RESTORING DIVERSE SEEDS IN THE HANDS OF FARMERS -
ASHA's demands with regard to Seed

Seed is the soul of Agriculture. Locally adapted diversity-based cropping patterns and timely availability of good quality seed in required quantities are essential for sustaining farming. In the Indian context, seed has been an openly shared 'community resource' carefully bred, conserved and evolved over thousands of years. However, seed today has been converted into a package. Seed choices will determine the technological choices that farmers will adopt in growing the seed.

Today, technological advances, market manipulations and industry-supportive policies and legal systems have made it into a 'commercial proprietary resource', separating farmers and their crops from the seeds they require for planting. Technologies, legal frameworks, market manipulations and concepts like 'seed replacement rate' are all contributing factors to increasing commodification/commercialisation of seed, its corporatisation/monopolisation and its alienation from farmers. The policy regime favours such a shift with regard to Seed, and there is no regulatory system/statutory framework which at this point of time makes farmers and their rights as the centre of the effort. In this approach the government adopts, public sector agencies and their role is rapidly diminishing too. Some of the anti-farmer forces can be summed up as: IPRs, Corporatisation/ Commercialisation of Seed, Anti-farmer technologies, Monopolisation of markets, Lack of regulation in favor of farmers, Erosion of seed diversity; Dwindling public sector role.

- Increasing monopolies: Industry data from 2009 shows that the top 16 (out of 250-odd) companies control 23% of 10,000-crore seed market; within this, Monsanto and associates have 40% share. In Cotton seed alone (worth around 4000 crores), 93% control is with Monsanto in India!

- Erosion of diversity: Several crops and varieties within crops have disappeared from farms. Advent of high-yielding seeds and hybrids has increased this. Disappearance of on-farm diversity has implications on farmers' resource management, risks & future research.

- Undermining farmers' knowledge & skills: Today's technological and policy approaches to Seed are undermining the breeding and seed- keeping skills of farmers. Further, studies show that de-skilling of farmers is also affecting their rational choices related to Seed, very often making seed choices 'a fad'.

- Anti-farmer seed technologies: Seed technologies are actually becoming anti-farmer in many ways: the fact that newer technologies are toxic; that control lies elsewhere; that seed breeding is not done in farmers' growing conditions or organic conditions and so on, is making the scenario anti-farmer.

- Privatising resource & knowledge: laws & policies around seed favor privatisation, including creating property with exclusive monopolistic rights over materials and knowledge. This is in turn supportive of the profiteering objectives of large corporations and not the surival of millions of smallholders.

- Quality, Affordability & Accountability regimes are missing in regulation, even as more and more farmers are being pushed towards dependency on commercial seed traders. There is no regulation of advertising and other marketing tactics around seed.

- Seed Sovereignty is greatly threatened at all levels through all the above.

WHAT ARE WE SEEKING?

ASHA seeks farmer-friendly, farmer-centric statutory regimes, institutional systems as well as programmatic interventions *to ensure that farmers have control over and access to diverse, locally suitable, affordable, high-quality seed and knowledge associated with it, available in a timely manner. If it is a commercial situation, affordability of seed and accountability of seed traders also become important.*

For this, the government should do the following-

1. When it comes to ownership rights over seed resources, ASHA believes that no such rights should accrue to anyone on any life form – it is also antithetical to the way agriculture evolved and developed in this country. However, given that certain statutory regimes have already been put into place (which work within an IPR regime unfortunately), ASHA believes that all forms of prior art including NBPGR registry should be used pro-actively by concerned government agencies and authorities to prevent others from seeking IPRs over farmers' varieties. Further, an open source seed system should be set up, that prevents any exclusive rights for anyone using any public sector material.
2. Government should encourage, and invest in farmer-level seed production of locally suitable, high yielding and other seed (traditional or public sector bred); if Hybrids are to be encouraged, these should be bred in organic (farmers') conditions, with parental lines in the hands of communities, with skills imparted, after risk assessment in a holistic fashion.
3. Agri-research & extension systems should prioritise farmer-led participatory varietal selection and breeding programmes.
4. Community level seed banks have to be set up and run, through appropriate village level institutions and adequate financial/other support.
5. Private (commercial seed) sector should work in a statutory regime that allows the government to regulate not just the quality but price at which seed is sold, in addition to laying down a strict accountability regime that includes penalties, compensation and remediation where required. Regulatory regimes should also pro-actively watch out for seed monopolies/ oligopolies building up and prevent the same. Compensation mechanisms should be simple and time-bound and commensurate with claims and expectations based on claims apart from covering costs incurred.
6. Farming communities all over India should have first priority and access to all the germplasm collections all over the country.
7. All MoUs/PPPs both in research & extension with private seed corporations should be cancelled immediately by various state governments and the Union Government. Resources should be invested on public sector agencies to strengthen them to support farmers.
8. For all those seed technologies which bring in potential environmental and health hazards, such seed should not be allowed even for open air trials.