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Crops of truth



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[Issue 435 \(/issues/2010/09/01/\)](/issues/2010/09/01/)

Jaideep Hardikar travels to the bottom of the social scale, and the women of rural south India, to discover where knowledge and wisdom about seeds are still to be found.

The first thing that catches the eye is their colour. Next, a fascinating variety.

As she neatly arranges beautiful clay pots filled with seeds, one by one, on the mud-littered floor of her house, Chandamma Molikeri's face lights up. 'These are our seeds – our life,' says the sexagenarian, proudly unveiling different millets, some of which face extinction elsewhere in India.

The list is long: fox-tail millet, wild millet, small millet... All of that, she says, forms her family's food, rich in nutrition, their health and wellbeing. Bishop-weed, she says, is good for lactating women; linseed good for the heart; little millet will protect you from the summer heat. In her native Telugu language, Chandamma calls them satyam pantulu or 'crops of truth'.

That's an ode to the resilience of seeds, which grow against several odds: the infertile, laterite-red or alluvial-black soils that characterize this region; fluctuating monsoons; climatic disruptions; market price volatility. The seeds are truthful. They grow without much water or inputs. They suit dry-land farming, in contrast with the high-cost, energy-intensive modern agriculture systems forced by the government on peasant farmers, millions of whom now languish under the yoke of debt.

Dry land and rain

We are in Bidakanne, a village of 2,000 mostly small farming households in Medak district in Andhra Pradesh state, 100 miles west of its capital, Hyderabad, southern India. It's a dry-land area, like roughly 70 per cent of India's agricultural land, where crops depend on rains to grow. Any small aberration in the monsoon has a disastrous effect. Now the clouds are pregnant with rain. A desperately awaited monsoon has finally announced its arrival after a gruelling summer and one of the worst drought years.

For people like Anjamma, life is celebration of colourful seeds. 'I am respected for this knowledge...

Chandamma is not alone in her determination to bring back 'dignity' to crops that have been relegated to 'inferior grains'. In all, some 5,000 women from 75 villages are staking a claim to create an 'agro- biodiversity' heritage site.

For more than two decades, with the help of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), they have been painstakingly preserving local seed varieties. It's a revolution of sorts. Heritage status for those varieties on official seed registers could restrict any activity that might hamper this practice, says PV Satheesh, the founder and a director of DDS.

Its members are fighting market behemoths. The 'knowledge initiative' in agriculture, signed by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and US President George W Bush at Hyderabad in 2006, was cheered on by representatives from Wal-Mart and Monsanto. India now covets expensive technologies in agriculture, ostensibly to boost sagging farm growth. Many believe this strategy will do more harm than good.

Back to roots

The future, says Satheesh, lies in going back to the roots, to our native wisdom.

Chandamma radiates confidence in the wisdom she got from her parents, who inherited it from theirs, and they in turn from theirs. Listening to her is an education: on the science of the seeds she calls the 'originators of life'; on the treasure of wisdom; on the human link to wild nature; on the secrets of biodiversity; on taste and the genesis of local cuisines that in India distinguish region from region.

'If I have control over my seeds,' she says, 'I control my food and my family's nutrition.' Preserve your own seeds; grow nothing you can't eat. 'Without seeds,' she says, 'a farm is like a house without light.'

The farmers of this region grow between 6 and 25 crops from up to 80 seed varieties. This rich diversity, they say, is an insurance against aberrations of nature or market fluctuations. Some seeds survive untimely rain, others resist drought. They never fail.

The 5,000 DDS women are confederated through village-level sanghams or voluntary groups. They represent the poorest of the poor of the peasant world and are from Dalit – erstwhile 'untouchable' – communities at the bottom of the Indian social scale. Samamma, another seed-keeper, says their lands, like them, are resource-poor – a sign of discrimination. Seeds are a rallying point, a reason for the women farmers to confederate and ultimately to have a political voice.

