Prof. Rajeev Varshney grew up in a middle-class family in Bahjoi, a small town in Uttar Pradesh. His father Kulwant Lal had a small grain wholesale business and mother Bhupna Devi was a homemaker. After completing his primary schooling in Bahjoi, he received his bachelor’s and master’s degree from the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) in 1991 and 1995, respectively.

While pursuing his PhD degree, he worked as a junior research fellow on an R&D project sponsored by the Department of Biotechnology under the supervision of Prof. PK Gupta, a well-known name in the field of plant genetics, and Prof. PC Sharma, who became the driving force behind his choice of career. At that juncture, he came across Prof. Mark Sorrells, who was then working as a researcher, science administrator and thoughtleader in the field of international agriculture.

Prof. Varshney joined International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in 2005 and since then he has been working as a research scientist, administrator and thoughtleader in the field of international agriculture. Prof. Varshney is a firm believer in harnessing the potential of modern genomics tools and molecular breeding approaches as a game changer for accelerated development and delivery of improved crop varieties.

During his stint in Germany, he feels, he found his vocation that shaped his research career. He recalls, Prof. Nierman Borsting, a renowned agricultural scientist, whom he heard during a conference in Italy in 2003, said, “Genetics is the key to revolutionize agriculture.”

The words inspired and motivated him to work on translational aspects of upstream research in plant genetics, and also provided new concepts, such as 5Gs for crop genetic improvement and the most recent one being fast-forward breeding for a food-secure world.

After joining ICRISAT in 2005, Prof. Varshney was given the responsibility to lead the genomics research on ICRISAT’s mandate crops, which include legumes (chickpea, pigeon pea, groundnut and cowpea) and cereals (pearl millet and sorghum) that are staple and income-generating crops in the semi-arid tropic regions of the world.

To provide new insights, his team has recently discovered crop varieties with high-yielding, drought-tolerant and disease-resistant traits. The team has also developed varieties that provide food security and nutrition security.

Prof. Varshney has established and continues to nurture a huge network of >180 partners from 35+ countries across six continents. He has published >580 papers in high impact factor journals, including more than 100 top journals, and has the h-index of 45,000. He is an editor of 17 books and has been recognized as a highly cited researcher for the last 8 years in a row.

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