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Give prestige to labour: Swaminathan

Staff Reporter

Recalling Mahatma Gandhi's call for ending the "divorce" between intellect and labour, M.S. Swaminathan, chairperson of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), said on Sunday that it was about time we gave "prestige to labour."

Dr. Swaminathan was speaking at the 7th Convention of the Grameen Gyan Abhiyan (Rural Knowledge Movement) on Information Communication Technology and Food, Health and Livelihood Security in an Era of Climate Change. The two-day event at the University of Mumbai concluded on Sunday.

Dr. Swaminathan said the Genome Saviour Awards recognising village-level contributions to genetic resource conservation was a step in that direction. A similar approach was needed in the field of water conservation. "We must give prestige to labour, to the grassroots workers," he said.

Dr. P. Krishnaiah, chief executive, National Fisheries Development Board, Hyderabad, pointed out that agriculture, dairy and fishing were not treated as "respectable activities." People in these occupations were seen as having entered them due to lack of alternatives, he said.

With the target date of 2015 for the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) ahead of us, there was a need to "speed things up," so that we could "leapfrog to achieve at least the fundamental targets" such as reducing infant mortality rate, Dr. Swaminathan said.

"Resources are not a problem. There are many schemes, but we have to deliver as one. Technology may be leapfrogging, but we must not allow rural India to be where it is. It is in nobody's interest."

Dr. Swaminathan said information and communication technology (ICT) had certain social advantages, an important one being the narrowing of the gender divide through bridging the digital divide. "Women have taken to technology like fish to water. Many gyan chaupals are headed by women," he said.

In the context of the discussions on business models for the ICT, Dr. Swaminathan said: "We should still insist on government providing infrastructure." Businesses could respond through corporate social responsibility. Business would prosper if the consumption capacity, in other words the purchasing capacity, of rural India increased.

Bharatiya Janata Party national president Nitin Gadkari, however, advocated a minimum role for the government. He had little faith in government systems, despite the fact that his party ruled several States. Instead, "we must identify good NGOs and individuals who genuinely want to contribute to society."

Mr. Gadkari cited examples from Bihar where the simple bicycle had transformed the lives of school girls. He listed power failure as a key problem facing ICT in rural areas. Efforts were needed to tap solar energy so that information systems could run smoothly. Dr. Basheerhamad Shadrach, executive director, telecentre.org Foundation, said the government had to "think beyond its bureaucracies and systems" and come up with out-of-the-box approaches to implementation.

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