

Reshaping destinies

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The local village communities in Zaheerabad have been able to reclaim their fallowed lands and cultivate a myriad varieties of traditional landraces of food grains. They have not only been able to control their food systems that are ecosystemically evolved over thousands of years but also have adequate nutritious food for their consumption.

Zaheerabad, in Medak District, Andhra Pradesh, is a region that has traditionally fed itself on a variety of millets including sorghum, pearl millet, foxtail millet, little millet and so on. However, the introduction of cheap rice under PDS weaned many people away from their traditional food grains; after all, rice was easy to cook, and absolutely devoid of any fuss. Many women considered it to be a great blessing. However, it was only much later that the full implications of this shift in the food habits became clear.

These communities began noticing a marked decline in their nutrition. Rice offered a load of carbohydrates, but very little protein and other nutrients such as iron, calcium, minerals, fibre etc. But the hard-working bodies of the farmers demanded a high amount of proteins and other nutrients, which their traditional millets and other food grains were capable of supplying.

Because PDS (Public Distribution System) rice was available easily and at a very cheap price [one day of wages could now buy three months ration!], many farmers started leaving their fields fallow because keeping them productive meant hard toil. Gradually, the traditional landraces that had sustained these communities for generations started to decline. The complete 'de-milletisation' of their communities seemed a *fait accompli*; but the women who took a wider view of their food and farming, decided to fight the situation.

The first move

The first step these women took, in this fight, was to bring fallow land back under cultivation. By breathing new life into these lands and by cultivating a variety of crops, they would re-establish autonomy over their agriculture. The women approached Deccan Development Society, and thence the Ministry of Rural Development; which saw merit in their initiative and agreed to support the formation of community grain banks. Support to the tune of Rs.2600 per acre was extended to the women, and the initiative was launched in 30 villages; with 100 acres of fallow



Photo: DDS

Permangari Narsamma in her millet field

land being brought under cultivation in each village. Most of these lands were owned by marginal and small landholders. The effort was undertaken *with* the farmers in a partnership mode. This meant that the farmers – especially women farmers – were involved at every stage of planning and implementing the intervention.

In each of the 30 villages, extensive consultations were held with the farmers to chalk out the best course forward. This was followed by participatory exercises wherein the women identified the fallow lands, mapped the soils on these lands and other relevant details. Following these exercises, the idea of a decentralized public distribution system was placed in front of the communities; it was immediately evident that the idea kindled hope in their minds. It thus became all the more imperative that this PDS was fashioned in a participatory manner, led by farmers, and with utmost transparency. It was decided that the DDS Sanghams would advance the money required for ploughing, weeding, applying manure and for other activities aimed at reclaiming the lands. During the participatory exercises, the communities further stated that they would rather use farm yard manure which ensured that the lands remained fertile for as long as three years, instead of chemical fertilizers which helped the lands only for a year or so; and which in the long run destroyed their soils.

Similarly, the communities identified various challenges that they would face in their bid to reclaim the fallow lands. So were the

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solutions, and the means needed to surmount these challenges. The estimates [in 1994 when this initiative began] to reclaim an acre of fallow worked out to Rs.2700/- Following these consultations, the Sanghams released money as a loan to the identified farmers, for the purpose of fallow land reclamation. It was further decided that instead of repaying the loan in the form of cash, the farmers would repay it in the shape of grains. As it was difficult to get high yields right from the first year, it was decided that the repayment would be made in an incremental manner. For example, in the first year, the farmer would pay 100 kgs of jowar [sorghum] while 200 kgs would be repaid in the second year, and so on. These arrangements had the total approval of all farmers and were embedded in agreements that were drafted through mutual consultations and agreement.

Committees of women were formed in each village and were made responsible for the oversight of this initiative. Each woman was entrusted with 20 acres of land to oversee personally. In the very first season, more than 2500 acres of fallow lands were brought back under cultivation and more than 800,000 kilograms of sorghum was produced. This translated into three million additional meals in the 30 participating villages, or 1000 additional meals for each participating household. The fodder generated from this initiative could support 6000 additional heads of cattle in the 30 villages where it was implemented. During the first season, the total grain collected in the form of repayment amounted to 10,000-15,000 kilograms in each village; enough to feed 100 households in each of them. This set off the process of identifying the 100 'poor' households in each village, which was nothing short of fascinating.

Poor access nutritious food

In an unprecedented move, dalit women, and those from the most backward social and economic backgrounds within the village were invited to identify who among them were then poorest and the most deserving of the support that was to be extended in the form of food grains. An array of highly sophisticated and sensitive criteria were laid down by these women to define poverty itself and those households who can be identified as poor in their respective villages. In a participatory wealth ranking exercise where the entire village community participated these criteria were discussed and approved by the entire community. For example, a set of people, aged and without support were designated as destitutes and the maximum grain support was committed to them. The hard core poor were those who had no land and had to do daily labour to earn their meal for the day. Those who owned only one acre of land, had no draught animals and no irrigation, were identified as poor. Similarly, if a couple had a number of small children who were not in a position to work, they were also considered as poor. People who had outmigrated due to survival difficulties were not eliminated. Single women and their households were top among the categories of poor.

Following this, each household was issued a ration card. This entitled the family a fixed quota of sorghum during six months of the year, when food and work were scarce and the poor struggled the most. In this way, the APDS (Alternative Public Distribution

System) plugged the critical gap in the poor households' ability to access nutritious, eco systemically adopted local food.

Scaling up

The initiative that started in 1994 had, by 2003 expanded to include 3600 acres spanning 51 villages, and helps the designated households therein eat for up to six months if need be. Subsequently, the APDS spread to other villages within the district and to other parts of the state and the country. As on date, 79 villages in Medak and 46 outside of Medak are covered by this initiative on nearly 7000 acres and supporting close to 6000 farming households. Together, these lands produce more than 2 million kilograms of food grains and have succeeded in generating about 350,000 person-days of employment in these villages. In all, the APDS is servicing more than 11,000 consumer households comprising of more than 60,000 people and has been successful in providing more than 2.7 million extra meals every season.

The sale proceeds are deposited by each village in their own Community Grain Fund, and are used to bring more and more fallow lands under cultivation; and for other land development activities. This ensures that the food security net spreads wider and wider with each passing year. The program entailed only a one-time investment from the government, following which the entire initiative was taken over by the communities themselves; and since the entire program was planned and implemented with the active participation of the communities involved therein. That this task was managed by groups of dalit women, non-literate and marginalized, who have never been allowed to manage anything in their lives, is the most emphatic socio-political statement made by these women.

Acknowledging these efforts, the Planning Commission has recommended that millets be made a part of the public distribution system. Further, the women who spearheaded this initiative have been recognized at various national and international forums, as having conquered hunger.

Thanks to the efforts of these women, the NBSAP, National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan-2009 of India, made a strong argument for reorienting the public distribution system towards *the use of agro-biodiversity, linking it to food, nutritional and livelihood security; in particular, focus on producing and distributing local food grains through the PDS [thereby providing incentives for revival or continuation of agrobiodiverse farming], and decentralise controls over the system to women's committees.* All these have come as huge endorsements for the efforts that these women have been putting, in their struggle for food sovereignty.

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