

Roli Srivastava | TNN

# EARTH MOTHERS NURTURE BIODIVERSITY

**Hyderabad:** About 100 kms from Hyderabad, is a farmland where scores of women farmers have been toiling for the last many years, sowing the seeds of traditional farming and reaping the rich dividend of biodiverse crops. Spread over an area of about 60,000 hectares with an almost equal number of farmers working on it from 39 villages of Zaheerabad in Medak district, is this unique farm where 80 to 100 crops are grown through the year, around 25 crops per acre of land.

The result is a lush farmland, that has not seen a single dry spell in the last many years and is now a strong case study being considered by the state government for the tag of a Biodiversity Heritage Site for the crucial reason that not only have these women nurtured lives dependent on this farmland but also conserved a form a traditional farming that has been forgotten in the wave of high-tech farming that has swept across the state.

A detailed, passionate description about this farmland is currently sitting in a government file where these women farmers have expressed their challenges and victories: "Farming is the mainstay of livelihood in our villages. In spite of a hostile terrain we continue to cultivate vast stretches of fragile land using our traditional knowledge." They note how like the rest of the state, they too battle drought-like conditions but survive the challenge because of their "resilient" agricultural techniques, which doesn't involve use of chemicals or dependence on a single crop. Also, none of the crops are irrigated.

"Over the last 10 years scores of farmers have committed suicide but in these villages of Medak where farmers are involved in biodiverse agriculture, there has not been a single suicide because farmers are not dependent on a single crop," says Sathesh Periyapatna, director, Deccan Development Society, an NGO working with these women farmers for the last two decades. "Modern agriculture encourages farmers to grow just one crop which is technically easy to



grow and harvest unlike here where 20-25 different crops are grown, a different crop for different patches of land," Periyapatna says, adding how women in dry-land agriculture have traditionally conserved biodiversity everywhere which is the case here as well.

And now the women farmers are pressing for the heritage tag, which would help protect this farmland. "Our agriculture protects the earth, environment and our animals. We used to work for others and under their direction. But now we understand the strength of our cropping systems and don't want to be enslaved now. We are demanding the heritage site which will be a recognition for our crops and our strength," says Begari Samamma, a dalit woman farmer

who holds two acres of rain-fed land in Bidakanne village, Jharasangam Mandal, Medak District.

The AP Biodiversity Board has now referred the heritage site matter to the state government but officials say they are suitably impressed with this farmland. "The women cultivators are focussing on millets, when people are forgetting about them and their nutritive values. Besides, they are not using any chemical fertilizers," says Ashok Kumar, chairman of the AP Biodiversity Board. If the farmland does earn the Biodiversity Heritage Site tag, it would bring it on par with national parks where the wildlife is protected. Here, the agro-biodiversity would get the same protection.