

Direct selling, adivasi style

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Locavore's heaven: The Sunday organic market sets shop on the grounds of the 60-year-old Christian Hospital in Bissamcuttack, in Rayagada. Photo: Chitragada Choudhury

[At an organic market in Odisha, middle-class consumers get to interact with the producers of their food and appreciate traditional knowledge systems](#)

One Sunday morning in January, I visited an organic produce market located amidst dense bougainvillea creepers and rows of trees, on the grounds of the six-decade-old Christian Hospital in Bissamcuttack, a town in southern Odisha's Rayagada district.

In policy and public imagination, Odisha, particularly its southern districts like Rayagada and neighbouring Kalahandi, connote bad news — terms like “poor” and “backward” dominate discussions. But this undulating region has breathtaking ecological and cultural diversity, and the weekly Bissamcuttack market is an ongoing experiment to nurture the area's ecologically-attuned agricultural traditions. The market also wants to forge a close connection between consumers and the farmers who practise such traditions — thus consciously departing from the dominant model of chemical inputs-driven, mechanised, industrial agriculture that leaves farmers vulnerable to global market shocks.

The sellers I met that Sunday were adivasis from the surrounding villages. Some were setting up stalls as I walked around, others were arriving on bicycles or motorcycles, their wares in baskets and sacks. The buyers were mostly hospital staff, who, trickling in through the morning, made their purchases over leisurely conversations with the farmers. They chatted about unusual produce such as tubers, cultivation methods, and even sought advice on ways to control bugs on their home plants without chemicals.

The produce ranged from freshly harvested vegetables to pulses, legumes, greens and herbs, as well as food items central to adivasi agriculture and diets, such as nutritious millets and tubers. All of these were mostly from small farms (under five acres), which avoid synthetic inputs and incorporate traditional knowledge of diverse cropping.

Indra Kudruka, one of the farmers, said his family grows more than 20 different crops in a year. Listing a few of them, he reeled off the local names for finger millet, two different tubers, corn, long beans, country beans, bottle gourd, papaya, pumpkin, brinjal, ivy gourd, bitter gourd, okra, jackfruit, drumstick as well as a range of herbs and greens such as amaranth and coriander.

Significantly, rates for the produce had been pre-decided through consultations between buyers and sellers to ensure the farmers recovered their cost of production, and made a profit (a long-standing recommendation of the National Commission of Farmers that largely remains unimplemented elsewhere). During my visit, tomatoes were selling at ₹20 a kg — higher than the ₹10-15 prevailing then.

Fair and interlinked

Debjeet Sarangi of the Odisha-based Living Farms organisation is the brain behind the Bissamcuttack farmers' market. “Our thought was to initiate a consumer-producer network that generated a sense of connect with agriculture, and the issues of social and environmental justice in food,” he said. “The market thus nurtures the ‘nature-agriculture-culture-community’ continuum, and promotes direct, fair and short distribution chains.”

There were three rounds of discussions between hospital staff and farmers before the market was first set up in July 2016. The fixed-rate chart worked well because of the mutual trust from the outset, and the gradual build-up of solidarity, Sarangi said.

Mahendra Nauri, a young farmer-seller, said they usually quote a price that is marginally lower than market rates, since their cultivation practices and mixed cropping helped reduce their cost of production. He added, “During the quarter, even if rates go up in the open market, we do not mind selling here, since we get assured customers every Sunday. There is no haggling, and we feel good when they praise our produce for its taste and freshness.” (The farmers sell some of the produce, such as rice, in other markets also.)

John Oommen, a doctor at the hospital, said they largely accept the rates suggested by the farmers at the meetings held every quarter, since the aim is to ensure the latter make an earning. When the rate charts are mutually revised every quarter, the farmers also list the produce they intend to bring in the coming quarter. The arrivals reflect the seasonal nature of agriculture and food endemic to this region. For instance, buyers cannot expect a winter crop such as cauliflower in the

monsoon months, but instead mushrooms harvested from the forest and tender bamboo shoots would be on offer then.

The market thus serves as a space where middle-class consumers can interact with the producers of their food, as well as gain exposure to adivasi traditions of agricultural knowledge, which are today under threat from industrial agriculture.

(It is not uncommon to see sales agents of seed companies from Telangana touring the interior adivasi villages, trying to market BT cotton seed packets.)

Caring for the soil

Nauri said the local families entirely avoided buying hybrid seeds, pesticides, or fertilisers like urea and potash: “We preserve and circulate our own seeds in our farmer networks. On my family’s two-acre farm, we have a compost pit near the mango tree in which we create farmyard manure to replenish soil nutrients. To address pests, we make a concoction of neem leaves, bitter gourd, custard apple and lime combined with cow urine.” The methods they used, Nauri said, married knowledge handed down generations with new skills learnt at organic farming workshops.”

Our parents are well-versed in local traditions of cultivation, and my generation and that of my children need to find ways to keep those alive,” Kudruka said, adding that he has observed how hybrid crops and chemical pesticides have diminished both land and health over time. “My father is close to 90, but I cannot work as much as him,” he said. Nauri chimed in, “Our elders can withstand extreme cold and heat better than us.”

Many of the buyers are drawn to the market because of concerns about the taste of food, their health and the wellbeing of the farmers. Shikha (she uses one name), who works on community health issues, said that buying produce at the market and, more importantly, interacting with the farmers each Sunday had altered her perspective on food. “It has made me more alert to what we consume, and changed my eating completely in terms of incorporating millets and produce grown without chemical pesticides, even if this means spending slightly more on occasion.” She added, “The market has made us respect these farmers for what they do.”

‘Modern’ farm distress

The intimate transactions unfolding at this market were indeed a sharp contrast to the widespread scenes of farmer distress I had witnessed just days ago in western India, in the tomato-producing belt of Nashik. There, farmers dependent on chemical inputs-intensive, monoculture practices were hit by rock-bottom prices (as low as 50 paise to ₹2 a kg). Struggling to recover even the cost of transporting their produce to the mandi, they were compelled to destroy standing crops, or even allow cattle to graze on the expensive vines — in a desperate bid to cut losses.

Sarangi said the Bissamcuttack market aimed to get buyers to think of India’s acute agrarian crisis not as distress facing farmers alone, but a tragedy that concerned all of us. “If a farmer stops coming to the market, do we know what happened to him or her?” he asked rhetorically, alluding to the thousands of farmer suicides in the country, a phenomenon apace since over a decade.

Oommen conceded that the market’s small scale helped enable it. However, he argued, this did not necessarily detract from its value. “The purpose here is not scale, but to get farmers a decent price, and to learn what we can from them,” he said. “Our world probably does not need The Big Solution, but many small ones, designed and managed locally.”

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