

Very Much on the Map: the Timbaktu Revolution

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‘Going to Timbuktu’ has meant three different things for me. In school, it meant an unknown, distant (or even mythical) place. Then I learnt that there actually is a place named Timbuktu, in the African nation of Mali (whose mysterious reputation in Europe apparently gave rise to the more common usage). And then as I got into environmental issues, I learnt that there is even a Timbaktu in India! This is one where a quiet revolution has put a forgotten part of the country squarely into the consciousness of at least those who care about an ecologically and culturally sensitive process of development. Finally, on a visit to the place this winter, I realized how it should be in the consciousness of our politicians and bureaucrats, who are bent on driving India into unsustainable, inequality-ridden crises.

Located in the Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh, close to the town of Penukonda, the Timbaktu Collective is an initiative to empower villagers (particularly the poorest amongst them) to take charge of their own future. And the future of their land and natural resources. It began as a tiny effort by Mary Vattamattam and C.K. (‘Bablu’) Ganguly, a couple tired of a constant agitationist mode they were involved in as part of the Young India Project (organizing farm labour), to do constructive work in a few villages. Aided by a few other individuals such as John D’Souza (one of the founders of the well-known Centre for Education and Documentation), in 1989, they bought some land near Chennekothapalli village, in the middle of an area where deforestation and land mismanagement had converted the hills into barren rock and the soil unproductive. It was a bold, almost foolish attempt at doing something in an area that had been given up as a gone case, both by the government and by many of the villagers themselves. *Especially* foolhardy given that they had three very young children, and a bank balance of Rs. 500.

From this tiny start, the Timbaktu Collective (TC) today is spread over 140 villages, its more than 100 full-time employees spearheading a variety of rural reconstruction initiatives (www.timbaktu.org). Even before knowing the full details of this remarkable transformation, I sensed it in the magical change from a degraded, barren landscape to a green, cool oasis as I approached TC’s main campus.

Women’s empowerment

Amongst the first efforts of TC was to tackle serious indebtedness and financial dependence amongst the poor, especially women. It encouraged the formation of thrift groups where women could put in small savings on a regular basis, into a sort of alternative banking system with the possibility of earning interest and taking loans on low-interest repayment basis. Over time this has spread to almost 140 villages spread in 3 mandals. In each mandal, a Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Society has been created, with membership of and full control by the village women. More recently these were

federated into a Mahashakti Network to enable greater clout in dealing with the official administration and more mutual learning. Put together, the cooperatives are now dealing with about Rs. 7 crore turnover. Loan interest rates that started at 24% have come down to 10-12% (substantially less than the famous 'microfinance' schemes that typically charge 40-50%!); and in turn women get upto 8% interest on deposits they make, in effect only having to pay an average of about 2.5 to 4% interest on loans. There is a nearly 100% rate of repayment of loans (even if sometimes late). Most importantly, women report significant benefits, as they have been able to put money into agricultural renewal, small-scale businesses, livestock, handicrafts, education, health, housing, and marriages.

The cooperatives are now also able to support women with other aspects (through outright grants rather than loans), e.g. on children's education, serious accidents, and health-related expenses. Importantly, the economic empowerment provided by this initiative has had a positive bearing on TC's original vision of ecologically sensitive, equitable development, in many (some unexpected) ways.

Towards an organic future

One of these spill-overs has been in agriculture. Several of the women's thrift groups realized that amongst the most common items for which loans were taken, was the expensive inputs (fertilizers, pesticides) that farmers had to put into cultivation. Simultaneously TC had started some demonstration plots to showcase the potential of organic farming. Women asked for help in experimenting with this on their own lands, and thus began a major programme to promote sustainable agriculture.

The difficult context in which this process had to work is important to understand. Anantpur is India's 2nd driest area, with an average rainfall of 380 mm, and regular droughts. Traditionally the farmers had adapted to this with innovative dryland techniques including the extensive cultivation of millets (jowar, bajra, ragi, and others). But government programmes over the last couple of decades pushed the cultivation of groundnut as it gave good economic returns, to the extent that about 90% of the cropped area in the district was taken up by just this one crop! When successful, this gave the farmer a good return, but if it failed due to drought or pests, the result was economic devastation. Additionally the cultivator was locked into a vicious cycle of greater and greater input costs (especially pesticides), growing dependence on government and corporate entities, and declining fertility of the soil.

