

Some food for thought

Illiterate peasant women in Andhra Pradesh have taken huge strides towards bio-diversity conservation, writes ASHISH KOTHARI.



IMAGINE a group of highly qualified 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 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 Pradesh, 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 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 house plot 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 grows 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 previous year, and soil conditions.

Sounds like an agricultural sci-

entist? 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. India's food security supposed to have been brought about by the Green Revolution blend. 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 being "romantic" and "unrealistic" in the context of the 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 were cultivating. Twenty eight dalit women, both 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 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 bring along during agricultural operations! The strategy has been so successful that neighbouring farmers, 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 food grains production, but at a staggering cost which we are now beginning to pay. The soil in Punjab and Haryana and Eastern Uttar Pradesh is dying, its micro-organic biodiversity having been killed, their humus 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 have 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 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, path breaking 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 million 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 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 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 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.

Charkha Features



K H U S H W A N T S I N G H

Gujarat tragedy

THERE are days when speeches made by our *netas* and so-called *sants* distress me so much that a voice within me screams "let all of them go to *Gehennum* (hell); I'll get on with my life as best as I can." When I get over the depression, a wave of anger surges within me, I say to myself: "this is my homeland, my motherland, I will not let these medieval-minded fuddy-duddies get away with wasting precious years squabbling over trivia like where exactly a temple should have its foundation-stone laid. I will shout my protest from the house-tops."

Then comes the ghastly carnage in Gujarat. It is clear as daylight that the attack on the train at Godhra was pre-planned with malicious aforethought. Its perpetrators wanted to drive a wedge between Hindus and Muslims. They succeeded in doing so and the State administration let them get away with it. Far from putting them down swiftly with an iron-hand, it colluded with the mischief-makers because its police and its Chief Minister was imbued with the spirit of *badla* — revenge.

I have seen it before with my own eyes in 1947 and 1984. Mobs went on the rampage looting and killing innocent people. The police stood by like *tamashbeens* — spectators watching the carnage. They had been tipped off not to interfere but let looters and killers teach hapless men, women and children a lesson they would never forget. In Gujarat not only did the police remain inert, when the army arrived on the scene it was not deployed. Flag marches are spectacles which don't frighten evil-doers. What does frighten are orders to shoot at sight which were issued only after many lives had been lost and vast amount of property destroyed. There can be no doubt there was serious dereliction of duty on the part of the Chief Minister, his cabinet colleagues and the IG of police. Those who make statements defending them perjure their consciences and do so for reasons known to all of us. Shame on them! The only word that fits Narendra Modi and his government is *nikammi*.

I quote lines of Delhi's poet Gauhar Raza on the Ram temple freely translated by me from the Urdu:

*A temple built with mortar soaked in human blood,
Its bricks fired and baked in kilns made of burnt down huts,*

*Its bells pealing with screams, sighs and sobs.
A temple whose foundations are laid
By uprooting from the earth its glorious past,
Whose walls are plastered with savagely torn off stones
And coloured with sindhoor taken from heads' of married women;*

*Its stones are carved out of flesh of innocent people
Let an aged man whose hopes are dead
Like the last gasp of a young man who has been bled
To name a temple raised thus
Will be an unpardonable sin.
You have made this into a habit
But we will not let you Shri Rama's defame
By giving such an edifice, bear his sacred name.*

Defying old age

For the last five years a regular bi-weekly visitor I have is Kishan Lal, owner of the Rajdoot Hotel. I learn that he also makes bi-weekly calls on the eminent lawyer Fali Nariman. Every time he comes he brings something from his hotel or his farmhouse. I don't know what he has in