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Genetic modification neither panacea nor evil: Harsh Vardhan

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NEW DELHI: Genetic modification is not a panacea and certainly not an evil, says Science and Technology Minister Harsh Vardhan who promises to evolve a solution which is best for the people as well as acceptable to farmers.

In an interview ahead of the Indian Science Congress, a mega festival where about 10,000 scientists are expected to participate in Tirupati from January 3-7, Vardhan spoke on a range of issues.

Excerpts of the interview:

Q) Is science and technology a continuing priority for the Prime Minister Narendra Modi led government?

A) Science and Technology is not only a continuing priority for this government but also a pivot for all of our country's development and growth. The PM has always lauded the work done by our scientists. He has regularly urged scientists to address India's and the world's challenges such as energy, water and climate-change related science.

At the same time he has pointed out the importance of research on the most fundamental of questions such as the origin of life and nature of the universe. The Prime Minister has often said that while science is universal, technology must be local and it is this link between Science and Technology, which must be robust and dynamic.

One important point, which the PM has, stressed is, not only for science but for all ministries is that we need to get out of our silos. My scientists are doing this in many ways.

Q) Can you describe 2-3 of the greatest achievements of your ministry?

A) There are a huge number! But here are a few. In order to generate block level operational weather forecasts my Ministry of Earth Sciences has set up a state-of-the-art high resolution global weather prediction model at 12 km resolution.

With this development, we have attained the same capability as the USA in using high-resolution prediction models for generating weather forecasts. An independent assessment by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) concluded that the annual economic benefit in GDP for farmers cultivating 4 principal crops (Wheat, Rice, Sugarcane and Cotton) was Rs 42,000 Crore in 2015.

India is an active participant in the discovery of Gravitational Waves and the India component of the Laser Interferometry Gravitational Observatory (LIGO) has been announced by the PM.

India is a partner in the largest 30-m telescope and will be manufacturing components here. Our Supercomputer mission has taken off and will bring us back to the frontline.

A cattle genomics programme to develop our indigenous breeds to high-yielding ones despite the vagaries of climate and disease has been started. We are very excited about India leading in new science in these areas.

Q) In your personal opinion what have been the worst 2-3 failures of your term as minister of science?

A) In science we are self-critical and demanding of ourselves. So, I would not like to use terms such as 'worst-failures'. What you call failure are the stepping-stones of experience, and allow us to reach higher. Still, we could have done a lot better in some areas.

The three science departments and the Ministry of Earth Sciences have become better at communication with society but we need to go a long way here. We should develop a common web portal for all of science and in all our languages. This is not a trivial task, but we should do it. I expect that we will do this in 2017.

Finally our laboratories and institutes need to have close links with each other, to take on national projects and link better with entrepreneurship and innovation. Here too, there has been much progress, but we need to now change exponentially upwards.

Q) There is a crying need to pass the Biotech Regulatory Authority legislation, what is its status and when can one expect for state-of-the-art biotech regulatory system to be in place.

This is bashing at a straw man. Sadly, the previous UPA government not only dithered over introducing the bill but spoke on it with contradictory terms. This has damaged the quality of discussion on important issues and we have now remedied this with many stakeholder meetings.



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We do already have a state-of-the-art regulatory system and all the non-statutory aspects of the bill that we agree with have been implemented with the science ministry and the Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change.

As technology and science advances we keep advancing our regulation to meet best standards. We will introduce legislation as needed after full discussions.

Q) As science minister do you think India should embrace and adopt in the farmer's fields genetically modified crops, since it is scientists from your ministry who toil to make these a reality?

I am all for applying the best of science and technology for our farmers' welfare and the nation's food security. No Indian can be against this. All our scientists agree and know that GM crops are only one aspect of the solution.

GM is neither a panacea nor certainly not an evil. This government has a holistic view of solutions to specific problems. One problem may have a GM-based solution. Another may be better served by conventional breeding.

Yet another problem may be best addressed by new gene-editing technologies. And organic farming may be best in yet other contexts. Whatever is the best solution for a given challenge we will work with those, which farmers accept and see benefit which are best for our people.

Q) The biggest Kumbh Mela of science the Indian Science Congress opens in Tirupati soon, do you think such a big gathering has relevance or should it be more focused with emphasis given to increasing the quality of science to be debated?

A) The Science Congress is special as it brings together every kind of person interested in science. Given its diversity and size one can always find fault with components but that will not be in the right spirit. It is a very important event, where the Prime Minister addresses all our scientists. Every scientist listens to every word he says. Our ministries act on his speech. And the Science Congress reaches out to all, its debates are varied and valuable. Such festivals are very important.

Q) India has had a rich heritage of science and knowledge since Vedic times, how is the ministry trying to mainstream that ancient knowledge so that modern India can benefit from the past wisdom?

A) My Department of Science and Technology is coordinating an exciting new programme to publish and make widely accessible, a series of books on the history of Science in India. Inspiring saga of our great scientists of the past has been produced to inspire young scientists of today.

Q) In the new year what is the expectations and outlook for the S&T sector are you seeking a higher allocation from the Finance Minister in the upcoming budget?

A) S&T will do well in the new budget, as you will see!

Q) Is there anything else you may want to say to up the morale of the Indian scientists and budding talent?

A) In his meeting with scientists the PM reminisced about how ISRO started with great ambition and meagre resources. He promised, and I echo: Take on ambitious challenges and we will ensure that you have efficient processes and the resources you need.

I have visited every laboratory under my Ministry and gone to every corner of the country and motivated my scientists. There is a new determination to do greater science, connect with people and transform our country. Let us work to make science as the agent of creating a new India.

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