

Cultivating Biodiversity: Peasant Women in India

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In the Deccan region of India, over 60,000 women peasants are feeding their families, their culture and their pride with biodiverse farming practices. Their knowledge and successes have reached across national and institutional borders, and they have received recognition from around the world.

It is the year 2003 in Andhra Pradesh, India. A group of more than 50 peasant women were gathered in a thatch roofed hall in Didgi village, engaged in a video interface with a group of senior agricultural scientists. Samamma, who owns three acres of rainfed farmland and grows more than 18 varieties of crops, stood up and started explaining why she values biodiversity in her farming practices. Quickly a scientist on the other side of the video camera stopped her and said “

No, no, please do not worry about biodiversity. It is we, the scientists, who should think of biodiversity, and we will recommend a seed for you to use.

” Still too often scientists believe that agricultural science and knowledge are exclusively their domain while peasant farmers, especially the women, are not to be included at all when discussing farming approaches. However, the women in the Deccan region have proved them wrong in so many ways.

Biodiverse farming systems

The women of the Deccan region are the seed-keepers, treasuring seeds more than money. Photo: DDS

The peasant women in Didgi village have developed highly biodiverse farming systems with common characteristics: they all farm on non-irrigated, not very fertile, fields of less than two acres; they are all non-chemical farmers; they all grow 12-23 varieties of crops on their small plots; and none of them need to purchase any of their food from markets. **The women of the Deccan region are the seed-keepers. They not only conserve seeds, but also decide on the mix and quantity of seeds to be planted at planting time. This is a win-win system: the women’s way of farming supports biodiversity, and biodiversity supports their way of farming. Why is biodiversity so important for these women? Why are they not content with growing just one or two commercial crops as advised by the Department of Agriculture? They have a clear preference for food crops such as Yellow Sorghum, which are totally discarded and discouraged by agricultural scientists as it only attracts a low price on the market. For dalit women Yellow Sorghum provides nutritious food and good fodder. It grows in dry soil, can be used in fencing and thatching and has many other qualities. All these factors, in addition, can be completely controlled by the women in spite of their low income levels. The reverence that peasant women show for such “orphaned crops” illustrates their special vision on food and farming. More than food**

Reshaping food policy

In India, a select few species are promoted and supported as food crops by governmental institutions. A wide range of millet varieties, which traditionally have nourished many rural communities, are not among them. In 2013, for the first time in our history, the government recognised millet varieties as national food security grains by including them in the brand new National Food Security Act. After a decade long struggle by dalit peasant women, the Deccan Development Society and the Millet Network of India, millets are now firmly entrenched in India’s public food system. For us and for the women this was a great moment for rejoicing. They used radio and made short films to share their toils and successes. With grit and determination they have overcome their social, economic and gender marginalisation and reshaped national policy. Also, in 2013 as proponents of millet we were able to take the message of millets back to their African birthplace by initiating the Africa-India Millet Network and creating a new solidarity between the two continents.

For women from vulnerable communities, sticking to peasant values and biodiversity in farming can mean the difference between life and death. Whereas farmer suicides have been widespread among Indian farmers who were crippled by debt as a result of their expensive and risky commodity and chemical based farming systems, there has not been a single suicide among peasant women farmers who continue to use low cost biodiverse farming principles. Agrobiodiversity is a strong part of these communities’ traditions, but it is also the only logical way for them to farm. They clearly understand that a biodiverse system is the best security they have against climate vagaries. Moreover, the crops they grow are indicative of their food culture, and the relationships between foods in the kitchen reflect relationships in the field. For instance, food made from sorghum is accompanied by food made from pigeon peas, and in the field sorghum and pigeon peas grow as companion crops. This unique “farm-to-kitchen” model is what has kept agrobiodiversity alive on their farms for centuries. Since women are the most important torchbearers of this food tradition, they are also the carriers of the agrobiodiversity tradition. Biodiverse farms not only nurture physical life, but also moral, ecological and spiritual life. People in this region celebrate biodiversity through several religious festivals where heroes symbolise and bless biodiversity. Englagatte Punnam, for instance, is celebrated when the winter crops mature, by tying diverse crops on the door of every home – as if the farmers are declaring, “ look at the diversity in my field!

