

M.S. SWAMINATHAN, THE CONSERVATIONIST AND ADVOCATE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

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File photo of eminent agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan. | Photo Credit: ANI/Congress Twitter

Much has been said and written about the role of [M.S. Swaminathan \(1925-2023\)](#) in accelerating agricultural growth through applications of science and technology. But, his contributions in the fields of conservation and environmental protection are no less significant.

He worked extensively on four aspects of conservation: mangrove ecosystem, biodiversity conservation, genetic conservation and Keystone Dialogues (which pertained to plant genetic resources and biological diversity).

Even though mangrove ecosystems possess the capacity to survive in the most challenging environment of saline brackish waters, under low oxygen tension and high temperatures, apart from providing benefits to coastal populations, mainly protection against natural events such as storms and rising sea levels, they constantly face the threat of destruction on account of human depredations including the expansion of coastal aquaculture. It was for this and many other reasons that Swaminathan focussed on the need for taking urgent measures to prevent any further destruction of mangrove forests and ensuring the restoration of partially degraded ones. He was particular on maintaining the genetic diversity of the ecosystem of the Indo-Malaysian region, regarded as the centre of diversity for mangrove species, according to M.S.

Swaminathan: Scientist | Humanist | Conservationist; a revised and updated biography, which was authored by R.D. Iyer, Anil Kumar and Rohini Iyer, and published by M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in November 2021. (The original biography - "*Scientist and Humanist - M.S. Swaminathan*" - was written by R.D. Iyer and published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in May 2002).

Being conscious of debates between proponents of development and those of conservation, Swaminathan wanted every country to "achieve harmony between human and animal populations, and the natural resource endowments." He was acutely aware that unless the livelihood security of people was strengthened, conservation of unique natural endowments could become a lost cause in poor and overpopulated countries, his biography stated.

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Given the concern among developing countries that experiments in biotechnology not permitted in developed countries could take place on their territories, .Swaminathan “rightly argued for the need for an international Protocol on Biosafety under the Convention on Biological Diversity,” pointed out his biographers. In respect of animal genetic resources, his advice for countering the potential negative impact of crossbreeding was to go for conservation of native breeds. He recommended that breeds, having little to offer to a production system but which may have hidden or identifiable production strengths such as resistance to diseases, be retained in herds of optimal size or through cryogenic storage of semen or ova. For promoting again the theme of conservation agriculture, he had formulated an educational programme, “Every Child a Scientist,” to sensitise children of the country’s biological heritage and conservation methods.

After he was elected president of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 1984, he, in his “Personal Manifesto,” emphasised that the IUCN must change from a Euro-centric to an Earth-centric organisation.” As much attention should be paid to issues concerning the poor and hungry as to saving pandas and penguins. On food crisis in Africa, he diagnosed that the continent’s plight had less to do with drought than with the fact that “there is a need for widespread reforestation.”

Swaminathan, as a humanist, developed a three-pronged hunger elimination strategy. He “repeatedly emphasised that our common future depends upon our common present, and that bridging the nutrition divide is fundamental to bridging all other divides,” added his first biography published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan 21 years ago.

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