Transforming this scenario has been a slow struggle, but the demonstration effect has won hundreds of farmers over. Villages like Brahmanpalli, amongst the first to try the organic techniques, is now almost 100% converted; others like Kondakindapalli and Harencheru are rapidly moving there. Farmers have added (or brought back) millets, castor, corn, redgram, green gram and other pulses to groundnut, all of this with only organic inputs that are produced locally. They report no loss in yield if one measures what is finally available to consume, and a substantial reduction in financial costs. There is reportedly also an increase in self-consumption, as food crops like millets make a

come-back, thereby reducing their need to buy foods from the market. The long-term nutritional benefits of this should be substantial (though not currently measured).

Two crucial institutional innovations have made this possible. At the village level, farmers are organised under Sanghas, whose members are responsible not only for helping each other and new converts, but also in a unique system of self-certification. TC has been one of the pioneers of the Participatory Guarantee Scheme for certification of farmers and their produce as being organic (see <http://www.pgsorganic.in/>). Groups of 5 farmers with adjacent fields keep a watch on each other (for anyone not following organic principles could endanger the organic status of the others); neighbouring groups of farmers do the same; and finally the volunteers and coordinators of TC keep a check.

A second innovation is equally important. Traditionally farmers have been systematically cheated by traders buying their produce at low rates (or using faulty weighing machines). TC initiated a farmers' marketing organisation, the Dharani Farming and Marketing Mutually Aided Cooperative, which buys the organic produce at a slightly higher than market rate and sells it, with profits coming back to the farmers after cutting expenses (<http://www.timbaktu-organic.org/>). Various products, such as ragi malt, honey, unpolished red rice, peanut butter, and groundnut oil, are marketed under the brand 'Timbaktu Organic', now available at various outlets in nearby towns, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad. Decisions in the Cooperative are largely taken by the farmer members, with TC staff helping in aspects like accounting and external market relations. In 2010-11, the Cooperative sold Rs. 38.30 lakh worth of products. In an interesting innovation, it raised its first capital (about Rs. 28 lakhs) in the form of ethical (low- or no-interest) investments from a large number of well-wishers of TC; this was paid back in 5 years, and another capital amount of Rs. 19 lakhs raised in 2010.

The initiative has also helped to revive substantial agricultural biodiversity, which was being lost in the government and market-led drive to grow groundnut and only groundnut. So far TC has been able to document and collect 28 varieties of rice, 31 of millets, 18 of pulses and 7 of oil seeds. The farmer sanghas are constantly trying out a these for local adaptability, productivity, soil health, consumption preferences, and other factors that are important in farmers' choice of the crop mix. Well over 1000 farmer families have by now converted over 3500 acres to organic cultivation.

Regenerating natural ecosystems

Amongst the earliest activities of the TC team was regeneration of their own lands, and those around them. Over the last 20 years or so, they have created a green oasis which stands out like a very healthy thumb in the midst of a sore countryside. But the programme also initiated a similar process in a number of villages starting with Mustikovila, helping to broadcast grass seeds in a barren landscape, and encouraging the residents to stop grazing in several successive bits of land for 3 years each. Guards were appointed from each village, paid by the TC through Van Samrakshana (forest protection) Committees elected by the villagers. This process, dubbed Kalpavalli, helped bring back life to over 8000 acres; a recent survey showed a plant diversity of over 300

species, and growing diversity of bird, insect, reptilian and mammal life. On a visit to the area, I saw a Blackbuck, and was told that a small herd has started occupying the area.

Or rather, *had* started occupying the area. For in the last few years there has been a massive setback to this process, with the state administration granting permission to Enercon, a multinational company, to set up a series of windmills in just the area the villagers had regenerated. Any amount of argument by them to give the permission in nearby, still barren lands, were ignored. The company came in with big promises of development for the villages, paid off some influential locals, and created a violent divide within the community itself. Those who were trying to resist the development could not sustain their protest, and the area is now scarred with massive road development, blasted hilltops leveled to put up the windmills, and constant disturbance of vehicles and construction. Ironically, the project is reportedly proposed for carbon credits under the Clean Development Mechanism, the global process that provides incentives to projects that help in mitigating global warming. Apart from the local destruction caused (including possibly driving away some of the Blackbuck), the Enercon project has raised the larger issues of why cluster windmill development should not have to go through an environmental impact assessment and clearance process (India's laws do not require this, assuming that such energy is eco-friendly!), as also through informed consent of local villagers.

