



A.P. COALITION IN DEFENCE OF DIVERSITY

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Dear Mr Director General

Greetings from the global network of solidarity groups on the occasion of the International GM Opposition Month where millions of farmers, indigenous people, women and environmental activists have taken to streets in the continents of Asia, Africa, Australia , Europe and the Americas have taken to streets to express their anguish and horror at the way the governmental and CGIAR agricultural research institutions have been caving in before the onslaught of the biotech industry.

Exactly two years ago, Mr Director General, about five hundred women from Medak District had marched in front of ICRISAT and submitted a memorandum to you. The memorandum said:

We the farmers of Medak District in Andhra Pradesh have seen ICRISAT from its inception and have watched it grow with pride.

We were delighted that the CGIAR had chosen our district to set up a Centre to research on the crops that we have been growing in this region since millennia.

We were excited that ICRISAT will bring experts from all over the world to look at the knowledge accumulated in our part of the world for thousands of years on these crops, our soils and our farming systems. We thought these experts will build a new agriculture on the foundations of our knowledge.

This did happen for some years. We fondly remember those scientists who came to us and did long participatory research on pigeonpea, on chickpea and tried to build watersheds on the foundation of our knowledge.

But now it seems all this is the story from a very distant past. Over the last few years we, farmers from these resource poor regions seem to be completely out of your agenda. You seem to be blinded by big business, biotechnology and the agenda they have brought in. We clearly understand that this will totally eliminate small farmers like us from your work. We understand by being in this new league you have firmly shut the ICRISAT doors on we women who have been the backbone of millet farming by saving seeds, by keeping alive biodiversity on our farms.

Two years after this historic letter, Mr Director General, we are appalled to see that the shut door has now been firmly locked out for the small farmers, women and dalits. Visiting your website, one is filled with horror looking at the list of project themes in your GT – Biotechnology. It looks like a Schindlers List in reverse, almost a hangman's list intent to commit GENocide of what you so touchingly call "orphan crops". We wish they had remained just orphan and not lose their lives under your GEillotine. All your mandate crops have been subjected to death by genetic engineering and thereby you have announced your loud and clear goodbye to the original mandate of ICRISAT which bound you to work with farmers in their fields by getting out of the rarified environment of artificial laboratories.

Way back in the early '90s, Deccan Development Society was the proud partner of ICRISAT you did a seminal Participatory Research with women farmers, probably the one and only farmer centred, farmer led, women oriented research that ICRISAT did with a clear gender perspective. This and the film documenting the Participatory Research process gave a fantastic perspective to ICRISAT about the way women small farmers think about Agricultural Research.

But since then we have seen you becoming so stuck with technofixes, boxed in your petridishes and making Faustian deal after Faustian deal with the biotech industry.

We observe with abject horror that one of your major donors is Syngenta Foundation which was notorious for its biopiracy attempt at the IGKV, Raipur when it tried to steal a generational collection of rice varieties of the famed researcher Dr Richaria. Syngenta is also the butt of international ridicule for its indefensible challenge of the Indian Patents Law. As the claimer of patent rights over very large rice genome sequences in the world, Syngenta is tightening its vice like grip on rice systems around Asia. Now by partnering ICRISAT on crops such as Pearl millet, behind a ridiculous façade called *Harnessing Modern Science in Africa to Sustain Sorghum and Pearl Millet Production for Resource-poor Farmers* it is not exactly engaged in a humanitarian act. Syngenta's intentions are very clear: Control and capture African farming for several decades to come.

Syngenta and its ilk, the so called Life [sapping] Industry has always talked in purely Orwellian speak and has meant profit when it spoke of the poor. This is but natural for corporations which are meant to squeeze the last penny out of the poor to fill their coffers. But what is extremely painful is that a public trust such as ICRISAT has become an accomplice in this anti poor, anti farmer development. And in the process, has lost not only the trust the populations of the South had

placed in the CGIAR institutions and have forfeited the very *raison detre* for its existence.

