

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Zigzag to seed



To celebrate International Women's Day we focus on one of our own: the longest serving member of the ISF Secretariat, a woman by the name of Dr Radha Ranganathan.

Radha, Director of Technical Affairs at ISF, saw the association's inception following the merging of two organizations: FIS (Fédération Internationale du Commerce des Semences) and ASSINSEL (Association Internationale des Sélectionneurs pour la Protection des Obtentions Végétales).

In the last 18 years, ISF has grown to become a truly global association. Here, Radha reflects on her ISF experience and the people who influenced her path to science and seed.

Hello, Radha. Tell us how you came to be at ISF. What made you decide to join?

At the seed company where I was employed from 1997 to 2002, one of my tasks was to engage with stakeholders on issues that were of concern to them and the company. I spoke, for instance, of genetic engineering to church groups who thought it was unnatural and unnecessary, about plant breeding and the Green Revolution and the good they brought to countries in the South, to skeptics about intellectual property, to civil society organizations who were against patents and plant variety protection. It was when I met Bernard Le Buanec who, like me, was in a group of individuals with diverse and often fiercely opposing views and who were collaborating on a book on legal options for access to genetic resources, traditional knowledge and biological innovations.

Bernard was then Secretary General of FIS and ASSINSEL, the forerunners of ISF. Soon I was a member of seed industry delegations at various international meetings such as negotiations on FAO's International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. I learnt a lot from Bernard whose knowledge of the seed industry and all things related to seed was vast. I was fascinated by all that these associations did for their members and wanted to be part of them. In January 2002 I applied for a vacant position in what was soon to become ISF and joined in May 2002.

What are the main milestones of your career in and out of ISF?

I've done different things in ISF that I have enjoyed and learned from. But being part of the small team that interacted intensively with the IPPC on an International Standard on Phytosanitary Measures on the international movement of seeds was special. I like to think that our professionalism and that of the industry on seed health and moving healthy seed across international borders played a significant role in the development and adoption of the standard.

Did you have a mentor or role model who inspired you to go into this field? Which women in the public sphere or from your private life do you admire?



Radha's great aunt, Kanakalakshmi, among the trailblazing women scholars in India during the early 20th century.

In the early 1920s, an epoch in India where women were very sheltered, my great aunt traveled to Britain to get a Bachelor's degree in English. In the 1930s my aunt, whom I greatly admired, completed her Ph.D. in physics and before her 25th birthday. Dr C V Raman, a Nobel prize winner for physics in 1930, was an examiner! I grew up hearing about these pioneering women in the family and that the sky was the limit to what I could achieve. My own career itself has zig-zagged its way to seeds!

The ISHI-Veg and Regulated Pest List were built over years of work and accumulated knowledge, as well as collaboration among experts from all over the world. What makes you the proudest about these initiatives?

You pick a good example of what characterizes ISHI-Veg. The level of collaboration among the 60 odd scientists from 13 countries is remarkable; furthermore, method development is a non-competitive subject and everyone leaves their company hat at the door. I am very proud of what we have achieved with the pest lists. When I first

approached the authorities for their opinion on developing regulated pest lists for vegetable crops, I was all but laughed out of the room!

In the 18 years that you have been working in ISF, what are the most important changes you've seen in the seed industry, both positive and negative?

The number of women who now participate in ISF bodies is a very positive development. Regretfully, consolidation in the industry is perceived negatively by the public.

What are some things you'd wish more people understood about the work that you do / we do as ISF?

Take seed health – I really wish companies got credit for the work they do to produce healthy seed. Together with ISHI-Veg they do a lot to ensure the safe movement of healthy seeds in international trade, not only to protect their reputation, but also to safeguard agriculture, human health and the environment.

In what areas do you think more work should be done?

I used to think the seed industry would be recognized, as a matter of course for what it does, say, developing new varieties and producing healthy seed. We need to sharpen our communication skills regularly to explain and inform the public and regulatory bodies about what we do and why. ■



Radha at a meeting of ISHI-Veg, a collaboration among 60 scientists from 13 countries working on seed health.