

The 12th Mobile Biodiversity Festival of DDS 14th to 28th January 2011



“The Indian Council of Agricultural Research projects that India will need a 30% boost in rice and cereal production, 140% in pulses and 243% growth in oilseeds to meet the needs of the ever-expanding population” says a Financial Express editorial (The Last Supper, Jan 17th 2011)

As is obvious the solution to the food crisis-like situation in the above worldview is seen in expanding the acreage or production of rice and cereal and oilseeds. It is a dominant, singular solution such as this which the Mobile Biodiversity Festival of the DDS, celebrated since the last 12 years, stands up against. And the numbers of people – both local farmers and visitors from India and abroad – attending the same year after year have sanctified the necessity and significance of a more localised, culturally, socially, and in today’s times, politically relevant agriculture, considering the mind-boggling pace with which the agricultural regime is changing across the country affecting rural Indian farming communities and the nature of inter-dependent livelihoods and cultures that were once a marked feature of Indian rural lifescape.

On 14th January, 2011 colourfully decked bullock carts had lined up at Basanthpur village in Medak district on a particularly warm and sunny day (breaking the long spell of winter chill of the last few days) awaiting the commencement of the annual festival of celebrating community-led and sustained biodiversity, agricultural and food security. Basanthpur on 14th January 2011 seems almost like an untouched oasis in the gloom that surrounds Indian farming systems today with its bullock carts laden with over 100 varieties of seeds and food prepared from millets, the wealth of dryland farmers of the Deccan. It almost seems like food security issues do not affect the farmers assembled under a makeshift tent to inaugurate another round of the annual festival. But problems and issues remain, just a 20 kilometers drive away from this space or these spaces and the ability of these farmers, part of the DDS sanghas, to sustain their local agrarian regimes and farming systems over the next generation. Following the traditional ritual of lighting the lamp, P.V. Satheesh, Director, DDS, welcomed the guests and the gathering.

AP Rythu Sangham Secretary, and Vice President, All India Kisan Sabha, Mr. Malla Reddy, in his Presidential Address said; earlier, while millets were considered poor people's food, today the rich in Banjara Hills are consuming it. The irony is for all to see. "There were misconceptions among farmers that millets give relatively lesser returns when compared to other crops, but little do they understand that the investments in growing these crops are minimal, too. We are today growing cotton in not less than 4-5 lakh acres in each district of AP. The downside of cotton farming is for all to see in the number of suicides committed by farmers who grew cotton. In AP, more than ten lakh farmers' suicides happened after the government changed its agricultural production policy. They gave Rs. 1,50,000 as compensation for suicides which is hardly sufficient. More suicides occurred among small and medium farmers growing cotton, chilli, etc and falling into the debt trap. We need a change in the agriculture policy. Today agricultural scientists are also asking people to grow multi crops. Terminator seeds have been pushed into the farmers' fields so that monopolists such as Monsanto, Syngenta, DuPont, etc can create a market for their seeds. 80 per cent of the world market for seeds is monopolised by them. Today we have not more than 70 types of seeds and they are responsible for it."



Giving this larger context, Mr. Malla Reddy pointed out that we need these millets to save both the soil and our crops. The corporates are far more aggressive in their advertisements. They have slapped cases against us for asking for stopping sale of Bt seeds; there are cases against us in at least four different Courts.

Following the inaugural ceremony and worship of the bullock-carts, the mobile biodiversity jathras took off, with their seeds and food products made of millets, covering Jarasangham, Raikode, Nyalkal and Zaheerabad mandals, between 14th and 23rd January, finally culminating in a grand closing ceremony at Machnoor on the 28th of January 2011.



This year's biodiversity festival had to be cut short fearing disturbances surrounding the Telangana statehood agitations. Thousands of farmers from Medak district, nevertheless participated in the jathras at each of the mandals with the same joy and festive fervour as they had all these years.

This year, the mobile biodiversity festival saw the participation also of farmers from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Orissa, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Nagaland, Meghalaya

and activist / NGO representatives from Manipur and Karnataka as well as the above-mentioned states. There were also visitors this year from France and Ireland.