It is this public trust which prompted the farming communities of Asia and Africa to keep their *vast genetic resources available in the ICRISAT genebank (currently 114,000 land races and varieties from more than 100 countries)*. **Now farmers have begun to demand that these genetic resources not be patented by ICRISAT's corporate partners and that farmers access these landraces and varieties through restitution agreements like the one signed between CIP and Potato Park community in Peru.**

When we in the APCID speak of genetic engineering and its implications of rural poor, we are not speaking in a vacuum but out of day to day experience in researching along with farmers in the Bt Cotton growing areas of Andhra Pradesh for over five years. This has given us the closest view of the havoc that Bt cotton has caused in the lives of small farmers. All our annual studies viz., **Did Bt Cotton Save Cotton Farmers in Warangal** [2003], **Did Bt cotton Fail AP Again in 2003- 2004?** [2004], **Bt Cotton in Andhra Pradesh – a three year assessment** [2005] and **False Hopes and Festering Failures** [2006] have repeatedly proved how all the promises of Bt cotton have meant nothing for small farmers. Coupled with these economic statistics, we have also documented the effects of Bt cotton on the soil, livestock and human health. This has sent alarm bells ringing in sensitive quarters across the globe.

Under invitations from many organizations we along with the farmer-filmmakers of the Community Media Trust of the DDS have traveled extensively in Southern and West Africa, South East Asia as well other parts of India where Bt cotton has made its debut and caused untold misery to farmers. These experiences have been captured in a film called **A Disaster in Search of Success: Bt Cotton in Global South** produced by the women farmer filmmakers whose earlier film **Bt Cotton in AP : A Three Year Fraud** won them a national award this year.

We are quoting all these, in order to reiterate the futile and dangerous GE path selected by ICRISAT in particular and CGIAR in general in pursuit of a mythical goal. Whether it is pest and disease control or higher yield, nowhere in the world has genetic engineering proved a silver bullet. In fact in the USA, which has the largest GE cultivation in the world, over the last decade, the pesticide use has not registered a single per cent reduction according to data published by the USDA itself. In the neighbouring Canada, which is second only to the USA in its cultivation of GE crop, farmers' incomes have nosedived even as GE adoption has soared. All these prove the negative credentials for GE.

Therefore Mr Director General, if ICRISAT decides to sell its soul to the biotech industry, it is probably your business, though as global citizens we have the right to ask you under what mandate did you do so. But at least please don't do it in the name of the **Resource Poor farmers**. They did not ask you to do it nor did you ask them whether you should do it.

In the South East Asia, the just concluded Week of Rice Action told IRRI : **IRRI out of Asia**. But IRRI has a long tradition of working against the interest of small farmers and their rice heritage. Before such slogans crop up against ICRISAT, can we hope you will wake up and unshackle yourself from the corporate fetters you have bound yourself in ?

In your self description of ICRISAT you say your vision is: ***'Science with a Human Face', tailoring research to address and resolve real human needs: to reduce poverty, hunger, and environmental degradation –across the semi-arid tropics of the world.'***

Is it still your vision? Do you still intend to resolve real human needs [and not as perceived by ICRISAT] to reduce poverty and hunger and environmental degradation?

With your having decided to partner biotech industry, will you sound believable. Can farmers still trust you? If you seriously want to regain this trust, we demand the following:

- 1. Move out of GE and move back to basics. Work with farmers and start building on the foundations of their science once again.***
- 2. Get out of the unholy alliance with the biotech industry which has very little to do with Life and everything to do with Death. Death of the environment, death of the poor and death of food sovereignty and dignity.***
- 3. Stop renting out your facilities which was donated to you by the international community to the biotech industry. This is a total breach of trust.***
- 4. Bring back biodiversity and NPM on to your agenda. We hope these terms, biodiversity and NPM ring a bell in you. Can you retrace this path from where you strayed away and redeem yourself as a public research institution?***
- 5. Start repatriating the genetic wealth you have amassed from the farmers of Asia and Africa. Farmers have the right over it but are unable to access it from you whereas the biotech industry which is accessing it from you do it as biopirates***

If you are able to move in this path ICRISAT, you still have the chance to regain the glory of your earlier days and earn back the trust of the international community of farmers. If you fail to do so, time is not far off when slogans such as **ICRISAT OUT OF ASIA AND AFRICA** will start resounding in the air.

Hope this will not happen.

With warm regards

[p v satheesh]

Convenor

On behalf of AP COALITION IN DEFENCE OF DIVERSITY

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