Water

In such a dry area, every drop of water counts. Traditionally the area's rulers and people had developed a sophisticated system of tanks that met drinking, agriculture and other needs. First the British colonial rulers then Independent India's governments neglected (and in some cases actually dismantled) these tanks, as also disinvested local controls over them. Water scarcity is now a serious and periodic crisis.

TC has tried to address this issue through a mix of watershed development work in 14 villages (each with over 500 hectares), and the construction or repair and desilting of over 260 waterbodies. Much of this has been done through governmental schemes, including Food for Work. Once again, though, external commercial forces have played havoc, at least in one area; the erosion that the windmill construction has set off could silt up the Moshtikovila tanks that TC helped the villagers to desilt.

Reaching the most marginalized

In all its programmes, TC has given special focus to the poorest, socially most disprivileged sections, especially dalits and landless, and women amongst them. Where it found that collective processes involving several castes were not enabling dalits to voice their issues, separate institutions such as Dalit Youth Sanghas have been created. In a very recent innovation, a Grama Siri Cooperative of the landless (those particularly dependent on animal husbandry) has been set up to facilitate a process of savings based on collective trade in livestock. New livelihoods for disprivileged women include a

weaving centre, whose products (saris, towels) are marketed in collaboration with Dastkar Andhra.

TC also gives a special focus to children; indeed amongst the first activities that Mary conducted after settling here, was education of village children (along with her own). It runs several schools (including a residential one) where 'normal' education is supplemented with various fun, crafts, gardening, and other activities related to local environment and livelihoods. Under its Child Rights programme, Chiguru, TC has also set up a childrens' resource centre with library, study room, computer facilities, craft workshop, environmental science lab and play facilities, accessible to any child. A number of childrens' clubs are run in various villages, under this programme, to give a voice to children in the affairs of their settlements.

Yet another innovation is the Course in Rural Entrepreneurship, Administration and Management (CREAM), now run through a registered society TREES (www.tree-society.org). Realising that people from villages wanting to go into business often don't have the skills, TC has facilitated a number of training programmes not only for the residents of villages it works in but for several other organizations in other states (so far, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and Kerala) work with.

Long way to go...

Despite its many remarkable successes, the TC initiative is far from achieving the rural revolution that is needed to achieve a vision of sustainable, equitable human welfare. Bablu and Mary are the first ones to acknowledge this. They note that even though they have managed to facilitate a large number of dynamic rural institutions for collective work, they have not made an adequate dent in the panchayat system, ridden as it is with the divisiveness of state and national politics. They did undertake a series of awareness and training programmes with panchayat members, but ran out of steam before it could become long-lasting. They hope that with the recent rule of 50% reservation of panchayat seats for women, the increasingly empowered members of the women's cooperatives will be able to take positions in the panchayats and steer them in more progressive ways.

There is also a long way to go for the majority of the farmers to turn to organic cultivation, for a sustained dent to be made in the market, and for more villages to take up forest and waterbody revival. Though there is an impressive level of democracy in the running of the Collective, there remains substantial dependence on Bablu and Mary for its overall running, especially to deal with a number of external challenges. And the Enercon windmill invasion of the Kalpavalli forests is seen by TC as one of the biggest setbacks.

Failures and weaknesses notwithstanding, the TC initiative shows the potential of a constructive rural revolution based on principles of ecological sustainability and social equity. It demonstrates that localized, democratic economies in the hands of ordinary citizens are worth exploring as alternatives to globalised economic growth controlled by powerful corporations. Today's dominant 'development' paradigm has created a series of

crises that are affecting hundreds of millions of people, not the least of them climate change, and has left over half of humanity struggling with poverty and hunger. It is time to explore the TC kind of alternatives.

As I leave Timbaktu, I wonder: if one couple can transform life for so many thousands, what cannot a few dedicated groups achieve across India?

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