

feature



WORKING THE LAND:
Susilamma Masanagari (red sari) and Ratnamma Algole (orange sari, green top) on collective cultivated land

Sisters are doing it for themselves

It is a story of hope and triumph - 5,000 women from the poorest section of Indian society have transformed once barren land into fertile farms to provide food for 50,000 people. TARA GREAVES travels with Christian Aid to meet the inspirational women of the Deccan Development Society

SITTING cross-legged under the welcome shade of her porch, Laxamma looks so content as she deftly arranges different types of seeds into colourfully-painted pots that is it impossible to imagine her any other way.

Her emerald green bangles jingle on her wrists as a kind of musical accompaniment to her fingers which dance from one variety to another.

She names dozens of them, detailing, from memory, exactly what they are, when and how they should be planted and how they should be kept, so they have the best possible chance of producing much-needed food - without the aid of Western conveniences such as freezers or cold stores. Occasionally her flow is interrupted by a neighbour from her small rural village in drought-prone Andhra Pradesh, part of the vast Deccan Plateau which dominates central and southern India, calling out a greeting - a sign of the respect the 45-year-old now commands as a seed keeper, teacher and landowner.

But, 25 years ago, life was very different for the mother-of-two and without the aid of a then-fledgling organisation called the Deccan Development Society (DDS), which in turn has been helped by the generosity of

supporters of Christian Aid, Laxamma does not like to think about where she might be now.

"My husband left me," she said, her busy hands resting on a pot for a moment.

"In those days I was just an agricultural labourer. I was poor. I had no house. I was a single woman returned to my mother's place.

"At that time no-one cared for anyone else, everyone was searching for work to cure their hunger. No-one cared about the land. They thought 'if I have wages today, I can eat today'."

Adding to her hardship was the fact that Laxamma is a Dalit, also known as "untouchable" and, despite the complex Indian caste system being abolished in 1950, old prejudices remained and simply being born into the wrong family meant many doors were closed to her. Just when she was at her lowest point, she signed up to a women's sangham, a voluntary group for the poor, which DDS has now set up in more than 100 villages.

Here the story is picked up by PV Sathesh, a charismatic former television producer and documentary maker who co-founded DDS with five acquaintances, including a human rights worker, a social anthropologist and political activist.

"We were all conscious of the kinds of things we had done and the kinds of things that had happened and we all felt we must do something active," he said at the organisation's headquarters in a nearby town.

DDS wanted to restore the earth using traditional methods but also people's faith that the land could still provide for them.

Since the start, the focus has been on working with those in the most marginalised section of Indian community - Dalit women - which is where the courageous Laxamma and thousands like her come in. "Indian society is very hierarchical and divisive," Sathesh said.

"In the caste structure, if you imagine a body, Brahmins are the head; the intellectual, priestly classes which take

on the role of leader and teacher.

"Next comes the trunk of the body. These are the fighters and the warriors, known as Kshatriyas. Then comes the trading level known as Vaishya and the last level is the feet or the Shudras."

Underneath all of these, not even worthy of being in a caste, are the Dalits.

"They were in such a position that they would not even be touched by someone from another caste, they were the untouchables," said Sathesh, who is a Brahmin.

At least 12% to 15% of the population of India is Dalit and, even today, castes still exist - sometimes for positive discrimination where there are programmes with a specific number of places for Dalits in schools, colleges and in government.

India has even had a Dalit president - but in the rural villages, the caste system can still be used to oppress. At the very beginning, DDS created sanghams for men but it soon became clear that women wanted to be included.

"Women have a great sense

of sisterhood. They sit down and talk together and they don't just think of the benefit to themselves," he said.

"Women also have a lot of patience, they don't want to jump 10 steps ahead - they are willing to take one step at a time.

"They also use money very frugally and very conscientiously." The sanghams are now the solid roots from which all of DDS's branches have grown.

Initially this was empowering women to take wasted land - some of which they were given by the government under positive discrimination but had abandoned because of its barren state - and instructing them in natural ways to transform it and also giving them grants for tools and labour, which they had to repay when they could.

