

# ***Recipe for community sovereignty***

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Year 2002. A severe drought has gripped the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, regarded as one of the most “modern” states of India, the earliest one to embrace neo-liberal reforms full scale and implement them with unprecedented aggression. The state has large river networks, is known for its long pursuit of Green Revolution technologies in agriculture, has the highest rate of fertiliser and pesticide use in India, and prides itself as a major IT hub in the country.

In spite of all this, in the Year of the Drought, the state could not find an answer for hunger in its chemically fertilised farms. It was running critically short of foodgrains and sent an SOS to the government of India. When the federal government promised to send 500,000 tonnes of rice every month, the government of Andhra Pradesh heaved a sigh of relief.

Switch to the southwest corner of Andhra Pradesh, the semi-arid region of Zaheerabad in Medak District. Farming here is completely rainfed, with no canal irrigation for support. This is where the Deccan Development Society, a grassroots organization, has been working for over two decades with very poor *dalit* [the formerly untouchable castes who are at the bottom of the Indian caste hierarchy] women, who comprise the most marginalised sections of society.

Since 1995, the DDS *sanghams* [village level women’s collectives] have been running what they call an Alternative Public Distribution System in over 50 villages. This is a self-provisioning food system based upon the principles of local production, local storage and local distribution. By bringing the cultivable fallows under production, these women have been producing a basket of crops through their biodiversity-based, ecological food production system. They now have adequate grains for the food deficit members of their community [landless people, non-farming artisanal people, etc.].

In 2002, the Year of the Drought, some of these villages produced more grains than they needed. In a meeting of members from all the villages, a question went around: *There is extra grain in some villages: does anyone want it?* All the other villages uniformly declared that they had adequate grains in their community baskets and did not need any more. Thus, some of the poorest and most marginalized women of Andhra Pradesh challenged the high tech government of their state, which had proved incapable of feeding its people, through their capacity to produce adequate food by using their traditional ecological agricultural practices.

Cut to year 2003. The Government of Andhra Pradesh announced, as it does every year, that it will supply subsidised seeds to farmers from its *mandal* outlets. There was a mad rush for seeds by farmers from all across the state. In Chevella *mandal*, close to Hyderabad, the state capital, the rush become so uncontrollable that police had to fire on the farmers, killing a few of them. In Anantpur *mandal*, farmers were so desperate to access seeds that they trampled upon each other, thus killing some of their colleagues.

At the same time, in the Zaheerabad area, the village level Community Gene Banks set up by the DDS women's *sanghams* were overflowing with dozens of varieties of local seeds. Every family in the village had sufficient quantity and variety of seeds to meet their own needs and the community gene banks were becoming almost redundant. Some of the villages did not know what to do with the excess amount of seeds and started selling them in the market, much against their inherent cultural principle that seeds are only for exchange and not for sale. In the midst of the agricultural desert that the state of Andhra Pradesh had become, these villages turned into unparalleled oases.

In both these instances, the women's *sanghams* facilitated by DDS demonstrated that it is possible for the most marginalised people to recover their own food and seed sovereignty and to set up autonomous, localised food and seed systems even in an era marked by the globalised, mechanised, transnational controlled industrial food and seed system. The women's achievement is the result of their decade-long struggle to retrieve community autonomy over food production and seed control.

The loud and clear statement emerging from the *sangham* women is the culmination of their prolonged confrontation with the state's policies, especially those pursued by the government of the Telugu Desam party, which was then in power and pursued a myopic Vision 2020 drafted for it by the notorious McKenzie Consultants [Is this the full and correct name of the company?](#) of the USA. This was the way the government tried to construct a WTO-compliant A.P. Vision 2020, which declared that "small farming was unviable," proposed four principles as a way out of the severe agricultural crisis the state was facing. These included: a) *Consolidation of land holdings*; b) *Replacement of human labour and mechanisation of agriculture*; c) *Contract Farming*; and d) *Export orientation*. The blind *Vision* had also strongly advocated the pursuit of biotechnology as a major option for rescuing agriculture from its present crisis. [The Telugu Desam government was subsequently voted out thanks to a massive electoral revolt by agrarian communities.]

