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## [COVID-19 Pandemic: Worlds Stories from the Margins] What does self-reliance really mean? Amazing stories from India's margins

*by Ashish Kothari*

Can you imagine Dalit women farmers in Telangana, once facing hunger and deprivation, contributing 20,000 kgs of foodgrains for COVID19-related relief? Farmers on the Tamil Nadu – Karnataka border continuing to send organic food to Bengaluru consumers even during the lockdown? Villages in Kachchh and Tamil Nadu handling anti-COVID19 health measures, with minimal outside help? And adivasis (indigenous people) in central India with community funds able to take care of migrant workers who have had to come back to their villages?

These and many other stories across India show the potential of empowered rural communities to cope with crisis. And they expose the tragedy of a path of 'development' and governance that has not recognized, or worse, taken away the extraordinary agency of ordinary people to manage their own lives. COVID19 has pointed sharply to our horribly unequal society, in which hundreds of millions of people do not have food, livelihood, and basic needs security, even as 1% of the richest own or control most of the country's wealth. It has also brought in focus the utter chasm between the nation's rulers and its poor. And it has highlighted how safeguarding nature not only for its own sake, but for human survival, is so crucial.

But back to the stories above.

“I grow 40 kinds of crops on my rainfed land and don't use chemicals; I have enough food to last my family in the lockdown period and beyond”, said Chandramma, one of Telangana's Dalit women farmers. She was participating in a webinar organised in April by Vikalp Sangam, a process bringing together people's initiatives on alternative pathways of well-being. She is part of the Deccan Development Society, whose women's *sanghas* are active in 75 villages.



*Chandramma, a Dalit woman farmer at Deccan Development Society's seed bank, Pastapur (Telangana) (credit: Ashish Kothari)*

Through these, several thousand women who were on the margins of casteist, patriarchal society, have revived their dryland, millet-centred agriculture, increased overall production while retaining control over land, seeds, water, and knowledge. Having achieved *anna swaraj* (food sovereignty) and self-sufficiency, in COVID19 times these women are feeding landless families in their villages, contributing 10 kgs of foodgrains per family to the district relief measures, and daily feeding 1000 glasses of nutritious millet porridge to health, municipality and police workers in nearby Zaheerabad town.

The second story is from a village Self-Help Group (SHG) in Krishnagiri district of Tamil Nadu. In 2017, the SHG launched a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative with help from Navadarshanam, a community founded in 1990 to live ecologically sustainable and simple lives.

The initiative helps local organic farmers plan their operations based on commitments from urban subscribers for a weekly box of vegetables, fruits and groceries. All revenues are passed on to farmers, due to which incomes have risen between 10 to 20 times for some of them.



*Navdarshanam FoodCoop group (credit: Navdarshana)*

Remarkably, during the lockdown, CSA deliveries are continuing without interruption. This has

helped farmers avoid a problem millions of their counterparts elsewhere have faced: make distress sales to whoever buys at very low prices. And consumers in Bengaluru, even in the red zones, continue getting fresh, organic produce. Of course, all norms for physical distancing are being followed.

Talking of which, lets look at stories of communities safeguarding themselves against COVID19. In Kachchh, the village of Kunariya set up a crisis management team, used social media to raise awareness about COVID19, and facilitated a full health survey. 316 needy families, including those of visually impaired and differently-abled individuals, single-women and other marginalised people, were assured all basic necessities using panchayat funds or local donations.



*Village Mapping at Kunariya, Kachchh (credit: Kunariya Panchayat)*

All this happened because over the last few years, dynamic facilitation by its sarpanch Suresh Chhanga has enabled Kunariya to move towards greater public participation in governance of local affairs. It has also been able to build effective bridges with the government authorities, implement schemes and laws like MNREGA and Food Security Act, create transparency in the use of budgets, and strengthen women's voices in decision-making.

When I phoned Suresh Chhanga, he excitedly recounted what they did with children in the lockdown period. Recognising that they are stuck at home, bored or even in some cases facing aggression of equally bored or worried adults, the panchayat encouraged elders to teach them whatever special skills they had – music, crafts, cooking, traditional technologies, gardening – or engage them in environmental activities like caring for trees.

Then there is the Sittilingi Panchayat in Tamil Nadu, which mobilized itself as soon as Kerala announced the first COVID19 case in January. Panchayat President Ms Madheswari called for an urgent meeting with relevant government departments, and a

civil society institution called Tribal Health Initiative (THI), and went into disaster control mode. This included mass awareness campaigns, enforcing physical distancing in all places of public gathering, and isolation of returning migrants. As an income generation initiative, local tailors were asked to stitch masks in bulk. This panchayat has had many years of inputs by THI, an initiative by Drs. Regi George and Lalitha Regi to create an adivasi-oriented health facility, along with organic cultivation, education, empowerment, crafts and other livelihood activities.