Nowadays there is a college managed by DDS where women can go - and sometimes stay overnight - to attend courses, learning about sustainable farming, together with a Green School where younger



HARD LABOUR:
The sugar cane harvest in Didgi village

MAKING CHANGES: The Community Media Trust set up by DDS in 2001 to train women to become filmmakers

Photos: ELEANOR BENTALL



CHANGING LIVES: Top right, Narsamma Algole who became a producer at Sangham Radio after attending the Green School run by DDS. Centre right, the Green School, Machnoor village, set up by the Deccan Development Society which has a focus on vocational training. Right, Begari Laxamma, and her seed bank where she has 82 varieties of seeds, in Humnapur village



generations are supported.

But DDS members have also developed balwadies (crèches) for the children of women working in the fields, a home for Dalit women who suffer abuse and violence and even a Community Media Trust with its own radio station and award-winning female filmmakers.

The last two have proved invaluable in sharing information, as many of the women do not read or write so oral communication is the only way that knowledge and traditions live on.

Narsamma, one of the members of the trust, said: "What we understand and know is limited to what we see and experience."

The women have produced more than 200 films about agriculture and their way of life – winning three coveted awards for their work – which are shown in the villages as well as further afield at festivals around the world.

The radio station, Sangham FM, broadcasts for two hours every night and reaches about 300,000 people, with segments ranging from legal issues, health and finance to missing animals, gossip and children's programmes.

There is also

a shop to sell the produce the women have left once they have fed their own families.

For Laxamma, DDS helped her to develop the skills she already had and learn new ones to turn her life around. This still means long, sometimes back-breaking, days in the boiling sun toiling on her land and evenings spent preserving seeds.

At certain times of the year she is in almost constant demand when people visit her house to collect seeds (there is no cost for them, they receive a pot and are asked to return two at the end of the season to keep the bank alive).

"In my grandmother's time there was plenty of seed but in my mother's time a lot of farmers were convinced by the government to use packet seed and so the other seeds vanished," she said.

Laxamma was one of five women from the Sangham chosen to help run a seed bank and in just two years they managed to re-establish 82 varieties.

"Each seed variety has something specific about it, for example some will withstand heavy rain, some will come early in the season and some will come late.

"By planting mixed

crops, we know at the end we will have something to eat."

She has 2.5 acres of her own land to farm as well as being the seed keeper for the village and for a central seed bank also run by DDS.

Laxamma stresses how important it is to keep the traditional methods alive so that they never again have to rely on outsiders.

"We may take their seeds today but then we have to take them again next season. We lose our autonomy. In a few years they may say we will only give you seeds if you give us what you produce from the land and then they have control of our seeds, our land and our food. We lose our independence.

"This way we can earn money but at the end of it we also have our own food to eat."

One of the things on people's minds in this country is how to feed a booming population without a step change in the way they grow food but Sathesh thinks he has the answer.

"I am not interested in feeding the world, only the 1.2 billion in India," he said, with a smile.

"If every village can take care of itself, where is the problem? They can even produce more food which can help feed those

in the cities too." In this semi-arid area, 100 villages now completely feed themselves – all using traditional agricultural methods.

And Laxamma is adamant that not only does she not want genetically modified food, she does not want machines to take on some of the work – even though it would make her life easier – as it would mean the loss of wages for her neighbours and friends.

The inspiring women of DDS are now strong, caring and knowledgeable – and all because they were given a chance.

Just imagine what could happen if thousands more women – and their children – were given that same opportunity.

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WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

REGARDLESS of religion, ethnicity or nationality, Christian Aid works with and through partners, such as the Deccan Development Society (DDS), to become a leading force in helping to wipe out global poverty.

For more than 60 years the charity has been turning hope into action but the world is not getting any fairer and during this year's Christian Aid Week, which runs until May 21, they need your help more than ever.

In 2010/2011, they funded DDS with a £45,000 grant to help aid this life-changing work and expand the number of women, children and families it can help.

Celebrating its 25th birthday this year, DDS now works with 5,000 women, many of them from the poorest section of Indian society.

The programmes it runs, including a college, school and media trust, have evolved to give the women a powerful voice in the areas of agriculture, sustainability and education.