The *sangham* women, who were aghast at the policies of the government, had organised protest rallies in village after village, day after day. They held public consultations and protest meetings. They also initiated a signature campaign that was endorsed by over a million farmers all across Andhra Pradesh. Not content with this, they also put together a farmers' jury called *Prajateerpu*

[People's Verdict] consisting of 18 farmers from the small and marginal category belonging to the poorest sections of the agrarian society, with a majority representation for women, dalits and *adivasis* [indigenous people]. After hearing evidence from government bureaucrats, agricultural scientists, biotech industry representatives, farmer leaders and environmentalists, the jury delivered the now-famous verdict, *Prajateerpu*, which categorically declared its opposition to genetically modified (GM) crops, including Vitamin-A rice and Bt Cotton, while it advocated food and farming for self-reliance as well as community control over resources. [See box 1. *A Verdict by Farmers*]

### **The agro-cultural context**

The Zaheerabad region hosts a wide variety of agricultural crops including sorghum, a range of millets, pulses and oilseeds, all of which grow under rain-fed conditions. The diversity of this cropping system and its capacity to grow on highly infertile soils, without demanding water or external inputs, makes it uniquely significant for the survival of ecologically sustainable agricultural systems.

As a matter of fact, the local people call these crops *Satyam Pantalu* (Crops of Truth), a powerful imagery to signify the fact that these crops grow with practically no inputs at all, surviving on the available sub-soil moisture. This perception guides this biodiversity-based agricultural system through a series of agro-economic, survival, cultural and spiritual paths.

### **Government intrusion**

For these culturally rich, vibrant, self-reliant communities the neo-liberal economic policies of the government comprise a harsh intrusion. The people clearly see them as an unprecedented infringement upon the autonomy of their food and farming futures. In response to these policies, the women of the DDS *sanghams* were more determined than ever to withstand the onslaught through their own forms of resistance.

One of the new institutions of resistance that they decided to build was an *Alternative Public Distribution System* [mentioned earlier in this article] through a Community Grain Fund. This initiative was meant to resist the havoc over their dryland food system caused by the government-sponsored Public Distribution System [PDS], which was originally intended to provide essential food grains at a subsidized price. Through the PDS the Indian State introduced a frightening homogeneity into the people's food systems, selling only wheat and rice as staples at cheap prices through fair price shops across the length and breadth of a vast and diverse country like India, with a population of over a billion.

India's rainfed farming system, spanning millions of hectares, grows hundreds of varieties of millets. The PDS-induced homogenisation proved to be the death

knell of these dryland food producing communities. The cheap rice and wheat offered in government ration shops started destabilising their agriculture, discouraging farmers from working hard on their lands and producing their own nutritionally rich millets. As a consequence of this policy, farmers started leaving hundreds and thousands of acres of land fallow. It was also an assault on the food cultures so lovingly nourished by these communities over thousands of years.

It was to fight this multi-pronged attack on their farming cultures that the communities decided to institutionalise their own community controlled, local grain based alternative public distribution [APDS] system. The APDS was dependent on local production, local storage and local distribution, which alone would ensure community autonomy over food production and consumption. [See box: APDS: the local food autonomy]

Some important gains made through the initiative are:

- The women brought over 2000 hectares of fallows in 50 villages under the plough. As a result they produced an extra 1.5 million kilograms of sorghum in their villages every year since. This meant that they were able to produce nearly three million extra meals per year in 50 villages. In other words 1000 extra meals were available per participating family.
- The fodder provided by the newly cultivated fields sustains over 10,000 heads of cattle in 50 villages every year. In each village **2500 extra wages/year** has been created. In all, over **120,000 extra wages** are earned in 50 villages, every year.
- Dalit women, who were once recipients of grains in the government-run Public Distribution System, became the patrons of a system designed, controlled and managed by themselves. This resulted in a massive status reversal in favour of the poor and the marginalised.