Apart from their individual seed collections, these women manage some 60 community seed banks with over 80

retrieved land races (wild varieties) that have been obliterated by modern agricultural practices – vibrant reminders of what once dotted India’s agricultural panorama. In all the 75 villages you’ll find seeds tied across the doors in garlands – thoranam – a sign of how proud farmers are of their biodiversity.

The contraption they use to store seeds is uncomplicated. A handmade bamboo basket, 60 centimetres round, 45 deep, is plastered with cow dung. Once the basket is dry, the seeds are placed in it, covered with grass and capped with cow dung. The seeds stay well protected. It costs nothing.

On the day of sowing, Chandamma says, she and other sangham members worship the basket of seeds at five different places on the field before opening it.

Festival

Deccan, as this region is known, has festivals of which seeds are the soul. Endlagatte Punnam is one such. The festival precedes the harvesting of winter crops. Peasant farmers collect ear-heads of crops from their farms and, with home-cooked sweets, offer them to the village goddess.

A ritual that coincides with the Hindu festival Dussehra is here called Gatlu Koorchovadam. Women farmers mix the five most important seeds of winter crops with soil from a single plot. They fill clay pots with the mix and decorate them with sugarcane and sorghum. When the seeds sprout, they visit each others’ houses to see which have greater potency, then take the best to the farm for planting.

The selling or trading of seeds is a strict no-no. They are only to be shared, borrowed or exchanged. Chandamma says she lends her seeds to villagers, provided they return double the quantity after harvest. Both resources and knowledge are freely exchanged, encouraging localized systems of seed adaptation.

PV Satheesh is a driving force behind the Millet Network of India (MINI), which is trying to revive India’s coarse staples. When he first came here, he says, the process of ecological destruction had set in; fallow lands were becoming more extensive as agriculture became more intensive, with subsidized industrial monocultures destroying small farms. Fallow lands and malnutrition went hand in hand. By 1997 seed diversity was down by 70 per cent. It was time for some serious introspection.

Marginalization of crops led to marginalization of land and, ultimately, of peasant farmers, Satheesh says: ‘At the core, it stemmed from the loss of seed biodiversity and sovereignty.’ It took time for the DDS to create trust and convince farmers to return to coarse grains they had stopped growing. ‘Now they are convincing others to fall back upon their traditional wisdom.’

Fighting the behemoths

Across India, multinational corporations are rapidly taking over the multi-billion-dollar seed market, adding to the ruin of millions of peasant farmers. Monsanto-controlled genetically modified (GM) seeds are the latest threat to the rich agro-biodiversity of India, many peasant lobbies say. Peasant farmers’ suicides have been attributed to their introduction. Farmers also fear that GM technologies could lead to serious soil erosion. Diversified farming practices are more stable and sustainable, and minimize financial risks – an important factor for small farmers.

No wonder that resistance to commercial seed companies is growing. It ranges from NGOs like the DDS and movements such as the Beej Bachao Andolan (Movement to Save Seeds) in the foothills of the Himalayas, to the widely known Navdanya with its network of partners, to little-known individual peasant-farmers like Dadaji Khobragade who, on his half-hectare farm in a village in Maharashtra, is preserving and creating new rice varieties.

For people like Anjamma, life is celebration of colourful seeds. ‘I am respected for this knowledge,’ she says. ‘When all other commercial crops failed last year due to drought, I got bumper crops.’

On her four hectares of land, which she bought piece by piece for 20 years, she grows about 80 different crops. She says new generations are willingly embracing age-old wisdom. Wisdom, she says, is never obsolete. It is eternal. 'Search my kitchen, you can't find one crop that I don't grow,' she says. 'If you can tell me one crop that I do not grow,' she chuckles with a twinkle, 'I will do whatever you say.'

Jaideep Hardikar is a journalist based in Nagpur, India. In 2009 he was an Alfred Friendly Press fellow.

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