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Speaking to the *BioSpectrum*, he agreed that the public institutes have to do better valued research than 20 years back. Below are the excerpts:

Q: How do you look at the debate around GM crops now? Has the scenario changed in the last few years?

Dr Datta: We lost a decade as there is a negative environment around GM research. People started moving to matrix assisted selection (MAS) and other techniques as they were reluctant to continue research due to the controversies surrounding it. But the fact is that just like the plant biotech experiment cannot be done without *Arabidopsis thaliana*, the GM products have to be equally commercialized after a safety evaluation. Also, public institutes have to do better valued research than what it used to 20 years back. Improvement is required as I feel that we have failed to understand actual biotech research. At the same time, GM will take time and we should not be disheartened.

Today, motivation is lacking and many think it is a MNC-based technology. But it has to be known that India, being such a large country cannot be dependent only on public companies to feed its population. Private sector including indigenous ones, has to play a key role.

Q: What about the criticism on Bt Cotton? Couldn't Bt Brinjal have been a success also?

Bt cotton is a successful example. However, it was an illegal crop legalized later and perhaps Bt crop will face the same. Bt Brinjal was almost approved but only a single minister halted it. He overstepped his role and side-lined GEAC decision. It is important to note that it is growing well in Bangladesh now.

Q: Don't you think biodiversity is an important aspect that requires to be taken care of? Why do activists cry foul over the issue?

Biotech is an extension of plant breeding. In the threat of climatic changes, lies the opportunity for biologists. There are 4 lakh germplasms at the National Institute of Plant Genome Research (NIPGR) which perhaps would be never utilized. Biodiversity

has to be understood in the proper perspective. It hurts as a biologist that only one aspect of biodiversity is being talked about. But we have to understand the importance as scientists. Twenty two thousand wheat germplasms are being analyzed. The exports are up as during 2013-14, \$23 billion worth food has been exported. 10 million tonnes of rice and \$ 4.6 billion worth basmati alone has been exported. From an importing country, we have become an exporting nation.

Activists have not understood the importance of GM crops and the need to strike a balance between it and biodiversity. Its benefit is going to the farmers and people who brought it to the commercial angle. However, safety too is equally important and needs to be taken care of.

Q: Do you agree with Dr M S Swaminathan's assertion that ICAR must come forward to discuss the GM issue more often? What is the way forward on the issue?

I fully agree with Dr Swaminathan's assertion in this regard. The GM has to come and it is going to be there as a technology irrespective of this debate. In fact, we are just debating only one aspect and that is to be or not to be. The question should be of sharing and benefitting of technology. It is how we can govern and resources can be utilized. We are debating only one aspect and to me it is stupid to highlight only the controversial part and avoid discussing the benefits. The maximum benefit is to be shared by farmers, growers, and consumers. Farmers must have access to user friendly and consumer friendly technology at an affordable price. The government has to intervene and govern in a systematic manner.

Q: How do you look at the regulatory chaos? Don't you think it is leading to a loss of the taxpayer's money?

The Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) bill has to come to the Parliament and once passed, it would boost the sector. But to me, more investment has to reach public sector and more young people in research have to come forward so that there is ownership development.

Many people think that the Indian government gives only money for farmers but it is actually rather the policy interventions that help in giving new incentives to grow and distribute hybrids. The biggest taxpayer's money is available in the public domain. India is a vast country and we obviously cannot put a restrictive policy here as compared to a small country. Our country is an open state with an inclusive agriculture policy. In India, it is important that we keep the federal structure alive so that we can identify new developments to come. These developments come to a level that people know the minimum support price, procurement policy, and market strategy.

As PM Modi talks about real-time agriculture growth, it means connection with the world markets. Now a lot of people do not understand that. The awareness and profit sharing is the next phase.

Q: How successful has been the open access policy of ICAR? What are the challenges?

Access to journals and the suggestions from public have increased since the open access policy at ICAR. The information about new varieties developed, technological interventions, and government funding has benefitted the farmers and researchers alike to increase yield. Research papers have helped readers know about Indian agriculture. Lot of these papers are being traced to know technological interventions and government policies.

This is a huge country with variable agriculture policies at the state level. It is important to keep federal policies in alignment with the foresight on agricultural methods in the next 11-15 years. There is need to bring awareness to farmers. Besides that I feel the IP policy and profit sharing are important. It has not been practised in India so far. Therefore, it is important to keep the guidelines clear while implementing open access policies.