

Medak awaits biodiversity tag

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EVERY year, on 22 May, the world celebrates the International Day for Biodiversity. But even as awareness programmes, meetings and events took place across the globe, biodiverse farmers from 20 villages in four mandals of the Zaheerabad region of Andhra Pradesh, invoked this day to express their deep disappointment.

They wanted to draw the attention of their Chief Minister, N Kiran Kumar Reddy, to the fact that their proposal asking for recognition of their farming ecosystems as a Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS) was still awaiting a decision in the corridors of the Andhra Pradesh State Biodiversity Board (APSBB). It had been over a year since they first submitted their request in April 2010.

India's Biological Diversity Act came into existence in 2002. Amongst other provisions, it put forth a framework under which access to biological resources and related knowledge could, from then on, be regulated. Any such access, said the Act, would need to go hand-in-hand with an equitable sharing of benefits for which procedures and guidelines needed to be developed.

What is also important is that the Biological Diversity Act contains broad clauses that have mandated central and state governments to take measures towards the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. One such conservation measure, proposed in Section 37 of the Act, relates to the declaration of Biodiversity Heritage Sites by the state government.

This declaration has to be done in consultation with local bodies, which can include panchayats, district councils, urban wards or even the Biodiversity Management Committee (BMC) as proposed to be set up under the Act. This provision of the Biological Diversity Act can be critiqued on several grounds – for instance it gives local communities limited space to take decisions on whether or not areas can be regarded as Biodiversity Heritage Sites. Further, Section 37 also has a tentative clause on compensation and relocation which advises caution even as the declaration of such heritage sites is beginning to be explored in a few instances around the country.

The National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) through two expert committees has finalised a set of guidelines for the declaration of Biological Heritage Sites. Such guidelines do attempt to overcome the limitations of the Act and prod the state governments to rise above the limitations of institutionalized power hierarchies.

But guidelines can only do that much. This is primarily because they cannot entirely change the requirements of the parent legislation which gives only minimal powers to village level institutions and therefore creates only a limited space for the

participation of local communities. Moreover, the NBA guidelines are not binding. They can at best suggest a process to state level authorities.

Despite such limitations, the declaration of an area as a Biodiversity Heritage Site is being seen as an opportunity by many communities to protect both wild and cultivated biodiverse areas from external threats and land use conversion, so that



A Deccan Development Society meeting

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all that has been built assiduously over generations is not lost in one policy sweep.

At the same time declaration of an area as a Biodiversity Heritage Site also bestows recognition of the conservation efforts that farming, forest dwelling, coastal and even urban communities have carried out over decades.

Hence, in April 2010, 20 villages from Zaheerabad region had sought to explore the BHS route. What these ecological and biodiverse farmers seek to protect is over 59,759 acres of farmland where they regularly plant over 100 varieties of crops every year on their marginal lands and also preserve over 80 seed varieties.

Their proposal was preceded by several village level discussions where the farmers had debated on what the Biodiversity Heritage Site declaration

can or cannot do for their farming cultures and knowledge. They also held gram sabha meetings where such a concept was explained. Only after that, was consent given to go ahead with the proposal. The well-known NGO, Deccan Development Society, working with the farmers was key to this process.

The farmers have clearly stated: "The very reason for proposing this location as an Agro-Biodiversity Heritage Site is due to its location in a semi-arid region with richness in species and crop genetic diversity and the prevalence of traditional knowledge concerning sustainable management of fragile dry-land ecosystem and sustenance in such a resource scarce region."

While stating their concerns, women farmers especially observed that over the years there have been many changes in landscape and agriculture as observed by the community. The one significant change they pointed to was the introduction of hybrid seeds.

The second important threat to their agro-biodiverse practices was the establishment of a sugarcane factory in the area which lead to major changes in farming practices and local attitudes toward the environment.

The availability of only rice in the ration shop was another issue they had to reckon with. The Biodiversity Heritage Site for them was a step to encourage biodiversity on their farms and be able to deal with these multiple challenges.

At the outset the APSBB welcomed the idea and accepted the proposal of the 20 villages in principle. The farmers were assured that the status of biodiversity sites would be conferred on their area as soon as the administrative and technical processes were completed.

Following this, an Expert Committee constituted by the APSBB, consisting of three specialists visited these communities and interacted with them on their conservation efforts. They were Dr Anisetty Murthy, a former senior officer of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Dr Varaprasad of the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR) and Dr Hampaiah, Chair, APSBB. According to the farmers, the specialists appreciated the great efforts that the farmers had put in to secure the biodiversity on their farms and fields.

It has been eight months since the committee's visit, and the proposal continues to be stuck. No one knows the real reasons. Even the May 2011 submission to the chief minister does not appear to have worked for the farmers, a baffling situation for them since there didn't appear to be any resistance to the idea.

The farmers wait and wonder why.

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