

# Gendering Agriculture

## Putting women first

*By gaining critical control over seeds rural women have recovered traditional landraces and biodiversity in agriculture. Initiatives such as Alternative PDS and Food Sovereignty Trust by Deccan Development Society have not only ensured heightened access to food and nutrition but have also empowered women by strengthening their leadership abilities.*

P V Satheesh

Photo: DDS



*Nurturing biodiversity in farming*

Having worked for over two decades with small and marginal women farmers from low income dalit families in the Medak District of Andhra Pradesh, the Deccan Development Society has been privileged to acquire a range of exciting perspectives offered by the women on their agriculture. This paper presents some of those perspectives which turn the arguments by the formal agricultural economists and scientists on their head and present a unique vision of food and farming born in and nurtured from the ground.

The issues raised here confront us with the question whether gendered vision of agriculture is an exercise in cloning men's concerns on to women or creating and nurturing the authentic women's paradigm in agriculture especially that of the small and marginal women farmers from ecologically challenged areas. This is the issue that we have been raising for a long time. Since our own work with over 5000 dalit women farmers has spawned rich decades-long dialogues with them, we are in a position to mirror many of their thoughts on the subject.

The women's agricultural paradigm is marked by a process of humanisation of all things related to farming. Let me illustrate this with the epistemology of the women farmers of DDS:

- Let us start with the Earth. She is invariably referred to as *Bhootalli* [Mother Earth] by them. She is not a piece of real estate or a lifeless piece of grain producing machine. She is the Mother of life.
- From this point onwards the entire process of crop growth is seen by women in the same manner as the growth of a human child from the embryo stage.
  - When the crops are in the podding stage, *Bhootalli Pottatoni Undi*, [Mother Earth is pregnant]

- When the grains are filling *Paalu taagutindi* [they are being breastfed]
- When they are mature, they are *Pottakochindi* [ready for delivery]

The examples are umpteen. But they all point to one thing. Women farmers look at the entire farming process as a cycle of life. Food is produced in a cyclical and nurturing process of birth, growth, maturity and regeneration. This vision is as different from the vision of the Green Revolution agriculture as chalk is from cheese. This is the paradigm that women are presenting to us.

Through their initiatives, the women's sanghams of the Deccan Development Society have assured their full control over their agriculture, continuous access to food and nutrition for them and the children in their families and have heralded community sovereignty over food and seeds. In the following paragraphs, I will try to trace the course which the DDS sanghams charted for themselves over the years.

### Heightening the access

Almost from the beginning of its existence, Deccan Development Society has worked towards the issue of access to food for its members. In the early years, this access was aimed at providing them interest-free consumption loans that would enable the women to purchase grains regularly from the PDS (Public Distribution System) [which many of them were unable to do since they would not have cash when their ration would arrive at the village and therefore they would forego the ration] as well as from the market at advantageous moments such as harvest time when prices would be at their lowest.

But, soon DDS realised that this was not the best of the strategies to make them gain food autonomy. Therefore in the second phase

we started helping them to reclaim the infertile lands that they owned but due to their incapacity to invest on enhancing their fertility, had left them untended. Over a period of ten or more years, a programme called “Eco employment” brought over 5000 acres of marginal lands owned by the members of DDS and created nearly one million person days of employment. Most of all, it increased food availability to each of the participating families by over 400%. The lands that were addressed through this programme had been semi abandoned by the women and yielded less than 50 kg per acre per year. Through the eco employment, women bunded, destoned and at times added top soil to it. This rejuvenated the soils and with the hard work that women put in, the fields started yielding between 200-300 kg of a variety of grains per acre. Since the women brought into their lands their traditional practice of farming millets, legumes and oilseeds simultaneously, it was not only cereals that were coming into the family but also nutritionally rich pulses and oilseeds. Thus, alongside extra food, extra nutrition also entered the family kitchen. This meant that, over 2000-3000 women were able to feed themselves and their families and increase their food and nutritional security four to five times.

Another significant aspect of both these programmes was that the women practiced their own traditional millet based farming on these lands. Therefore, the food that was coming into their family was not rice which is a grain at the lowest rung of the nutritional table. They were now raising and eating a variety of millets that included sorghum [jowar], pearl millet [bajra], foxtail millet, proso millet, kodo millet and barnyard millet.

### Community controlled food sovereignty

The third and the most seminal initiative called the Alternative PDS through Community Grain Bank was initiated by DDS in 1994. The basic objective of this jowar [the local millet which is nutritionally very rich] based PDS programme was to ensure local production, local storage and local distribution. This was operationalised by advancing financial assistance to the marginal farmers in 30 villages in the first phase to reclaim their fallow lands through timely cultivation, application of farmyard manure and carrying out other timely farming practices. The agreement was that the money advanced will be returned in the form of grains which are stored in their own village and sold at a cheap price to the poorest families in the villages. All the decisions related to this programme were made by the community. In each village, a committee of dalit women was elected to lead and manage this programme. Thus, the women had taken over the food leadership of their village communities, an extraordinary achievement for them.

