

Human Diversity, Its Causes And Social Significance: The Proceedings Of A Series Of Seminars

Agro-biodiversity: The future of India's agriculture

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Introduction

The 1990s have been marked by an increasingly acrimonious debate over modern trends in agriculture: the controversy over the so-called Terminator technology, the scandal of the turmeric and Basmati patents claimed by American companies, the imposition of a global trading and patent regime under the World Trade Organisation, and others. Shorn of its acrimony, this debate is welcome, for it is bringing to the fore what must surely be humanity's chief concern: the security of our food supplies. Even as technology produces visions (often real, often not) of bumper harvests, and even as countries like India claim self-sufficiency in foodgrains production, over half the world's population (including tens of millions in India) go to bed hungry every day. Paradoxically, even as income levels rise in many sections of society, nutritional levels, and stability of access to food, are often declining.

There are many reasons for these paradoxes. What I would like to demonstrate in this article is that one of these reasons, the loss of biological diversity and related traditions, needs urgent attention. We can no longer afford to ignore this as a concern of the rich...for indeed this loss hits the poor the hardest, and makes farmers, and countries like India, more vulnerable to the vagaries of the global economic system.

India is one of the world's largest and oldest agricultural societies, one which has remained predominantly rural despite decades of modernisation. Even today, every aspect of the country's economy and polity, and the day-to-day lives of the majority of its 900-million populations, are governed by what happens in the agricultural sector. The stability and sustainability of its agriculture is therefore of paramount importance.

What role does agricultural biodiversity --- the diversity of agro- ecosystems, crops and livestock, and of related husbandry practices/knowledge --- have to play in this? How has the modernisation process affected the diversity found in nature and on farmer's fields and pastoralists' pastures, and will this have an impact on the paramount goal of providing food and livelihood security?

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