



**M.S. Swaminathan in Conversation.**  
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This small book is remarkable for three reasons:

- (i) It touches the major scientific milestones of Indian agriculture in the last 6–7 decades.
- (ii) It brings out the intrinsic and often relates inter-relationships and complications in the Government departments, research institutions (national and international) and farmers, politicians and scientists.
- (iii) It describes the life and struggle of M. S. Swaminathan being in a holistic manner.

There are many books ‘by’ and ‘on’ Swaminathan and they are well-read nationally and internationally. When he turned 80, there was a special issue *Tribute to Swaminathan* with a foreword from the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh and messages from a wide range of people – from Norman Borloug and Jefry Sachhs to Azim Premji and Kutchi farmers. Then, of course, there was a special issue by *Agriculture Today* on his 85th birthday.

His own publication emphasizing scientific developments and science policies have been many and extremely well-written. Therefore, one would first wonder about the place of this small book at this juncture with some apprehension before opening the book. But soon, one is delighted to see a new and interesting style. It opens up with a personal note of a doting daughter for the father and mother (many aspects unknown to even his close associates or fellow scientists) and soon the ‘Putting people first’ aspect takes over. This is important for all agricultural scientists. The book describes

Swaminathan’s early years and deep-rooted values, the effect of Mahatma Gandhi, the principles of secularism and the fight against injustice. His decision of not joining the IPS and taking up agriculture research after being told that ‘there is no future in agriculture’ is also mentioned. The narration continues about his Master’s at the famous agricultural university at Wageningen, The Netherlands, followed by a Ph D at Cambridge in ‘Commonwealth potato collection’.

The subsequent ordeal of a young scientist returning to India, the jobless months in his hometown followed by an appointment at Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), New Delhi as a cytogeneticist gives us a good idea about the prevailing situation for young scientists in the early 1950’s when the national institutions were getting organized. Equally interesting is the narration of the family situation and the young scientist couple, including the balancing work by his wife Mina. He was to play a major role in gender issues and the important role of women in agriculture. Other issues specifically emphasized have been IT as transformation world technology, social mobilization and reaching the un-reached. Swaminathan’s emphasis on communication among scientists and the field led to the use of the space programme with Vikram Sarabhai. As Swaminathan recalls, ‘Vikram and I went to many villages. He was excited by what he saw in the fields and wanted to share this information with Indira Gandhi, so we went to her house. “We must support Krishi Darshan on TV, you have to inaugurate the programme” he told her.’ (This is an interesting story and I wish the author would have elaborated more on it, especially when many years later we commissioned the first GAU Satellite Krishi Gosthi programme and Swaminathan came to our Gandhinagar studio and talked simultaneously with farmers of Kutch and scientists of Anand.)

In the next few paragraphs, Swaminathan’s management style comes out clearly. This includes his team-building at IARI, the formative years of agricultural research stations and institutions and, of course, his very satisfactory and fruitful tenure at International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the Philippines.

The special chapter entitled ‘Science in the service of society’ can be subdivided into: (a) the green revolution

experience and (b) the link between knowledge and action and dealing with the tensions of bureaucracy.

For scientists working in the Government system, this frank narration about the struggles in a complicated systems would reveal many things. As Principal Secretary (Agriculture), there must have been tremendous pressure on Swaminathan and the way he managed to come out clean and remarkably well. At one point he recalls, ‘I called all my officers and told them, if the Minister asks you to do something wrong, don’t do it’. Such stand will be of great use to all the scientists working in Government systems at higher levels.

Though the author has allowed Swaminathan to do most of the talking, she concluded the book in her own style under the title ‘The making of a leader’. Based on the story and reminiscences, she lists out the following key components of the leadership:

- (i) Personal commitment to the cause of human dignity and social justice.
- (ii) Authority of the leader emerges from the position of knowledge rather than hierarchy.
- (iii) Ethical behaviour.
- (iv) Recognition of people and their contributions.
- (v) Openness to new ideas, debates and discussions and continuing to learn from life’s everyday experiences.
- (vi) Finally and most importantly, a leader who has a vision, a message for the world.

This book will be useful to students, scientists and policy makers to understand the complexity of research organizations and the underlying forces of developmental process. However, there is no mention in the book about Swaminathan’s vision for the coming years. This would have been a valuable addition. The world of agriculture is at the crossroads, and the vision and wisdom of Swaminathan would have made this book even more valuable.

It has been a delightful experience to read this small and unique book about a great scientist and human being.

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