In the first phase, this programme was piloted in 32 villages in 1994 involving about 1600 families. This has given DDS a range of experience.

- Through this alternative PDS, the women brought over 2600 acres of fallows under the plough.
- They produced an extra 800,000 kilograms of sorghum in their villages in the very first year of the project. This meant that



Photo: DDS

Community gene banks managed by women

they were able to produce nearly three million extra meals in 30 villages. Or 1000 extra meals for each participating family.

- Through this act they were able to explode the myth that it is only Green Revolution model of agriculture in high potential areas that can bring food security into this country.
- The programme also generated a massive additional employment in every village that it was implemented. The extent was about 75 person days of employment per acre which roughly worked out to about 8000 person days of employment per village.

Such a massive and sustainable employment generation also has a direct impact on the purchasing power of the poor. The oft-repeated problem with the mainstream PDS is that even when there is enough food in ration shops, there is no offtake because people do not have the purchasing power. The Alternative PDS of the Deccan Development Society has also found a solution for this vexed problem.

- The fodder provided by the newly cultivated fields sustained over 6000 heads of cattle in 30 villages every year.

Over the last five years the DDS has expanded this programme to over 7000 acres in 134 villages in eight districts of AP benefiting nearly one lakh persons. Through this programme the access to food and nutrition by women and children, especially from the vulnerable ranks of the Society has been steadily ensured.

### Community Gene Fund

The next major step for DDS Sanghams was the Community Gene Fund programme, which had as its aim, Seed Sovereignty for all the women in DDS communities. This programme has restored critical control over seeds in the hands of the rural women in general and dalit women in particular. In tune with the paradigm of women’s agriculture, this initiative has laid heavy emphasis on



*Accessing more food through land lease*

biodiversity in agriculture and recovery of traditional landraces. Within a span of five years about 900 women who participated in this programme recovered over 85 traditional landraces and have set up banks of traditional seeds in 50 villages.

Ten years later, the situation has completely reversed the gender and caste relations within their societies. Every DDS woman now has 10-15 varieties of seeds at her home. Once upon a time, she would have eaten these seeds when she had no food grains at home. But with her food sovereignty assured now, she has moved towards seed sovereignty. Even as every single woman was achieving her seed sovereignty, 55 villages now have ten year old Community Gene Banks managed by one or two women seedkeepers selected by the village sanghams. Each of these Community Gene Banks store between 50-80 varieties of seeds. Anyone can borrow seeds from this bank and return the quantity in the form of seeds. The higher castes and men come to these banks to borrow seeds, thus completely reversing the gender and caste based power relations. twenty years earlier, it was dalit women who used to go for begging seeds from high caste men. With the reversal of their status from seed seekers to seed providers, dalit women have actually portended a gender revolution in agriculture.

### **Childcare and nutrition**

Apart from the consistent growth in the household nutritional status for women and children, DDS communities have institutionalised some of these efforts. Since 1988, DDS sanghams have run their

own Balwadis -- day care centres for their children. In 1996, they redesigned the menu for their children which was predominantly millet based. This has ensured that the children from the low income families in the villages of DDS have access to good food on a regular basis. Many studies done by the Society on the children in the DDS balwadies has pointed to at least 30% to 50% higher nutritional status for them in comparison to the children outside of the balwadies.

### **Hunger mapping and community kitchens**

As if to cap all the other achievements of theirs, the women started doing a hunger map of their communities in 2006 and identified the destitutes and people unable to do any work. In 2007, they had started community kitchens for these people with their own grain and labour contributions. For people who are typically under \$2 a day earning, this was indeed remarkable from any angle.

All these interventions that focused on retrieving women's food and farming systems had irrefutably established their health and nutritional advantages to their families.

In 2006, the DDS took another seminal step by establishing its Food Sovereignty Trust composed completely of nine rural dalit women. The Trust has its own corpus fund to look after the agricultural and food sovereignty initiatives of the Society. The DDS Food Sovereignty Trust has the basic aim of restoring the dignity of the poor by helping them to establish total autonomy over their food production, storage and distribution systems at the community levels.

In the final analysis, by tailoring its agriculture, food and nutritional initiatives to the paradigm of women, the Deccan Development Society has not only ensured their basic needs such as food, nutritional and health security is met but also addressed their strategic needs such as leadership and political roles, articulation space and visibility in the public domain. Many of them are today seen as a unique dalit women group which travels all over the world, as far as Canada, and articulate their vision of food and farming. Thus, by recognising and implementing the women's vision of agriculture, DDS has completely altered the discourse on Women and Agriculture.

*(Extracted from the paper presented in the International Food Policy Research Institute Workshop on Women in Agriculture in South Asia, Organized by Aga Khan Foundation (12th to 14th August 2008).*

### **P V Satheesh**

Director, Deccan Development Society,  
#101, Kishan Residency, Road No 5,  
Begumpet, Hyderabad-500 016,  
Andhra Pradesh, India  
e-mail: satheeshperiyapatna@gmail.com; ddshyderabad@gmail.com