

Meet Telangana's fiery dalit women fighting all odds to save environment

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Women of Deccan Development Society in a meeting. (Photo | Vinay Madapu, EPS)

HYDERABAD: Catastrophic events sometimes carry the seed of future bounty. When flood water inundated her house in 1993, little did Nagwar Sunandamma know that the incident would lead her to accomplish a feat that is usually reserved for Gods – growing a forest. For some 25 years, Sunandamma, a Dalit woman, who never attended school, persevered with government authorities and convinced them to let her grow trees on a 99-acre rocky plateau. When her fellow villagers mocked her for dreaming to grow a forest on a barren piece of land, she said, “You will see.” Today, the gnarly banyan, the huge neem and the fruiting tamarind trees stand tall as testimonies to a single woman’s grit and power.

Chilkapalli Ansuyamma (L) with Nagwar Sunandamma (Vinay Madapu/EPS)

The [Deccan Development Society](#), an NGO based out of Pastapur in Medak district, which recently won the Equator Prize 2019 by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for their contribution to ecology and innovations in rain-fed millet cultivation, has numerous such women who have brought forth their traditional knowledge to make huge contribution towards sustainable farming. Their Sanghams, comprising mostly Dalit women, have maintained seed banks, grown forests and put monumental efforts to preserve traditional ways of agriculture.

PV Satheesh, director of DDS, says: “Many women got displaced due to the construction of Singur dam. Those who had land received compensation. What about those who had no land? That is why they decided to raise forests. They not only made huge contribution towards environment conservation, but also saved their own lives.”

“After water entered our houses, some 500 villagers were stranded on the plateau without food and water for three days. We then lived in a government school for six months. It was during this period that a few of the women approached DDS with their issues. We formed a Sangham and then convinced the authorities to let us grow trees on the rocky plateau. Whatever we grow on this plateau is ours,” adds Sunandamma. In the initial days, there were only a couple of women who agreed to dig the land to plant trees. However, more people joined her eventually. They were paid Rs 2 to dig one pit to plant a tree. Chilkapalli Ansuyamma, a single woman, has been standing steadfast by Sunandamma all these years. She has designed, implemented and several thousands of Sangham women to transform wastelands into neighbourhood forests. She has helped plant 20 lakh trees across 22 villages. She says, “When we started out, villagers used to taunt us for working like men. It was unusual for women to travel in lorries, and do things independently. But today, the same people salute us.”

The Millet Mascot

On one side of the colourful porch of Kandakam Mogulamma’s house hangs a photo of her receiving the Narishakti Award from President Ram Nath Kovind in 2018. She was representing All India Millet Sisters Network, a group of women farmers who grow millets and inspire other women to cultivate this traditional grain.

Kandakam Mogulamma (Vinay Madapu/EPS)

Mogulamma joined a DDS Sangham after her mother-in-law, who was also part of a Sangham, passed away. She formed a ‘Daughter-in-law Sangham’ along with other women, and also became a part of the Millet Sisters group. The group’s pledge says: “Millets are our heritage crops. These ancestral crops have been providing us food for our homes, fodder for cattle and strength for our soil, and are supporting our health. Our millet-based agriculture possesses strength to sustain without irrigation and electricity. We don’t need chemical fertilisers to cultivate our millets. We don’t use a drop of chemical pesticide. We have abundant knowledge for this cultivation. Because of this, we have been able to carry forward our self-sustaining and sovereign agriculture for many generations. This is our heritage.”

Mogulamma says: “We formed the groups to ensure that we sow millets only. Our crops are fully rain-fed. We have around 5,000 members across 70 villages.”

The road to self-sustainability has not been easy. After her husband passed away three years ago, she took on the helms of her family (she has three children), and also inspired other women to become self-sufficient by growing millets. Today, she grows 20 kinds crops on her land in Kharif season and 12 kinds in Rabi season.

The Healer

Did you know that the cure for your sore throats, fever, and even diabetes can be found in your backyard? Yerukula Poolamma tears a few leaves from a creeper and says: “Grind the roots of this plant and give it to a lactating woman to produce more milk.”

Yerukula Poolamma (Vinay Madapu/EPS)

Poolamma is a natural healer. She, along with other Sangham members, are doing the tough job of finding medicinal herbs, documenting their uses and growing them. Whenever there is a meeting of Sangham members, women bring known medicinal herbs from their respective villages and pass on the knowledge. In this way, they have been able to build a rich depository of plants that can cure a number of ailments.

“I started identifying and documenting medicinal herbs in the Sanghams 10 years ago. At that time, there were no hospitals nearby, or the means to reach them. That is why we started relying on our traditional knowledge to address all health issues. These solutions are effective and have absolutely no side-effects. Now, we are growing medicinal plants on a five-acre land in every village. We do not want this knowledge to get lost forever.”

The endeavours of these women, and thousands of other women of the Sanghams, have been instrumental in finding local, nature-based solutions for sustainable development. Nature too has not been stingy in giving back. Sunandamma had planted 32 varieties of plants on her plateau. When she counted all, she found 96 varieties. The others had been brought by the wind and birds!

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