

Illiterate women lead organic drive

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Medak, Andhra Pradesh

IMAGINE a group of highly qualified, PhD-decorated professors being floored and humbled by an 'illiterate', peasant woman? I was recently witness to this remarkable occurrence, in a small village of Andhra Pradesh. The occasion: a visit to Gangwar Anjamma's tiny one-room cottage in village Gangwar, Medak District, by several coordinators and participants of the ongoing process of making India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). Always considered the preserve of formally educated scientists and city-bred experts, biodiversity conservation has been brought down to earth by the NBSAP process...and what better way to demonstrate this than a visit to Anjamma's?

As professors and scientists from academic institutions in Andhra, Karnataka, Pondicherry, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu gawked, Anjamma brought out, from under the only cot in her house, 50 varieties of crops in painted earthen pots. She showed larger baskets, lined with mud, ash, and neem leaves, within which several varieties were stored to withstand pest attack over long periods. In all, she told us, she was preserving upto 80 varieties of crops like jowar or sorghum, bajra, ragi, paddy, oilseeds and pulses.

Why was she maintaining all these seeds, had someone asked her to? No, her answer was simple

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yet powerful: "our survival depends on these". Starting off a decade back as a landless, dalit woman considered the most 'backward' by her own village, toiling in others' fields, she slowly built up a seed collection that she would exchange with other farmers. In return for each kilo she gave them, she would ask for 2 kilos back. Through this, she put together some savings, enough to get her a houseplot and some land. Support also came from the government, and today she owns 10 acres, 3-4 bullocks of the sturdy local breed Deoni, and a little house. Her husband helps her in the field, but when it comes to seed selection and preservation, she and her daughters-in-law are the key decision-makers. She regrows 30-40 varieties every year, testing them for various properties, distributing the good ones to farmers and getting more in return, and

perpetuating the cycle of seed selection, use, storage, re-use, and evolution. Sometimes in the same plot she grows 7-8 varieties, deciding the species and varietal mix according to season, weather, growing performance in the previ-

ty. Anjamma uses no chemicals, because she believes that they are poison for mother earth. Her farming is scientific, but it also displays the deep spiritual link with nature. So is she being "backward"...or is a person like myself who admires her

Hindu and Muslim, have been assisted by the Scheduled Castes Commission to consolidate 24 acres of land. They are now growing about 11 crop species on this land, some like jowar with several varieties. The cultivation mix and

A healthy alternative

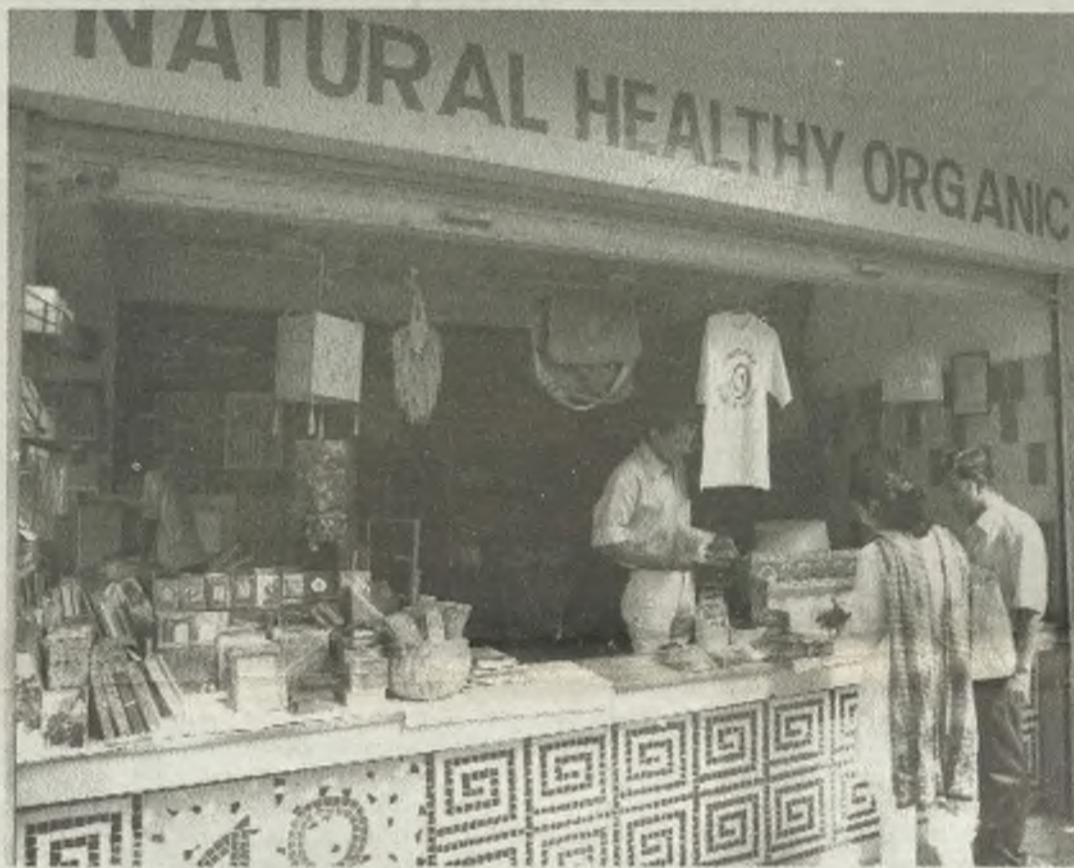
IN this issue of Grassroots, we focus on organic farming as a safe alternative to the mounting threat posed by pesticides to soil and water resources. Since the mid-eighties there has been a growing movement for organic farming.