As their knowledge unfolds in front of our eyes the wealth of practices they employ to survive through dryland rainfed farming under extremely hostile and fragile conditions and the rationale behind these practises appear more and more fascinating.

Food availability has been enhanced through a self-reliant, equitable and low cost food security system in which people's criteria for and definitions of poverty are central in decision making. The complementary links between different forms of agrobiodiversity and rural livelihoods have created new job opportunities, some local economic surplus and a growing sense of dignity among villagers.

The programme has also generated tremendous self-confidence among the women, with the growing realisation and recognition of the fact that the poor can be producers of food for the PDS and not always helpless recipients of subsidised food.

The decentralised storage system followed by the women stands in stark contrast with the government PDS where all grain is stored in the central warehouses of the Food Corporation of India. Each warehouse probably stores millions of kilos of grain, thereby necessitating a huge army of officials, reams of paper work and miles of red tape. In addition, as is well known, the official system results in considerable losses, with much of the grain spoilt through poor storing conditions or consumed by pests. Moreover, the existing system can only operate through a centralised mechanism like the state government, in which bureaucrats and others define problems and solutions. Recurring investment is also required every year to run the official PDS, much of the money going towards subsidising agricultural inputs for resource-rich farmers, energy-consuming long distance transportation, warehousing, and maintenance of extensive distribution networks.

Moreover, the centrally managed government PDS is dependent on ecologically and genetically uniform farming on good quality lands. It uses large quantities of expensive inputs like chemical fertilisers, water, pesticides and improved rice varieties grown as monocrops. The scope of the existing system is restricted to areas with water potential. Tapping, storage and supply of water in these areas is expensive -- so large amounts of credit are needed for this as well as for mechanisation and other industrial inputs. As the capital requirements are high, this type of intensive farming is largely in the hands of richer, male farmers in the well endowed areas of the country.

In 2002, the community controlled PDS that the *sangham* women spread into 25 more villages helped in the reclamation of 1233 acres of fallows, providing more than 55,000 person-days of employment [including over 40,000 person-days of female employment], producing over a million kilos of extra foodgrains per year and fodder that could support nearly 5000 heads of livestock in those 25 villages.

In another remarkable example of taking control over their food sovereignty, over 1500 women farmers of DDS *sanghams* retrieved over 80 **land races** that had been obliterated by so-called modern agricultural practices by growing diverse crops on their marginalised lands. They have conserved these seeds both at the individual farmer level as well as at the community level. The community level conservation is done by a village level seed keeper, a woman who is responsible for managing and maintaining the Community Gene Funds in over 60 villages. This effort has not only re-established vibrant agro biodiversity on their farms but it has also restored women's control and leadership over community knowledge of germ plasm.

## **Local markets**

Having understood that, in the era of the globalised market, the only way to fight the invisible globalising forces is to establish their own markets, about 2500 women from DDS *sanghams* have established their own cooperative market. The market purchases all the surpluses of millets and other food crops produced by the women, at a price fixed by their own committees. The price in the Sangham Market is free from the price dictated by external “market forces.”

One of the major concerns of the women is that the outside market does not recognise the value of their ecologically produced foods, especially millets. In order to deal with this situation, they have promoted a consumer group called the Zaheerabad Consumer Action Group (Z-CAG), which facilitates regular interface between producer and consumer groups.

## **Biodiversity festivals**

One of the major ‘tools’ used by DDS *sanghams* to take this message of community conservation to larger communities outside their *sanghams* is the Mobile Biodiversity Festival, an annual, month-long celebration of biodiversity.

