

Speech for the Hon'ble Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare for the opening ceremony of Eighth Session of the Governing Body of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) to be held on 11th November, 2019 at Rome, Italy

Dear Brothers and Sisters representing all the nations, Namaskar!

I am happy to be amongst you representing 18% of the humanity, my young and aspirational 1.37 billion countrymen. I also represent those countries where farming is the backbone of the socio-economy; where crop biodiversity is part and parcel of life and whose indigenous people and peasants have shaped the crop genetic resources that form the basis of breeding anywhere in the world.

Population is increasing, arable land decreasing, water availability diminishing, and biotic and abiotic stresses dragging down the production accentuated by climate change. Despite these challenges, India has to ensure food and nutritional security for the citizens.

Therefore, it is very clear that “no negotiations are possible at the cost of food security”. All international forums must not forget that Food is the most fundamental right. Developing countries will be driven by the necessity to ensure “rights of farmers producing food” are never compromised. More so when this very community is also responsible for the very existence of the plant genetic resources that we have today.

We understand that plant genetic resources are the source of solutions to breeding challenges. Plant genetic resources are also vulnerable particularly due to habitat destruction. Their conservation is “the shared responsibility of the humanity”. We must use all the modern technologies as well as traditional knowledge to conserve and use them sustainably.

We are living in the era of information. Technological advancements have ensured that information is the power. This is true with plant breeding as well. I, therefore, urge that we acknowledge the seriousness of the influence of “genetic sequence information” on the relevance of the Treaty as a whole and deliberate on “how to” rather than “why” of their inclusion in the negotiations.

India has been a strong advocate of sharing the wealth of plant genetic resources. A cursory look at the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research gene banks and other national gene banks shows that about 10% of the germplasm is of Indian origin. We reiterate that Plant genetic resources must be made available for research and sustainable use. However, it is very vital that every dollar of commerce arising out of the Plant genetic resources accessed from the system must be accounted for and must be shared equitably for the purpose of conservation of Plant genetic resources.

An operational, pragmatic, future-ready and flexible “benefit sharing framework” can certainly catalyze the system.

We all should solemnly recognize the contribution of farmers, indigenous communities, tribal population and particularly women-folk in conserving and selecting the Plant genetic resources over the time. Therefore, it is our bounden duty to keep these individuals and community out of any legal and financial obligations of the Treaty particularly the revisions being contemplated.

India stands firm in her belief and actions on the commitments to multilateral agreement. However, unless we eliminate the divide between North and South, and focus on the aspirations of the Treaty founders and farming communities, we will fail to make any headway.

India being party to the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) Agreement, made provision for giving effect to Article 27.3.b(II), passed the “Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers’ Rights (PPV&FR) Act” in 2001 to establish a Statutory Authority for effective protection of plant varieties as well as plant breeders’ and farmers’ rights harmonizing with the UPOV procedure of Novelty, Distinctness, Uniformity and Stability.

Under the PPV&FR Act, 2001 farmers have been recognized as breeders and they are entitled to be awarded, rewarded and recognized for their efforts in conservation, preservation and improvement of plant genetic resources. Farmers are also considered as donor of genes for varieties registerable under this Act.

Article 9 of ITPGFRA deals with farmers' rights and India is fully compliant with it and relevant provisions are enshrined in PPV&FR Act, 2001. Till now, 138 farmers/farming communities have been awarded with Plant Genome Saviour Awards and this is in compliant with Article 9(2)(b) of ITPGFRA. Further farmers varieties which are traditional varieties are also protected under the PPV&FR Act, 2001. India has received about 16620 applications for Plant Variety Protection out of which 10920 (66%) have been received from farmers alone. Also, the PPV&FR Authority has registered about 3631 out of which 1597 (44%) belong to the farmers. Under Section 39(1)(iv) of PPV&FR Act, 2001 a farmers is entitled to save, use, sow, resow, exchange, share or sell his farm produce including seed of a variety protected under the PPV&FR Act, 2001 except brand name.

I am happy to know that at its Seventh Session during 2017, the Governing Body of the International Treaty, decided to establish the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Farmers' Rights to produce an inventory of national measures and possible options in implementation of farmers rights for representative from PPV&FR Authority was elected as one of the two co-chairs. I am sure inventory developed by this Expert Group shall make it possible for many contracting parties to understand the best practices in implementation of Farmers' rights and suitably take measures in their legislation and national policies.

I am happy to propose to host the Ninth Governing Body meeting of the Treaty during 2021 in Delhi, India.

Please come to India and we will welcome you
