

Ringing Closure to the Mobile Biodiversity Fest-2013



The 14th Mobile Biodiversity Festival, organized by the Sangham women of Deccan Development Society, was brought to a close in a vibrant and colorful valedictory ceremony, that was organized at Pachhashaala, Machanoor Village, Jarashangham Mandal, Andhra Pradesh on February 13, 2013. The month-long Mobile Biodiversity Festival traversed through more than 60 villages in four mandals of Medak District, viz Raikode, Nyalkal, Jarasangham and Zaheerabad; and conscientized people about the importance of millet-based biodiverse farming. The Festival is a unique opportunity to showcase the the role that millets play in the social, cultural, ecological and economic life of the rural populace of Medak District. Several eminent people including Mr.Vishwanath Patil, President, Karnataka Rajya Raita Sangha, Bidar District; Ms.Shruti Devi, prominent Supreme Court Lawyer who has been fighting for the rights of indigenous communities in India, Mr.Jayakumar, IFS, Special Chief Secretary, Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, Mr. Tushar Pancholi, Director, Paryavaran Vikas Kendra, Gujarat, Mr.Subbanna Biradar, BSRDS, Karnataka, Mr.Prashant Mohanty, Director, Nirman-Odisha, Ms.Sheelu Francis, Director, Women's Collective, Tamil Nadu and Ms.Carin P, research scholar from Geneva, Switzerland attended the colorful ceremony; as did more than 1000 farmers from different parts of Medak, and from different parts of the country, including Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.



The 14th The Valedictory Ceremony commenced with a colorful procession of festooned bullockcarts, dancers performing Kolaatam and traditionally attired singers; that started from the outskirts of Machanoor village and proceeded to the Pachhashaala. At the venue, tens of dancers and singers, all attired in traditional attire presented traditional art forms that are unique to Medak district.

Ms.Masannagari Mayuri and her team, marked the start of the ceremony with a mellifluous song that encapsulated the transformation that has thus far been brought upon by the tireless efforts of the Sangham women and promises to redouble the efforts so that rural people in Medak and elsewhere can move towards sovereignty over food, nutrition and farming. Following this, the Burrakadha team gave a unique performance that described vividly the Pannendu Pantalu system of this region of Medak.

Mr.PV Satheesh, Director, Deccan Development Society, extended a warm welcome to the special invitees and other guests and pointed out that when the Mobile Biodiversity Festival commenced 14 years ago, no one anticipated that it would grow into one of the most important events on the cultural calendar of Medak. But today, this event featured prominently in the dairies of many people within and without India, and over the years, many guests from different countries had made it a point to attend it. The initial proposal to organize this event was met with a lot of skepticism from different quarters with a lot of people commenting that biodiversity is a preserve of scientists and wondered why farmers were trying to articulate this particular issue. But the Sangham women argued that biodiversity was an issue that needed to be discussed by the small and marginal farmers, the pastoralists and agricultural laborers; who were involved in the governance and conservation of biodiversity resources. It is these communities who are actually conserving agricultural biodiversity; and their voices and experiences had to be heard. The Festival is a platform that enables these men and women, to be heard; to showcase their concerns regarding food and farming, and to articulate locally relevant ways of conserving biodiversity in their own language and idiom. The festival is also a unique amalgamation of food, farming and art forms and presents the complex linkages among them in a colorful, and educative format. Mr.Satheesh went on to point out that the agricultural sector is being dominated by the Green Revolution style agriculture, and in the recent decades, by Genetically Modified crops. These crops were threatening to undermine the agricultural biodiversity and to take control over food and farming away from farmers and place it in the hands of agri-business corporations. He concluded that under these circumstances, these traditional crops were the crops of the future; for they were capable of growing even under the harshest of agro-climatic conditions; furthermore, these crops are ideally suited for times of climate change when weather and rainfall patterns are likely to get more and more erratic. Furthermore, he pointed out that these farming systems ensured that the rural households had access to nutritious food and that they had complete control over their food and farming.



Seeds are not just the genesis of the next crop; they are also a representation of knowledge and wisdom that has been gleaned through generations. The transfer of seeds therefore symbolizes the transfer of this knowledge and wisdom so that it may be carried into the future, thus ensuring the food and nutritional security of the generations to come. The Closing Ceremony witnessed a unique ceremony wherein elder women—the mothers-in-law—exchanged seeds with the younger ones—the daughters-in-law—who thus became the next generation of the repositories of this precious wisdom. The younger women were now responsible for nurturing, conserving and then passing it on to the generation following theirs. This symbolic transfer of knowledge also ensured that a new generation of farmers—including women—have the tools with which to surmount starvation.

