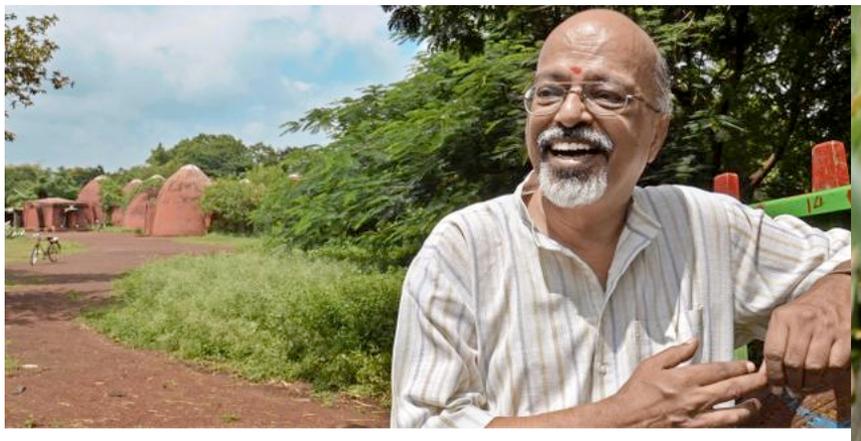


THE HINDU

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Millet Man



This green is my valley P. V. Sateesh, Director of Deccan Development Society at his village in Pastapur in Medak; P. V. Sateesh with the members of the Community Media Trust and Satish shows a millet crop Photos: NAGARA GOPAL

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Millet Man

Prabalika M. Borah

Chatline P.V. Sateesh believes this wonder crop can save the world, says Prabalika M. Borah



City-bred P.V. Sateesh took to living in a village like a fish takes to water. Pastapur, a village in Medak District around 130 km from Hyderabad, is rain-drenched on this Sunday morning as he walks us through fields planted with millet.

Sateesh is one of the founders of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), a 25-year-old grassroots organisation working in about 75 villages with women's sanghams in Medak. The 5000 women members of the society represent the poorest of the poor in their communities. Most of them are dalits. The vision of the society is to consolidate these village groups into vibrant organs of primary local governance and federate them into a strong pressure lobby for women, the poor and dalits.

Sateesh is also the National Convenor of the Southern Action on Genetic Engineering, a network of over 60 organisations, scientists, farmers' and consumer groups in the four southern states, and of the Millet Network of India, an alliance of over 140 organisations of farmers, scientists, nutritionists, environmentalists and consumers that operates in 17 states.

"What started off with the intention of ensuring the simple sustenance needs of the sangham members has become a tool of empowerment for them to address the larger issues of food security, natural resource enhancement, education, and health needs of the region," says Sateesh. Various activities are integrated to allow women access and control over their own resources. "These activities, alongside ensuring earthcare, are also resulting in human care by giving the women a new-found dignity and profile in their village communities," he clarifies.

In a future of scarce water, Sateesh feels, millet can save the world. "It has been shown that millets can grow in conditions of low rainfall, as little as 300 to 350 mm of rainfall, depending on the type of millet, and in poor and heavily degraded soils, which are the characteristic traits of the arid and semi-arid regions, and of the hilly regions of India."

Millets comprise a range of crops that include sorghum (jowar), pearl millet (bajra), finger millet (ragi), kodo millet (kodon), foxtail millet (kakum), little millet (kutki), proso millet (barri) and barnyard millet (sanwe). Sateesh stresses that millets are not mere crops; they are an entire concept. They are usually cultivated in combination with other millets, pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables, each with different cropping cycles and different uses.

Sateesh's passion for farming makes one ask, 'Are you really urban-bred; not born in a family of farmers?' Sateesh recalls, "I used to run a film viewers club. But when I realised that the club was discussed over lunch and drinks, I dissolved it. I used to watch a lot of World Cinema. Professionally I was in the media too, as a producer for Doordarshan. It is through media that I found this career."

Sateesh's interest in farming and farmers grew when as a producer for Doordarshan he worked on programmes for farmers for direct satellite transmission. "It was a new thing for me and as I worked with the team I realised its importance," he says.

Through DDS, he now works to make the farmers all the more independent, through seed banking, use of home-grown manure and other appropriate technologies. "The method of seed banking makes them independent," he explains. "They are doing something beyond scientific reach in the most indigenous way and this is helping them shape their lives in a very autonomous way. The use of home-grown manure not only saves them money but also ensures the safety of the quality of soil. Once the farmers get used to buying seeds, manure etc. from the market they get into a vicious

cycle.”

The so-called modernised techniques of farming, he feels, are only commercialisation. Instead, the communities of women with whom he works have developed eco-friendly enterprises. They work with livestock not just for milk and draught but also to produce organic manure. Thousands of backyard biofertiliser units provide 1200-1500 tonnes of vermicompost per year, improving the productivity of soils and crops and also generating an income of nearly four million rupees for the women. Hundreds of deep composting projects have been initiated. Several bio-pesticide units are entirely owned and managed by non-literate dalit women from low-income families. Millet processing units are helping the women run their own autonomous market for organic produce.

At a glance

Sateesh has introduced a number of eco enterprises into the communities of women with whom he works. The most important ones are:

- Working with livestock not just for milk and draught purposes but also for organic manure they produce
- Thousands of backyard biofertiliser units which together provide 1200-1500 tonnes of vermicompost per year both for improving the productivity of their soils and crops but also bring about nearly four million rupees of income to the women
- Hundreds of deep composting projects have been initiated
- Several bio pesticide units entirely owned and managed by non literate dalit women from low income families
- Millet processing units
- A completely autonomous women led market for selling ecological produce centred around millets.

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