” Women treasure these crops more than monetary wealth. Consequently, seeds are neither bought nor sold, but always exchanged. Proud to share

[During the Englagatte Punnam celebration, farmers exhibit the diversity from their fields on their homes. Photo: DDS](#)

The Deccan Development Society (DDS), a grassroots NGO working with peasant women from socially and economically marginalised dalit communities, has facilitated the sharing of farmer knowledge for 25 years. Women from this region, especially those from lower socioeconomic classes, have travelled abroad at least 100 times – from Peru to Cambodia – to share their experience and perspectives on farming with farmers, scientists and policy makers. They have met receptive audiences, both among male and female peasants and in international conference rooms. In 2003 they addressed the World Organic Congress in Victoria, Canada, where various people in the audience said they felt humbled by the women’s experiences. Brimming with confidence, these women have started celebrating the Mobile Biodiversity Festival. Every year since 1998, they have travelled to over 50 villages during one month, discussing and celebrating ecological agriculture, control over seeds and organic markets in a way that expresses the deep relationships between farmers and soil, agriculture and environment. They have reached over 150,000 farmers in the region, showing them the richness of the traditional seeds and crops from the area. The Indian government has recognised these Biodiversity Festivals as the most important community cultural campaign on the issue. Worldwide recognition The Deccan peasant women, who were so easily dismissed by the scientists in 2003, are now receiving national and international recognition for their work on biodiversity. Anjamma for instance, a 55-year-old peasant woman who has never gone to school and cannot read and write, is now a member of the expert panel on agrobiodiversity in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Government officers, scientists, civil society activists and media regularly come to the region to look at the women’s farms and

seeds. Their stories regularly appear in newspapers and on television channels. Today, the region comprising of about 50,000 hectares of land is about to be recognised as an Agricultural Biodiversity Heritage Site by the Indian National Biodiversity Board – the first in the country. The international Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) developed the concept to honour sites where biodiversity is practiced. The Heritage label gives the area and its biodiversity the same level of protection as national parks and offers special status, privileges and incentives to the farmers and their communities. The label conveys a strong message that the Indian government supports marginalised family farmers and recognises their contribution to protecting biodiversity. When asked what the Heritage label means to them, the peasant woman Mahbatpur Swaroopa answers, “We are totally disinterested in any monetary benefits. It is the recognition that we cherish.” The power of women

[The selection of seeds requires complex knowledge that is held by women like Basantpur Narsamma. Photo: DDS](#)

The attention for their farms and perspectives has added tremendously to the women’s self esteem. Paramma, a farmer-seed keeper in Khasimput village, once demonstrated this confidence as she confronted government officials who had come to visit her: “

Every month you get your salaries and fill your pockets with currency notes. But come to my home. I have filled it with seeds. Can you match me?

” Given their marginalisation in other spheres of life, the women feel that their practice and conservation of agrobiodiversity has bestowed them with a new stature in the country, in their communities and in their homes. Most of the peasant women in this area say that more often than not, they are consulted and play a key role in making choices for their family farm. Cheelamamidi Laxamma cultivates her three-acre farm with dozens of food crops along with her husband. When her husband was counselled that he should become progressive and plant some hybrid crops on the land, he – completely against the grain of his social culture – first wanted to consult his wife. When he did, she burst out: “Have you gone mad? Why do we need hybrid seeds and a monoculture? Are we not happy with what we are growing?” And he gave in. Sharp and alert women such as Laxamma enjoy far more respect from their husbands for the recognition they have gained in the community and beyond. First Published in Farming Matters, March 2014 P.V. Satheesh is one of the founders of DDS and its General Secretary.

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