

SOCIETY MUST TAKE A VIEW ON GM MUSTARD: SCIENTIST

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Major Crops, Cropping Patterns and various Agricultural Revolutions

NEW DELHI, 14/05/2013: Dr K. Vijay Raghavan, Secretary, Department of BioTechnology, Govt. of India, in New Delhi on May 14, 2013. Photo: Shiv Kumar Pushpakar.

“The commercial release of genetically modified mustard wasn’t merely a scientific issue but a ‘socio-political one’ that required the understanding of a wide section of society,” K. VijayRaghavan, 64, Principal Scientific Adviser (PSA) said in an interview.

He was formerly Secretary, Department of Biotechnology, that had funded the development of the seed. While the transgenic plant has been cleared for commercial cultivation by the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee — a scientific body — it’s yet to be cleared by Dr. Harsh Vardhan, the Union Environment and Science Minister.

Scientific view

“There’s the scientific view [that it’s safe and useful] and another, in my view, a very small number but more vocal with a contrary view. Scientists argue that you are giving equal time to a rational view and an irrational view and so a hard decision must be taken. In the case of GM, it’s important that society take a view. Science can bring evidence but the policy decision is a more complex process.”

However India’s science academies needed to “speak more” and play a greater role especially in its advice to government on matters of science.

“Indian science needs to get out from being intellectually not vibrant and exploring a vast space, into one which does. And India’s science academies need to play a special role,” said Mr. VijayRaghavan, a biologist and member of India’s prominent academies.

While the Economic Survey in February said that India didn’t spend enough on science relative to its GDP, Mr. VijayRaghavan said resources would increase but the fact that there weren’t significant budgetary cuts to science showed that the “Prime Minister was seeing value in science” and directly intervening in matters of science.

“Our process of delivery of funds does need improvement,” he emphasised.

Last month, 150 scientists signed a petition demanding that Indian science establishments take more stringent measures to punish scientists and senior researchers proved guilty of sexual harassment.

Gender parity

Government intervention on its own wasn’t enough to address problems of sexual harassment and gender parity in India’s research institutions. Rather, scientists should be talking about addressing them in their institutions and emulate organisations that have better policies and administrative practices in place, he added.

Mr. VijayRaghavan, who’s the first PSA not connected to India’s atomic energy or space

programmes, said improved battery technology and applying them for increased mobility and power would be “transformative” to the Indian economy and to this end solar and nuclear energy were critical to India’s fuel mix, he argued.

Among his priorities, he said, would be to closely work with the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog as well as the other scientific ministries.

“One must keep in mind the mandate and roles each Ministry has. There needs to be synergy between different groups. This is primarily about defining what each one’s goals are and about how to achieve them.”

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