

My Journey with a Visionary

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I would like to share four treasured glimpses from my memoir of Professor Swaminathan. These stories highlight the invaluable guidance, profound experiences, and significant milestones I achieved alongside the organisation under his mentorship over nearly three decades.

His Guidance and MSSRF's Community Agrobiodiversity Centre



I was truly fortunate to receive his invaluable guidance on multiple occasions. One memory that stands out vividly is from the inaugural day of the [Community Agrobiodiversity Centre](#) in Wayanad, Kerala. My curious expression in the photograph perfectly reflects the depth and seriousness of our conversation.

Now, as the institution marks a remarkable 25-year journey, I reflect on its profound impact in empowering grassroots communities, fostering biodiversity conservation, and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

Ex-Situ Conservation and M S Swaminathan Botanic Garden



In this cherished moment, I stand alongside Prof. M. S. Swaminathan, explaining the Rare, Endemic, and Threatened (RET) plant species collections housed in a closed *ex-situ* facility at the MSSRF headquarters in Chennai to the Late Dr. Manmohan Singh, who was then India's Finance Minister.

It was Prof. Swaminathan who envisioned the establishment of such *ex-situ* facilities in cities, aiming to educate residents about biodiversity loss and its underlying causes. If not for his decision to have me present this to

Dr. Manmohan Singh, I may have never had the privilege of meeting him or discussing the urgent issue of species endangerment in India.

This initiative was later expanded with the creation of a near-wild, open *ex-situ* facility on 12 acres of land in Wayanad, generously donated by Prof. Swaminathan and his family. Strategically located at the foothills of the Western Ghats—one of the world’s major biodiversity hotspots—this effort has since evolved into a full-fledged Botanic Garden, home to over 1,000 plant species, including many RET and *Red Data Book* species. Today, it is recognised as the [M. S. Swaminathan Botanic Garden](#), acknowledged by Botanic Gardens Conservation International as a community botanic garden.

Translating Prof. Swaminathan’s Wisdom and Gaining Confidence



I am seen here translating Prof. M. S. Swaminathan’s speech to an audience of elected Local Self Government representatives and women self-help group members. Over the years, I had several such opportunities to translate for him during his visits to Kerala, where he actively engaged with local communities and the public.

These experiences not only instilled in me a deep sense of confidence but also honed my ability to effectively communicate the science and practical applications of biodiversity for sustainable development in a way that resonates with people. They have played a pivotal role in shaping my journey and have significantly influenced my

approach in my current role as the Chairman of the Kerala State Biodiversity Board.

This foundation has equipped me with the skills to confidently engage with the Biodiversity Management Committees of 1,200 elected Local Self Governments, ensuring that the principles of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development are effectively communicated and embraced at the grassroots level.

Prof. Swaminathan's Influence on Recognising Agricultural Heritage



In this photo, I am alongside Prof. M. S. Swaminathan and the Late Shri Oommen Chandy, who was then the Chief Minister of Kerala. He had visited the MSSRF headquarters in Chennai to receive the plaque for the FAO's Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) designation of Kuttanad's below-sea-level farming from the then President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee.

I was honoured to be entrusted by Prof. Swaminathan with preparing the detailed proposal on the

Kuttanad below-sea-level farming system and presenting it to the GIAHS expert committee in Kanazawa, Japan, in 2010. The other gentleman standing beside me is Dr. Edison, former Director of the Central Tuber Crops Research Institute, Thiruvananthapuram.

MSSRF has successfully developed two of India's three designated GIAHS sites recognized by the FAO. In addition to Kuttanad, the other two are the Koraput Tribal Agriculture System and the Saffron Cultivation System of Jammu and Kashmir.

India holds immense potential to identify and secure recognition for more such traditional agricultural systems, leveraging their eco-labels and market opportunities to conserve agrobiodiversity and promote sustainable livelihoods for local communities.

With heartfelt gratitude, I honour his eternal soul and seek his blessings from the heavens.