Women farmers belonging to the DDS sanghams were felicitated throughout the course of the festival for their excellent work in conserving agri bio diversity in their fields (ranging between one and four acres) either cultivating multiple crops using natural methods of farming or collecting several variety of seeds which they share with fellow farmers from nearby villages.

The latest element added to the mobile biodiversity festival of DDS this year was the transfer of traditional knowledge and wisdom from mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law of these villages in a symbolic act of handing over pots of seeds and taking an oath to preserve, protect and continue the tradition of saving their lands and seeds for their well-being, through the newly formed *kodalū sanghams* (daughter-in-law sangham).

The Closing Ceremony on the 28th of January 2011 saw people assemble from around 60-65 villages of six mandals of Medak district, attended by dancers and singers.

Speaking on the occasion as the Chief Guest, Mr. Basavaraj Tambake, Karnataka Rajya Rythu Sangha Honorary Ex-President, said, the Kannada poet saint Basavanna had once said worshipping a farmer is better than worshipping god, because a farmer has a pure mind and feelings. He was highlighting the significance of the biodiversity festival which celebrates these farmers of Medak who have managed to conserve agri biodiversity and at the same time have preserved their autonomy and self respect. He said the DDS sangha women farmers have given a hope for the future of farming which is safe in their hands.

Criticising the policies of the Government at the centre for its lopsided agricultural policy, he said while in Mr. Pranab Mukherjee's statistics the total number of farmers suicides was 2.5 lakh, we believe that it is anywhere between 4 to 5 lakhs. And while numerous professors of thousands of universities in India did not even make an effort to stop these suicides, an organization like DDS through its work has shown there was not a single suicide in the villages they have been working in. They have



shown it by cultivating crops which are good for the soil, for our health and well-being. DDS work has shown the way to other states, including Karnataka, where Mr. Subhash Palekar has managed to convince the Karnataka State government to pledge a support of Rs. 200 crores for an Organic Farming mission. Yet at the national level, things must change. Our government seems to have been sold out to foreign MNCs. He said seeds must be protected in order to retain agriculture in the hands of the farmers.

In his address to the gathering comprising of farmers from different parts of India and Medak district and the academic, activist communities present on the occasion, Dr. Prasada Rao, retired professor of Agriculture, said there is need to re-coin the term 'chiru dhanyalu' for millets and call them '*keelaka ahaara dhanyalu*' instead because of they

sustain our health and nutrition. Millet cropping will also keep us away from dependence on MNCs. He said the Left parties have pledged support for the promotion and propagation of millets. The government must see to it that millet crops get the kind of MSP that rice and wheat have been given. He said our freedom, autonomy and sovereignty depend on food security and at least now the governments must open their eyes to the role and importance of millets-based farming.

The Director of DDS, Mr. P.V. Satheesh shared the information that the National Biodiversity Board Committee members who had visited the DDS sangha villages have come to an agreement over giving them an Agro Biodiversity Heritage status and this is probably the first such instance in India. He congratulated the sanghams of DDS for achieving this significant status. He also shared news that the Medak district administration has decided to start an initiative called Medak for Millets and pledged 10,000 hectares of land in a community-managed method. There is also the decision to bring millets into anganwadis in Medak district at some point. He said it is the women farmers here who have managed to significantly dictate the agro biodiversity strategy plan of the Indian nation, citing the example of the NAC recommendations giving place for millets in the PDS. This becomes even more significant that these are farmers who are mostly dalit, owning less than 2 acres of land and practicing rain-fed agriculture.

The event also had speeches by Prof. K. R. Chowdhary, Mr. Harikrishna, senior producer of the ETV group, Mr. Nammalwar, a pioneering organic farmer from Tamilnadu, Mr. Aman Singh of KRAPAVIS, Rajasthan, and the Joint Collector of Medak District. Also present were members of the Millets Network of India (MINI) from different Indian states.

Around 1000 farmers from villages in Medak district participated in the closing ceremony which was a festival of colour, sound and gaiety, and a celebration of life.