One of the main features of the Biodiversity Festival, since the beginning, has been the honoring of the outstanding millet farmers. Biodiverse farming systems are the manifestation of complex science that has evolved over generations, and the farmers involved in this are the pre-eminent conservators of biodiversity. Hence, honoring them is only appropriate. This year, A Santoshamma from Raipalle Village, Mekala Sangamma from Tekuru Village, Smt.Tukkamma from Metlakunta Village, Smt.Tukkamma from Nagwar Village and Smt. Paramma from Guntampalle village were honored for being outstanding practitioners of biodiverse farming and for conserving traditional farming knowledge with vigor and passion.

During the course of the month-long biodiversity festival, several competitions related to agriculture and biodiversity were held for the children from rural schools in the four mandals of Jarasangham, Raikode, Nyalkal and Zaheerabad. These included quiz, painting, elocutions and so on. Prizes were given away to the winners of these competitions, at the closing ceremony.

Following this, Ms.Sheelu Francis, Women's Collective congratulated the Sangham women for conserving biodiverse agriculture, for achieving food sovereignty in the truest sense, and for successfully organizing the Biodiversity Festival for 14 years. She also said that the Sangham women were a source of inspiration for the women of Women' Collective, and that they were motivated to revive such agricultural systems in their own state, after seeing the untiring efforts of the Sangham women in Medak.



Mr. Tushar Pancholi of Paryavaran Vikas Kendra alluded to his long association with DDS and to the fact that he had been witness to the stellar role played by the DDS women in achieving food sovereignty; he further stated that Paryavaran Vikas Kendra would try and organize biodiversity festival in their own state. He further stated that the whole experience of witnessing the festival and engaging with the Sangham women was deeply inspiring and that the traditional seeds and agriculture were indeed the future hope of Indian agriculture. Mr. Prashant Mohanty of Nirman, Odisha said that after having witnessed the power of biodiversity festivals in Medak, Nirman was also planning to hold a similar event in Kandhamal, Odisha; he felt that the work being done by the Sangham women was instructive for the farming communities across the country.

Ms. Shruti Devi is a prominent Supreme Court Lawyer who routinely takes up cases related to rights of indigenous communities. She also happens to be the daughter of Mr. KC Deo, Minister for Panchayati Raj and Tribal Development, Government of India. She was the Chief Guest at the Valedictory Ceremony, and in her brief interlude, she spoke about her long association with the DDS Sanghams and how she had learnt a lot of things from them, which she then applied to her own work in the tribal belt of North-Coastal Andhra Pradesh. She said that every time she came into touch with the women from the Sanghams, she felt energized. She spoke of the importance of property rights for women, and urged the women of DDS Sanghams to augment their ongoing efforts to get land entitlement for women. She then referred to the upcoming National Investment and Manufacturing Zone, an Rs.11,000 crore project that is proposed to be set up in two blocks of Medak, where DDS has been working for the past three decades. She referred to this as a grave threat to the traditional farming and food systems of this region, and urged the Sangham women to think about this issue and to formulate appropriate strategies to counter this prospect. Speaking of the Agricultural Biodiversity Heritage Site (ABHS) that is to be set up in Zaheerabad, following an intensive campaign by DDS, she said that such a recognition might be a good development in light of the proposed manufacturing zone, and that such a recognition might deter the government from acquiring agricultural land and thereby destroy the agricultural wealth therein. She also opined that such a recognition would strengthen the case against such a zone being declared in a region that would coincide with the heritage site. She further urged the women to fight to ensure that the Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats functioned well and that women were adequately represented in these bodies. Following this, there was a ceremonial exchange of seeds between the older Sangham women and those from the daughters-in-laws' Sanghams.

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Last but not the least, Mr. Jayakumar, IFS, Special Chief Secretary, Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, in the Chief Guest's address said that the traditional agricultural systems were highly scientific as they had been evolved by our fathers and fore-fathers, based on their observation of the agro-climatic conditions. Hence, they represented generations of knowledge. Unfortunately, this knowledge was being usurped by the modern-day agricultural technologies; these technologies help in enhancing the productivity of food, but do so at a great price for the ecology and economics of the farming households. These technologies were not eco-friendly and resulted in the unprecedented pollution levels of agricultural lands, groundwater and other natural resources. However, the traditional agricultural systems are completely eco-friendly as they do not demand pesticides or chemical fertilizers and also help in preserving and enhancing the gene pool of a given crop. He hailed the traditional biodiverse farmers as the protectors of gene pool and appreciated the yeoman service rendered by them in conserving this rich natural resource. He further lamented that the modern day agricultural system might have enhanced the production of certain food grains, but had completely undermined the taste, depriving them of all flavor. He congratulated the women of DDS for their wonderful efforts to revive traditional agricultural systems in Medak and held them up as the beacon of hope for all farming communities in the country.

Mr. Jayappa, Deputy Director, DDS presented the vote of thanks.