In Udaibir's organic sugarcane plantations water consumption is reduced by 80 per cent. Traditional seed banks have been set up in different States and a major outlet for organically grown foods is at Delhi Haat. A variety of traditional crops like ragi, jhangora (millet) and amaranth that were on the verge of being forgotten have been resurrected. It is not just wheat, rice, maize and pulses that are being grown organically. Masalas like red chillies, dhania and haldi that are green and free of adulterants as well as sherbets like ginger ale, lemon squash, litchie squash and pudina squash are available.

Anjamma, an illiterate farmer of Gangwar, Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, is preserving the seeds of some 80 varieties of crops. It is true that organically grown food is more expensive than the conventionally grown foods. That is primarily because there is so little of it. Also organically grown food does not piggyback on subsidies. If farmers across the country went in for large scale organic farming the prices would be more competitive. The movement deserves support if we wish to save future generations from poisoned food and water. Articles on this appear on pages 14-15

Sad Schools

Asian Age must be congratulated on bringing out a series of articles on the unhappy condition of schools in many States. The articles are reproduced on pages 4-5.



A shop selling organic food at Dilli Haat.

ous year, and soil conditions.

Sounds like an agricultural scientist? Well, she is no less. The difference is, many of the scientists of our key national and state level agricultural institutions and universities will have highly-funded projects to do the same. And many of them (fortunately, not all!) will end up advocating the use of hybrid seeds, synthetic pesticides, and chemical fertilisers. The Green Revolution blend that is supposed to have brought India food securi-

being "romantic" and "unrealistic" in the context of growing food needs to feed India's 'burgeoning' population? Would we not have been starving without the Green Revolution?

For an answer, let's switch to another field visit that the NBSAP participants made, the next morning. This was to Badikanne village of the same district. Half a dozen village women took us to some lush green fields which they are cultivating. 28 dalit women, both

rotation is highly sophisticated, designed to maintain the fertility of the soil without having to use chemical fertilisers, to ward off pest attacks without having to use pesticides, to optimise the productivity of biomass including grains and fodder, and even to provide for distractions for small children that the women have to bring along with them during agricultural operations! The strategy has been so successful that neighbouring farm- (See *Illiterate women* ..page 2)

Kashmiri pashmina loses to cheap yarn

USHA RAI
Srinagar

ONE of the worst impacts of the 12 years of militancy in the Kashmir Valley has been on the exquisite traditional pashmina shawls. Chinese machine-made yarn and shawls have swamped the markets edging out the hand-made local pashmina.

In fact as Mifta Shaw, whose company has been showcasing Kashmir pashmina since 1840, as well as Fayaz Ahmed Beigh, who manufactures the traditional pashmina shawls working with some 3000 families of the Valley, fear the traditional hand-spun shawl is fac-

ing extinction. While Shaw maintains the end may come within a decade, Beigh fears it may all be over in four to five years.

