

Mute to Biotech Agenda!

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With elections round the corner, all the political parties have geared up for campaigns and electioneering to woo their voters. However, apart from the popular and ideological issues, the focus on science is limited and health or life sciences is even far too negligible. The reason most apparently is that it may not fetch enough votes on ground. Blame it on the lack of awareness on such issues or the absence of a strong voice, the other issues have overshadowed the importance.

We tried to contact political parties for their comments and learnt the hard way that science is not as important as other issues. Busy with drafting their respective manifestos, the party bigwigs chose not to answer our calls, mails and even tweets. However, finally we managed to speak to lower rung leaders in few key parties. Closer look at the political parties manifesto in 2009 and we come to know that the health, energy and agriculture are very important to them but not the means. There is a contradiction in how the policies they adopt will then be able to fulfil the promises they made. Till now no party has released its party manifesto 2014 officially as their respective election committees are working on the final drafts. A Delhi based political analyst told BioSpectrum that though the times have changed for good but the ways of electioneering continue to be the same. The issues such as this will take much longer time. A closer look at the party manifestos also confirms that as well.

Dr P M Murali, president Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE) too agrees with the analysis. He says, "I think people understand health. There is always something in their manifesto. But lot do not understand research that goes into this sector. So I would say that this is more ignorance than indifference."

"If IT (information technology) is India today then BT (biotechnology) is bharat tomorrow," was the famous quote from the former prime minister and Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) leader, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In its 2009 manifesto, the party talks about leveraging technologies

such as information technology, biotechnology. Quoting the same, "Indian advancements in astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, physics and biological sciences have been documented and recognised all over the world. Contributions in the field of medicine and surgery are also well known. Ayurveda and Yoga are the best gifts from India to the world in creating a healthy civilisation. There will be special emphasis on developing renewal energy sources, especially solar energy, wind energy and run-on-the-river technology, and bio-fuel." A BJP spokesperson mentioned that the party feels that no genetically modified seed must be allowed for cultivation without full scientific data on long-term effects on soil, production and biological impact on consumers.

The Congress party representative handed over its 2009 manifesto that talks more on the health schemes such as the National Rural Health Mission to improve the quality and accessibility of primary health care. There is requirement for increased funding in healthcare and agriculture. Apart from that the preservation of bio-resources to ensure their sustainable use and promotion of agricultural technologies. Many politicians from the party who have supported the BRAI bill include former science and technology minister, Mr Prithvi Raj Chavan. Also, Mr Manish Tewari, former spokesperson, ruling party, had told BioSpectrum, "Let the scientific matters be decided by the scientists and not get caught in the administrative and political non-decisiveness."

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) representative mentioned that their convener Arvind Kejriwal in past has made said his party was opposed to genetically modified crops and his colleague Prashant Bhushan had filed a PIL in the Supreme Court against it. "The aam aadmi is unaware of GM crops and the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI). People don't understand it. Regulation spells corruption and our party is striving to change the political system that breeds corruption." The party might take the help of Dr Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, chairperson, Biocon, to draft its policy for the sector.

The left parties recognize the biotechnology as a potential but want it to be monopoly free. Besides their opposition to GM seems to be more ideologically driven against US MNCs. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) in its agenda talks about raising public expenditure on health to 5% of GDP. It talks about enhancing public funding of indigenous research in science and technology to promote self-reliance; decentralization in funding for R&D; fundamental research in the sciences to be accorded priority. However, the CPI's National Council member Dinesh Vasnik has made it clear that they would fight on these issues inside and outside Parliament. He warned against foreign aids and grants for agriculture research, seminars and such programmes that were meant to promote the agenda of multi-national companies. CPI(M) leader Sitaram Yechury too has shown his opposition on lot many forums. "We do not need a bio-regulatory bill. We need a bio-safety law," he had remarked at a protest rally held against the bill.

When asked about it, Dr RK Pachauri, director general, TERI agrees that there is a requirement of sensitizing the politicians and parliamentarians on the subject. He cites the example of few European nations where the visits are organized to research labs for understanding the scientific temperament.

A very prominent retired administrator suggested that the policy must be based on "ideology of the ruling political party" modulated by science. In a hard hitting question, he asks, "Is there a political ideology that India should have a public health department like in all middle and high income countries and that any preventable disease occurring and even killing individuals is due to governmental negligence?"

A serious introspection is required on the part of policymakers on few issues. While socialist and capitalist countries profess that people's health is government responsibility, does any party in India believe in such a policy? Though we have a constitutional mandate that health

is human right but we do not practice prevention. The time is ripe for the stakeholders in the sector to make the political parties aware about the sector and its long term implications on nation's overall development, which of course no party can afford to ignore.