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250,000 farmers have committed suicide and chemical-intensive methods have devastated the land Now India's poorest women are growing a quiet revolution Seeds of hope

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BIG business agriculture promoted by Western corporations is to blame for up to a quarter of a million farmers committing suicide over the last 10 years, according to community leaders in India.

Poor farmers are forced to take out big loans to buy expensive pesticides and fertilisers, and to dig wells for the increasing amounts of water they need. But when their crops fail, or their wells dry up, they fall into debt – and many thousands kill themselves out of desperation.

That is the bleak picture painted by PV Sathesh, director of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), which supports community farming in one of the poorest parts of rural India. Sitting barefoot with his laptop in the shade outside his house in the village of Pastapur, in the Zaheerabad region of Andhra Pradesh, he gets angry about what's happening.

Farmers are "misled" into believing the promise that the high-input, chemical-intensive, single-crop agriculture of the so-called "green revolution" is their salvation, he says. So when it fails, they end up trapped in a debt spiral that too often leads to despair and suicide.

"Those that say that the green revolution will save the world should come and see the hundreds of thousands who have committed suicide in India," he warns. "The green revolution is a downhill slide into disaster."

“‘The green revolution is a downhill slide into disaster’ It’s been a quiet revolution. Without agitprop, without holding placards, the dalit women started to take control”

Satheesh points out that as many as 100,000 of the farmer suicides have been in Punjab, which is the centre of industrialised agriculture in India. There the water has been contaminated by the pesticides which have been applied to crops, he says.

“There is a train to Delhi every day which they call the cancer express. Half of those on board have been made ill by the pollution. Punjab has been poisoned – it has a high cancer rate from contaminated food and water, and a high suicide rate.”

Genetically modified (GM) crops, which are being pushed in India by multinational companies like Monsanto are also implicated, argues Satheesh. The suicide rate has increased among the farmers that have adopted GM cotton, and they have suffered skin allergies and other disorders, he says.

But, according to Satheesh, there is an alternative. “Organic, traditional farming can feed India,” he argues. “It can feed everyone. The trouble is that much of the traditional knowledge of agriculture has been destroyed by factory farming.”

That is why, through the DDS, which he helped found, there is now a big push to boost traditional farming. Funded in part by the British charity Christian Aid, DDS is helping some of the most marginalised communities in India relearn how to grow and save their own seeds, without GM or artificial chemicals.

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So far, about 100 villages around Pastapur have started to feed themselves by adopting these methods. If this can be done in a semi-arid region, which is often short of rain, it can be done elsewhere, says Satheesh.

One of the main tools used by DDS to encourage traditional farming has been the formation of village-based collectives, known as sanghams. At first this was tried with men, but they proved too unreliable, so women-only sanghams were established.

Because of the women’s sense of sisterhood, these have proved much more successful, and now involve some 5000 women. They are mostly dalits, historically the lowest class of Indian society previously known as “the untouchables” (see p32).

Although discrimination against the dalits is now outlawed, they still tend to be the poorest and least educated people in parts of India. That is one reason why

they were targeted by DDS.

Sanghams meet regularly to share experience about different crops, to decide on giving loans to farmers, and to help each other cultivate land. With the help of DDS, many women have become landowners, feeding their families and earning an income from selling surplus produce.

They have established community seed banks, which save and store seeds from one season to the next. They also provide expertise on which crops are able to resist pests or water shortages, and which grow best together.

"It's been a quiet revolution," says Satheesh. "Without agitprop, without holding placards, the dalit women started to take control. They have proved themselves as farmers."

Women who used to suffer exclusion and even violence have become empowered, and now act as community leaders, he says. "Every woman out there is a diamond. They emanate hope."

At one sangham meeting in March, 40 women in brightly-coloured saris sat around a courtyard as dusk fell. Some held children, many had mobile phones, and there was a transistor radio on so they could listen to their community broadcast.

The women sing a song together, with verses about different crops in different seasons. They also prepare for the following day's gathering of sanghams, at which a "handing over the heritage" ceremony will take place. At an agricultural centre near Pastapur, hundreds of women receive pots of seeds from their mothers and grandmothers as a symbol of the traditional knowledge they are inheriting. They compete to see who can plan the most productive farm by laying out seeds in patterns on the ground.

Not surprisingly, the companies that market pesticides and GM crops do not agree. They argue that modern agriculture has brought enormous benefits to India, with fertilisers, pesticides and specially-developed crops preventing famines.

"Despite widespread poverty and malnutrition in India today the continuous threat of famine been lifted, which has allowed India to develop into one of the fastest-growing economies in the world," says Dominic Dyer, chief executive of the Crop Protection Association, which represents the pesticide industry.

Although small-scale farming has a role, it will not begin to feed India's rapidly growing demand for food, he argues. He accepts that GM crops are "controversial" in many parts of the country, but insists they could help the Indian economy.

The sangham women are, however, backed by Christian Aid. The charity points out that the UN's special rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, recently stated that sustainable agriculture could double food production in areas affected by hunger within 10 years.

Christian Aid, along with charities in other countries, has been helping fund the sanghams through DDS since 1995, and last year gave £45,000. Today it launches its annual fund-raising week in the UK.

"The work of DDS illustrates how, with the right support, farmers operating even in the most challenging environments can make a decent living using sustainable agricultural techniques," says Ben Hobbs, Christian Aid's senior policy officer for Asia.

"This enables farmers to reduce, or avoid completely, the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which can be expensive and damaging to the environment, and means they don't have to take out expensive loans to buy seeds and pesticides, which sometimes they struggle to pay back."

Hobbs also praised the way that dalit women had moved from landless agricultural labourers to land holders and seed-keepers in less than a generation. "Their standing in the community has been transformed, they are able to produce enough food to feed their families and, for the first time, have been able to give their children an education."

As well as promoting sustainable farming, DDS has helped start a "green school" in the village of Machnoor for the children of dalit women. Consisting of a series of interconnecting pod-shaped buildings made from red earthenware bricks, it teaches 120 children maths, languages, carpentry, pottery and many other skills.

The women have also set up their own local radio station, and a video production unit. By taking control of their own media, they say they are able to get their message across to more communities in India, and to the wider world.

"If we want to show our knowledge and preserve our knowledge then we need someone to show it," says Narsamma, a member of the video production team. "When we hold cameras in our hands we command respect."

It's farming, however, that's likely to remain the bedrock of dalit life for the foreseeable future. While it does, the women are determined to hang on to their new-found power – and resist the blandishments of the big companies.

Salome, a campaigner with DDS, argues that seed corporations will destroy their hard-won independence. "They take the seeds from our hands, then they sell us seed, and they tell us how to grow it," she says.



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