A range of fakes from China, Nepal and our own powerlooms in Punjab are being passed off as pashmina from Kashmir. With pashmina being produced in bulk on powerlooms, prices have dropped to an all time low. In 1985, '86, pashmina shawls (1m X 2 m) were selling for Rs 5500 to Rs 6000. Today the price should be Rs 12,000 to Rs 15,000. Instead it is down to Rs 4500 to Rs 5000. Asif Ali of Kashmir Looms maintains that the cost of the pashmina stole or small shawl in London was initially \$ 200

a piece. Now the adulterated product is being sold in flea markets of Europe for just \$15 to \$20.

While some amount of blame can be put on the turmoil in the Valley, the sad fact is that the Indian pashmina has no patent. Neither the authorities in the Valley nor those in Delhi realized the importance of a patent. So the spurious shawls are being marketed abroad as Cashmere or Pashmina. Most buyers are not discerning enough to see the difference in quality and are easily taken in by the brand names. It may be too late already to save the Kashmir pashmina. So the exquisite pashmina, whose history dates back to the days of Mohenjadarro, (the soft fine

fabric draped around the statue of a woman found at Mohenjadarro was probably pashmina from the Valley) may go the way of Basmati rice, neem and haldi.

It is said that some 700 years ago Badshah Zen-ul-abidan, one of the most famous Central Asian leaders introduced pashmina to the artisans of the Valley to lift their economy. The word 'pash' is derived from Pushto and means fine. Now with the direct competition between machine (Chinese and Punjab powerlooms) and man (the traditional weavers), the craft that the Badshah gifted to the people of the Valley

(See *Kashmiri Pashmina* ...page 9)



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Illiterate women lead...

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ers, some of them very large land-owners who had once converted to chemical-intensive farming, have requested the women to help them switch back to organic farming so that the natural fertility of their soils can return.

Therein lies the rub. The Green Revolution sure did help India to considerably increase foodgrains production, but at a staggering cost which we are now beginning to pay.

The soils in Punjab and Haryana and Eastern Uttar Pradesh are dying, their micro-organic biodiversity having been killed, their humous having been sucked out. Or they are getting water-logged and salinised by irrigation-intensive and continuous farming. Here and in other parts of India, pests are making a comeback with a vengeance, having proved more resilient to the pesticides than their predators! Farmers have to spray more amounts or deadlier pesticides, with mounting costs, growing cases of direct poisoning, and of course a legacy of unacceptable chemical contamination of the food that we all eat. The sheer economic treadmill, in which

farmers are having to pay more and more to obtain the same or diminishing returns, is driving many of them to desperation. Not to mention the incredible economic burden the country has to bear for subsidising fertilisers and pesticides, and the petroleum imports related to this.

It is in this context that the

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women of Medak district have an answer. As part of the community organisation Deccan Development Society, women of about 75 villages have organised themselves into sangams.

Since 1985, they have brought back under active cultivation over ten thousand acres of degraded agricultural lands, and raised their production from 0.5 million kgs of grains per year to nearly 2.5 million kgs. Since 1996, they have developed and managed a radical, pathbreaking

Alternative Public Distribution System based on the principles of local production, local storage and local distribution. About 1600 women participating in this PDS system have enhanced the productivity of nearly 2500 acres of land, to grow nearly 800,000 kgs of extra sorghum per year. This has also meant generation of nearly half a mil-

a Biodiversity Action Plan under the NBSAP, aimed at further consolidating this initiative. One of their main demands in this action plan: the government must re-orient its economic policies and agricultural schemes away from chemical-intensive farming towards supporting organic, biodiverse produce. And recognise that women have a key role in sustainable farming, and should accordingly have tenurial rights to the resources required for it.

The women of Medak are not alone in these demands, or in innovative initiatives towards sustainable agriculture. Beej Bachao Andolan in the Himalayan foothills, Rupantar in Chhattisgarh, Green Foundation in Karnataka, Academy of Development Science in Maharashtra, an organic cotton growers network in Vidarbha, and many many others are showing that this indeed is the future of agriculture.

Not the chemical-intensive Green Revolution, not even the hi-biotechnology dream of the technocrats, but the simple, time-tested, locally-controlled, low-input systems of the women of Medak. ■

lion extra wages in three years and generation of new fodder for over 20,000 heads of cattle. This activity has translated into production of nearly 1000 extra meals per each project partner family per year.

The village level Community Grain Funds which the women in 32 villages were able to establish today serves the critical hunger time food needs of the poorest and destitute in their communities.

And now they have produced

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