Displays of local seeds are mounted in traditional reed baskets and stacked inside colorfully decorated carts drawn by bullocks. The carts enter each village in a procession with musicians and dancers, stop at a number of locations in the village and end up at the edge of the village from where the next village picks them up with their own bullocks. Each village is responsible for the process in their own village.

A facilitated discussion takes place immediately after the procession in a public place and then village women feed the gathered people with the traditional foods of the region. Some 60 villages, several mandal towns (representing a group of villages) and the district capital are involved every year, making it possible to engage village, mandal and district level officials along with the general population.

The biodiversity festival has been getting the message of ecological farming, biodiversity, conservation and culture across to an ever-widening circle of farmers year after year. Over 150,000 farmers have so far engaged in these discussions and many thousands of them are moving back to the ecological farming that they had temporarily left behind.

The year 2001 was a watershed year for the Mobile Biodiversity Festival. Over 50,000 farmers participated in the village-level discussions that year. They firmly presented their agenda for the revival of traditional ecological farming systems of the region and the biodiversity inherent in it. Together these communities produced an Action Plan for the Agro Biodiversity of the region. This plan

became a major part of the Government of India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan created as a part of India's commitment to the International Convention on Biological Diversity.

For the first time in the history of India, a small community had come together to discuss their concerns and eventually turned it into a national plan. This was a phenomenal achievement for the people in the Zaheerabad region of the Deccan.

Over a period of six years, the DDS biodiversity festivals have covered a remarkable ground:

- They have moved ecological agriculture from an environmentalist's agenda to a farmer's agenda.
- They have transformed agro biodiversity from something pursued in a sanitised laboratory environment into a vibrant community celebration.
- They have elevated the concerns of small farmers groups into a national concern.
- They have provided a new path and vision to the official planning process of a massive nation like India.

Through all these exciting community process they have redefined ecology, agriculture, biodiversity and governance.

#### **A VERDICT BY FARMERS**

##### ***"We oppose:***

- the proposed reduction of those making their livelihood from the land from 70% to 40% in Andhra Pradesh
- land consolidation and displacement of rural people
- contract farming
- labour-displacing mechanisation
- GM crops—including Vitamin-A rice & BT-cotton
- loss of control over medicinal plants including their export

##### ***"We desire:***

- food and farming for self reliance and community control over resources
- to maintain healthy soils, diverse crops, trees and livestock, and to build on our indigenous knowledge, practical skills and local institutions."

~~ ***From Praiateerpu. the Farmers Jury on food and***

# A P D S : THE LOCAL FOOD AUTONOMY

## Quantitative Outcomes

- Increase in Agricultural Productivity
- Employment Generation
- Change in Land Prices
- Change in Migration Rates and Patterns

## Qualitative Outcomes

- Restoration of environmental and ecological balance enhancing the productivity and value of lands.
- Conservation of Biodiversity
- Increase in food intake and improvement in health and nutrition status
- Fodder for Livestock
- No more Distress Migration
- Social Capital Formation
- Women Empowerment

<b>A TALE OF TWO SYSTEMS</b>	<b>PDS</b>	<b>APDS</b>
<b>1. Mode of operation</b>	Centralized Operation	Decentralized / community role
<b>2. Location of control</b>	Centralized control	Local control over production, procurement, storage and distribution
<b>3. Framework of implementation</b>	The present PDS system and procurement policies linked to PDS are ecologically damaging as they promote input intensive and mono-cropping patterns of agriculture such as rice and wheat	Ecologically safe, focus on diversity of crops, sustainable practices, resource conservation practices, bio-diversity
<b>5. Access</b>	Access of PDS and coverage good in some states but not so good in many states	Community access to everyone without administrative hassles
<b>6. Operational costs</b>	Excessive overhead costs	No overheads
<b>7. Operational loopholes</b>	System suffers from leakage and corruption	No such danger

FROM A STUDY BY THE GLOCAL RESEARCH GROUP, HYDERABAD