species.' I changed my mind in the middle of the book when I studied 150 papers on the subject and none of these talked about imaginary dangers. A lot of things on the safety, environment and other related areas on these crops slowly become very clear to me. I realized that lot many things what anti GMO activists were saying, were not true. The whole environment movement is based on the grouse that health will be adversely affected and the multi-nationals will take control. That is their line of thinking even today. After making a rational analysis, I could see that there was an obvious fundamental discrepancy and flaws. The environmental campaigns and whole anti-GM workshops are based on a lot of such myths. If you do research you will come to know that these are without any substance.

Surely such debates without any positive benefit to farmers and harmful to science are a waste. One has to realize that it is the farmers who are at the receiving end. They are short of food and trapped in an entirely organic and agro-ecological prison of rural poverty where they cannot afford fertilizers, irrigation or pesticides, let alone commercial seeds.

Q: Being an insider, you can better explain the logic behind the actions of anti-GM activists?

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I will quote Al Gore, who in a movie had remarked, 'It is impossible to make somebody understand something when it completely depends on not understanding it." He was using it for fossil fuel industry but I feel its equally relevant to environmental industry as well. It is astonishing and equally sad that some of the myths they spread are not just scientifically unfounded, but obscene and offensive. Generally they insist that the traditional route is always best even if the traditional seeds are racked with disease, decimated by drought, and yield barely a tenth of what modern varieties might do. However, it is conveniently forgotten that the productivity matters most for families who are fully dependent for their survival on what they themselves can grow. A tide of anti-science activism has drowned scientists and governments around the whole world in a tsunami of lies. Nobody can deny that there are lot of monetary benefits involved for such people and that is why they deliberately don't want to accept things. But science can't stop because of unreasonable opposition.

Q: How will biotechnology benefit farmers? What stops such technologies to reach them?

India alone is going to have to feed 400 million more mouths in the next thirty or so years. A billion more people will join the population worldwide in the next 12 years alone. Biotech can make agriculture more environmentally sustainable. As an environmentalist, I feel that somehow the world has these concerns of ecological imbalance and environment including biodiversity loss, fresh water abstraction, and climatic change. Its going to be next to impossible without using the biotech. This is a powerful tool we have to develop further to enhance our capacity to meet lot many objectives such as quality, increased production, cutting on losses etc. More important are the usage of less water and pesticides.

Unfortunately the progress of good science runs up against the hard rock of bad politics. For example, many new wheats have been developed using recombinant DNA and even tested in field trials but not a single one has ever been made available to farmers. It is not because there was anything wrong with the new varieties, but solely because of the worldwide cloud of fear and superstition that surrounds the use of genetic engineering.

Q: What is your opinion on the moratorium on Bt brinjal and continued policy deficit on GM crops in India? Have the scientists too been lacking in their communications?

I don't think it happened as a result of any scientific analysis or data but because of a myopic decision made by a single government minister. Mr Jairam Ramesh's decision has held back the future of millions of lives including farmers, scientists and private players. I don't know whether he lacked courage or knowledge or both, but he has set back Indian progress in biotechnology potentially for many years.

Definitely the farmers have not been made aware about the issues properly and the scientists too are under pressure. People must realize that scientists who work in this sector aren't there by accident, or because of the high rates of pay, but because they believe in what they are doing. Plant breeders I meet are passionate about their work and its potential to benefit society. And yet society refuses to hear their message and researchers in turn seem unsure about how to respond. It is time therefore to change the paradigm. Scientists must be clearer on such issues and understand that effective communication has to be on topmost priority.

Q: What kind of future do you predict for such crops? How do you plan to create awareness among those who continue to oppose new technologies?

If we are to win the battle for food security, we need our researchers to be free to use all the tools of modern science. We need our farmers around the whole world to be free to choose which varieties of which crops they wish to grow. And we need our policymakers and media to lead society away from negativity that have held back agricultural progress in recent years. In current situation, its very difficult to predict anything but eventually there is no alternative and surely it will gain acceptance as time passes.

I now think that its better to disseminate the information through social media rather than just writing books. These days more people are more hooked to read quick comprehensive information on such subjects rather than go through books. So I am just going with latest trends.