

Magic of Millets

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The marginalised women of Medak district have shown the way to other farmers, scientists and policy makers to regenerate sustainable and citizen controlled food systems Akash Bisht Medak (Andhra Pradesh)

Balamma, a 60-year-old dalit woman from Edavulapalli village in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, is savouring her new-found freedom. Not too long ago she was a bonded labour who led a difficult life living on the margins of the village. Now she is a self-sufficient farmer. How did this transformation take place in a span of a few years?

Balamma's narrative is quite stirring. "My husband was a bonded labour. We owned a small piece of fallow land on the fringes of the village. We are dalits so we were given infertile land by landlords under the Land Ceiling Act. We could grow nothing on it as the top soil was rocky and we did not have the resources - bullocks, seeds, fertilisers - for farming."

Few years later, Balamma with some other dalit women from her village decided to lease a small piece of fallow land collectively with the help of a non-profit organisation, Deccan Development Society (DDS). On it, they grew multiple crops, primarily millets and pulses. That changed their lives. It has been more than 15 years now. Balamma owns cattle and her grandchildren go to school. "My children never had a chance to go to school because they had to start working at an early age to sustain the family," she says.

Many other dalit women like Balamma adopted similar cropping patterns in the wake of severe natural calamities like drought and floods. They, too, have been phenomenally successful in ensuring food security not only for themselves, but for the entire village. More than 5,000 dalit women, with the help of DDS, have formed *sanghams* (village-level communities) in 70 villages where they sit together and discuss issues pertaining to agriculture among other things. They have also devised an alternative public distribution system and set up seed banks in different villages of Medak district.

Collective farming by small groups of dalit women helped them conquer poverty. They leased fallow land for which DDS paid them 75 per cent of the total amount. Then they set about improving the soil quality using animal manure and local water harvesting techniques.

The women decided to grow multiple traditional crops - millets and pulses - instead of a single crop. If the harvest of a single crop failed due to natural conditions, pest attacks et al, they would have lost it all. However, with multiple crops the women had the advantage of saving at least 40 per cent of the harvest in extreme conditions and these crops are naturally resistant to pests as well.

Once the harvest was ready, these women, in a wealth ranking exercise, gave different coloured cards to each family depending on their economic status. That determined what portion of the produce each family would get. Also, they sold their produce at a rupee less than the market price. They paid back the DDS with a sack full of jowar for each acre. The surplus crop was sold off and the money it fetched was invested in a fixed deposit for five years. This money was taken out only to bring more fallow land under cultivation. After long struggle, they also got the work of bringing fallow land under cultivation in the NREGS, too.

Seed banks run by the *sanghams* follow the traditional method of storing. A woman in every village is chosen to store seeds and distribute it to whoever needs them. But, the seed bank has a rule: one has to return around double the quantity of seeds a person has borrowed. These banks have helped in storing a wide variety of seeds that would have been lost over time. "Some of the seeds had long been forgotten by the locals. But extreme weather conditions in the past few years have made people realise the value of these crops that had sustained several generations," a sangham member told *Hardnews*.

The women also began to grow plantation crops and earned wages similar to the NREGS. "We did work similar to what the government calls the NREGS way back in 1987. We paid daily wages to women who were part of the sanghams and worked in plantations or fallow land," informs PV Sateesh, DDS director. The plantations provided them with timber, fruits and fodder.

The plantations not only recharged the groundwater but also brought money after the women sold off the surplus. Traditional medicinal plants were also introduced which helped villagers save money that would otherwise have been spent on commuting to hospitals and medicines.

"According to our estimates, communities have saved around Rs three million by using medicinal plants and other traditional medical techniques. We also have a health worker in every village," says Sateesh. The women have also set up shops to sell the surplus produce at a rate lower than what the market offers.

Many women in different villages in Medak district narrate stories of their poverty-stricken past when the men worked in fields of big landowners. They couldn't plough their land as they had no bullocks. And, when they did manage to get bullocks, the harvesting season was over. "Now, even landlords sometimes come to us for bullocks and seeds. Many of them have adopted our farming methods after seeing our success," says a proud Lakshamma of Chilamamedi village.

The DDS has also started the country's first community radio station run by dalit women. They discuss issues relating to agriculture, health and music. Some of the women have even been trained in camera and video editing. They make documentary films that have been dubbed in several languages and won awards, too.

