
On the Margin

Poor & their Lands

A Case for Comprehensive Public Investments

*A Livelihoods Analysis of
the Dalit Watershed Development Program of DDS*

August, 2004



DDS



WASSAN

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***A Livelihoods Analysis of
the Dalit Watershed Development Program of DDS***

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ON THIS STUDY

Years ago, when watersheds became the flavour of the day and *Ridge to Valley* was the mantra of the times, some of us in DDS starting wondering how would this new development trend affect the poor, especially *dalits*. In our work with dalits for over twenty years, we had realised that most of their lands were uplands, marginal and uncared for. In the context of this experience, we felt that the *ridge to valley* model might help the better lands of the better off people but surely it would not serve the interest of *dalits*. As usual they would be left out of the substantive development process though peripherally, some crumbs would be thrown at them.

Thus began a process in DDS of new ways of looking at watersheds. This process was informed by the vision of the dalit women of DDS for whom their small pieces of land were the only source of food production for their families and communities. Therefore, we thought, if in the name of watershed, these lands became tree plantations or grasslands and ultimately converted into blotting papers to soak up rainwater and transport it to the better lands of the better off people downstream, it would be a grave injustice to *dalit* livelihoods.

An outcome of this thinking was *Dalit Watersheds*, a new concept in watersheds. This created a new model of watersheds that converted *dalit* lands into ecological food farms working on biodiversity based production system. Farming on these lands was totally organic, crops raised were diverse and the focus was on food production. They were managed completely by dalit women, turning these watersheds into *women's watersheds*. And finally, focusing all development effort on the lands of the poor, these watersheds became intrinsically equity-based. They were the forerunners of the Watershed++ model, which had remained just an agenda for discussion in big symposiums at that point of time.

This integration of ecological, gender and *dalit* concerns into watersheds needed to be studied in depth to understand its implications for the marginalised lands and marginalised people. *On the Margin: Poor and their Lands* by WASSAN is an effort in this direction. Mr A. Ravindra and Mr K Suresh of WASSAN who initiated this study need to be congratulated for their highly sophisticated outlook towards natural resource management that is community controlled, gender just and ecologically sustainable. Mr Ch Ravi Kumar, who was the mainstay of the study has made it

multidimensional and has come up with some stunning conclusions. I am very grateful to him for his work. I hope this has given him a new socio-political direction in his natural resources related work.

My colleague Mr Perma Narsimlu helped the WASSAN team in this study all through. Mr Giridhar, Joint Director [Admn], DDS, competently coordinated the logistics. Both of them deserve my special thanks.

I am certain that WASSAN, which is a very influential network, will broadcast the outcomes of this study far and wide. As a result of their efforts, if the watershed development policy in this country can come out of its straitjacket and look radically at the issues of gender, marginalisation, food and ecology in watersheds, WASSAN's commendable efforts would have borne fruit.

July 7, 2004
Hyderabad

P V Satheesh
Director
Deccan Development Society

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Livelihoods Analysis of Dalit Watershed Development Program of DDS

A majority of the poor in rainfed regions own land – some of it purchased by accumulating small surplus. Much of these lands in Andhra Pradesh are assigned to the Dalits over years. These lands are generally far from the village and are characterised by undulating terrain, low soil depth, poor quality soils, high levels of erosion, stony and scrub growth. These lands are mostly left fallow and are starved of any comprehensive public investments on their development. The mainstream watershed development program has also made sub-critical investments on these lands, if any!

The immediate need for securing food for the family over-runs any consideration for cultivation of the assigned lands. Lack of plough bullocks and agriculture inputs further complicates the process of bringing the assigned lands into cultivation. The ‘high-yielding seeds-water-fertiliser-pesticide’ technology paradigm is totally irrelevant for these marginal lands as there is nothing much to ‘*exploit*’. The people who own these lands and the land itself are subjected to historic neglect in public policy.

But, these marginal lands can make significant contribution to the food security of the poor as they can produce food grains – millets, pulses and oilseeds. Regenerating the land quality also regenerates the livelihoods. Food self-sufficiency for most part of the year reduces the external dependency for basic needs. This freedom helps the poor to negotiate with the wage markets, accumulate some surplus and most importantly, restore control on their own wage labour and lives. This will also kick start the process of asset building and improving living standards. Regenerating the marginal lands will in several ways regenerate the livelihoods of poor.

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