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Bt Brinjal is a symbol of death

By P. V. Sathesh
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The scientists behind technological innovations like Bt Brinjal fail to understand the sensitive relationship between humans and nature. It is time they learn the right lessons from the women working on the farms.



Women farmers taking part in a protest dharna against introduction of Bt Brinjal (photo courtesy: The Hindu)

This article is based on the statement made by P. V. Sathesh, Director of Deccan Development Society, in the Bt Brinjal Consultation organised in Bangalore by ICRA (Institute for Cultural Research and Action, Bangalore) and SAGE (South Against Genetic Engineering) on 20th January 2010.

As the Minister for Environment and Forests goes around the country eliciting opinions on India's first Genetically Engineered food crop, I seek to make my statement. But my friends who are organizing a Consultation in Bangalore want me to make it a visionary Statement. I am petrified at the thought.

How does one make a "visionary statement"? Either one is too vain or too

foolish to think that one is a visionary and can make a statement to match. In any case as far as I am concerned, more than 40 years ago, when I was in college, my vision got impaired. Doctors told me that I had seen solar eclipse with naked eyes and therefore my cornea had been burnt and my vision had become blurred. That was the first time that I had to get my vision corrected. Subsequently life had told me many times that there was an urgent need to correct my vision, be it in the case of my understanding of literature or media or art or just people around me.

When I worked as a Television Producer for Doordarshan in '70s I used to travel extensively in the districts of Gulbarga, Raichur and Bijapur in Karnataka: districts which the development experts described as very backward. I began thinking them as truly backward and started my relationship with people there with a patronising attitude. *Here I am a practitioner of a state of the art media and you backward people, get ready to learn from me.* But it did not take many months for my vision to get corrected. As I kept on listening to people in some of the most unreachable villages, sitting on their *charpoy*s, on their *chaupals*, inside their kitchens, in their farms and fields, slowly my vision of development got completely altered. I started finding how short-visioned we were in the Development Media. A huge correction resulted.

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The most serious transformation in my vision came about two decades ago when I started working with about 5000 dalit women in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh. Again the famous "backward" area. The women came from the most excluded section of the society. They were all very small and marginal farmers. Most of them were illiterate. But what they taught me was a very profound understanding of what food and farming should look like. The transformation they brought about in my vision of agriculture completely altered my thinking about these issues.

Therefore today if at all I have to make a visionary statement, it is their vision that I would like to present. Last month, I was in Copenhagen with a group of indigenous communities to present to the global community a Community Charter on Climate Change. At one of the events, there was a discussion on what demands to make from the governments of the world. One of the women from Madhya Pradesh who was a part of the delegation suddenly said: "Tell them that we have no demands to make. But if they want life back on this earth, let them demand it from us. Because only we know how to live with life and nature, and how to nurture it".

In essence she had summed up for me the lessons I had learnt over the past two decades. The lesson that I have learnt is this: "If we want agriculture to survive on this planet of ours, we must see it as a human relationship between us and the earth. Soil, seeds, plants, harvest and food -

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everything has life in it. Recognise and respect it." If this philosophy of the women is understood properly and practiced, issues like Bt Brinjal become irrelevant.

and food - everything has life in it.

The women I work with laugh at the concept of very high yields. For them hybrid seeds are not the ones that bring prosperity. Actually those are seeds that give us "aagam pantalu", the crazy crops. This concept comes from a belief that the principles of nature must define how much crop we need to get from the earth. If you tried to get unbridled crop yield, you are not coaxing life out of the earth but are sucking the blood out of her. And that blood might help you prosper for a while. But eventually she will die and you are left with nothing. You will be an orphan. The great modern science tells us that we should never try to marry off a small girl. She should not bear a child before she has passed out of her teens. And billions of dollars are spent in controlling the birth rate of our populations because the earth must not have too many people. Then how come the same science advocates the shortest duration for crops without allowing them to have a natural cycle of conception, birth and growth? Why is there no family planning for Mother Earth? Why must she yield uncontrollably?

If we are able to see through this vision of the dalit women of Medak, we can immediately see how the science of genetic engineering that pursues the goal of uncontrolled yields from earth escaping all principles of nature, is not a science of life and how Bt Brinjal becomes a symbol of death.

Therefore the question in front of us is whether to pursue life for earth or of death for nature. The choice I guess is fairly simple.

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