In 2002, during Chandrababu Naidu's regime, the Telangana region of Andhra suffered severe drought for nearly five years. Many farmers committed suicide as they were burdened with huge loans they could not repay. Their hybrid cash crops had failed as they could not withstand water scarcity. However, during this phase Balamma and other dalit women in Medak district didn't face such huge losses. Some of the millets they had sown were drought-resistant. So, they had food and fodder during the drought years. "During these tough years the villagers would ask everyone if they needed any grain or seeds. Everybody declined as there was a surplus of grain in every house," says a local woman farmer. When farmers across Andhra were struggling just to survive, these women had surplus in grain banks and seed banks.

The villages also saw a sharp drop in the number of the poor migrating to bigger cities, locals tell *Hardnews*. "Locals call millet *satyam pantalu* (crops of truth). These crops grow on practically no inputs and even on highly infertile soil," says Sateesh. Except for coastal Andhra, most of the other regions also grew millets and other traditional crops. After the Green Revolution, however, most farmers gave up millet farming and took to cultivating hybrid cash crops.

"Our cattle were dying after eating Bt cotton. We soon learnt that the crop required big investment. If one crop failed, farmers would face huge losses," informs Suryamma of Edavulapalli village in Medak. Some farmers who incurred such losses committed suicide.

Farmers also figured out that the soil was becoming infertile as no other crop would reap a good harvest after Bt cotton was introduced. Yet, cotton is still being grown in large parts of

Andhra along with several other cash crops that require large quantities of water and other inputs like pesticides, fertilisers and seeds. This is leading to an environmental crisis as water table in the region is depleting at an alarming rate as more and more farmers are digging deep for borewells.

Andhra Pradesh is divided into three regions - Rayalseema, Telangana and coastal Andhra. Coastal Andhra has fertile lands and a vast network of irrigation facilities. Most of Rayalseema and Telangana, however, are rain-fed. Land in the Rayalseema and Telangana regions is not conducive for crops that require plenty of water. So, millets were grown in the past and in small quantities post Green Revolution. With the advent of hybrid crops and genetically modified cash crops, farmers decided to abandon traditional farming. Bt cotton was first introduced in Andhra in 2002. It turned out to be a disaster that led to several farmers committing suicides due to enormous debts.

"Cash crops provide farmers with higher yields but it gets evened out with the input cost. One bad season can bring misery to farmers, especially, the poor ones. This has led to farmer suicides in Vidarbha and other parts of the country," says Suman Sahai of Gene Campaign.

The traditional cropping pattern of most of the rain-fed areas in India is disappearing at an alarming rate. The government is providing rice and wheat at a subsidised rate through the public distribution system (PDS). This has led to small and marginal farmers abandoning farming, migrating or engaging in some other profession while their land lies fallow. In spite of the high nutritional value and other benefits of millets, the area under millet cultivation has declined over the last five decades, especially after the Green Revolution. Between 1966 and 2006, more than 44 per cent of millet cultivation areas have been occupied by other crops, primarily cash crops. Government policies towards millets have also led to its decline.

"Millets are considered as the food of the poor. So, no one, especially the new generation, wants to associate themselves with the crop that is associated with poverty. People of older generations might like it, but the demand and appeal of millets is on the wane with the advent of junk food," informs Sahai. However, India still remains the highest consumer of millets in the world. Indians consume 42 per cent of the total global produce.

Subsidised rice distributed through the PDS has also led to a decline in the demand for millets as rice posed a competition. "There should be some political pressure from Punjab which is the reason why surplus rice from Punjab is being sent to Andhra Pradesh. It doesn't make sense to transport rice all the way from Punjab and Haryana. People should eat what they grow locally because it will save transportation costs and keep alive the traditional farming," says Sahai.

Sateesh, Sahai and others have repeatedly requested the government to introduce millets through the PDS primarily because they are high in nutrition and will also inspire farmers to grow the crop. "Millets should be introduced in midday meal and Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) because of their nutritional value and fibre. This will also keep the younger generation in proximity with their traditional eating habits," appeals Sateesh.

The marginalised women of Medak district have shown the way to other farmers, scientists and policy makers to regenerate sustainable and citizen controlled food systems. They have also succeeded in eradicating poverty and hunger while ensuring environmental sustainability. Moreover, women have assumed control over agriculture and become financially secure.

"Farmers are being made into consumers rather than producers through flawed government policies. The State has to empower people not disempower them. If these marginalised women in hostile natural conditions can become self-sufficient, why can't people in other parts of the country emulate them?" asks Sateesh.