Other stories of resilience from tribal and other forest-dwelling communities come from many parts of India, where they have been able to restore their collective rights to govern and use the forests under the Forest Rights Act 2006. For instance, several villages in eastern Maharashtra have, after two centuries of centralized control by the Forest Department in which revenues from the sale of forest produce like bamboo were mostly cornered by contractors and the government, have been able to do their own harvesting. This has been crucial to secure availability to nutritional forest foods, medicinal plants, and culturally and spiritually important sites. Sustainable harvesting of forest produce has earned villages substantial income, part of which has gone into community funds. In settlements like Rahu in Amravati district, Kukdale and Salhe in Gadchiroli district, these funds are being used to help returning migrant labour or landless people obtain basic relief materials. Civil society organisations Khoj and Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi have been active in these areas, but in Gadchiroli there is also the remarkable mobilization of 90 villages into a Maha Gramsabha (federation of village assemblies), towards greater self-rule, resisting mining, and economic self-reliance.

Many communities have also shown the enormous livelihoods potential of rural, small-scale industries. India's crafts have involved 150 to 200 million people, second only to agriculture. Government policies have severely disabled them, but in places like Kachchh, innovation in local supply and production chains and in design have revived handloom weaving, such that youth are coming back into it – a form of reverse migration.

Kuthambakkam village near Chennai has demonstrated how small-scale manufacturing (e.g. of solar fan-bulb kits), or grain processing, have helped families avoid having to migrate out for work. Its ex-sarpanch Elango Rangaswamy has come up with a solar-powered way of making disinfectant as a response to COVID19, which he says can be set up cheaply in any village for both employment and disease prevention.

From other parts of the country come inspiring stories at a larger scale. Groups under Kerala's state-supported Kudumbashree programme, that has provided dignified livelihoods for lakhs of women, worked with panchayats and urban ward sabhas to

spread awareness about COVID19, set up community kitchens to cater to those needing food aid, and mass produce sanitizers and masks. Goonj, a civil society initiative working in 20 states, is reaching relief to over 40,000 families, and using its Vaapsi programme of restoring livelihoods, to create or re-establish localized barter and exchange systems that enable dignified livelihood generation. In Madhya Pradesh, Samaj Pragati Sahayog, is working in several hundred villages to revitalize rural economy and substantially reduce outmigration, and has reached over 13,000 families with relief packages. For this, it procured wheat from a local farmer producer company, so that cultivators did not have to resort to distress sale.



*Youth like Damabhai and Balabhai Marwada are back in handloom weaving, Kachchh (credit: Ashish Kothari)*

What can we learn from these and many other such stories of COVID19-time resilience? Are they in our Prime Minister's mind, when he seems to realise the need for self-reliance, and waxes eloquent on it in addresses to the nation in the middle of the pandemic? Perhaps not, for his government simultaneously pursues MoUs with dozens of foreign companies, dilutes laws protecting the environment and labour rights, puts heavy tax burdens on handicrafts, and continues to forcibly acquire land, forest, and other resources so vital to the rural economy only to hand them over to corporations. His government's stimulus plan to move out of the COVID19 lockdown is ecologically illiterate and dangerous.

What these initiatives are demonstrating is the opposite of this. Self-reliance is about the revitalization of rural livelihoods (leaving aside cities for the moment). Note that I am talking here about *livelihoods*, not jobs; these are occupations linked to everyday life, social relations, and culture, providing the body and soul with satisfaction. For the vast majority of people in our industrializing economy, jobs are deadlihoods, soul-deadening mass production places where one desperately waits for the weekend to 'enjoy' oneself (if you happen to be one of the lucky ones in IT or government or banking), or worse, where you go to sleep wondering if you will have work and an income the next day (if you are part of the labouring class).

Hundreds of initiatives of local self-reliance or self-sufficiency in food, livelihoods, water, energy, sanitation, housing, and other basic needs around India tell us the urgent need to move towards *localization* instead of economic *globalization*, that has left hundreds of millions of people across the world in a precarious situation. They tell us that clusters of settlements can be self-reliant in basic needs, significantly reducing distress migration to cities and industrial zones, as also widespread trade and travel. They tell us that communities can govern themselves, while making the state accountable. They tell us that achieving all this also requires struggles to remove patriarchy, casteism, and other forms of discrimination that traditional occupations can be mired in. They show us the power of using hybrid knowledge systems, the respect of cultural diversity (while rejecting religious identity politics), and the need to reconnect within nature while respecting all of life. They also point to many transformations that need to happen in India's cities, but that is a subject for a future article.

If the Indian state is really interested in rural self-reliance, it needs to support a rainbow new deal, supporting dignified livelihoods through agriculture, pastoralism, forestry, fisheries, crafts, and small manufacturing in each village; help set up producer-consumer links eliminating exploitative corporate middlemen and retailers; reserve most production in labour-intensive small and medium scale; stop pandering to large corporates (India or foreign); eliminate GST and other burdens on hand production; ensure minimum support prices for primary sector products, and so on. Its current policies are, by and large, the complete opposite, and there is little in the COVID19 recovery or stimulus packages that points to any fundamental shift. Given this, it is left to communities themselves, with help from civil society (and some sensitive state governments), to use the COVID19 crisis as an opportunity for moving to justice, equity and sustainability.



Illustration depicting *Rainbow Recovery* by Ashish Kothari

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