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Vidarbha Farmers Receive Tips From the Women of Andhra

By Papi Sri Raman, Womens Feature Service

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Dalit ('downtrodden') women from Medak, Andhra Pradesh, have sown the seeds of hope in the neighbouring region of Vidarbha, in Maharashtra, notorious for the suicides of its farmers. And it is on the village of Dorli - once so poor that the villagers here put it up for sale - that their message has had the biggest impact.

Ratnavva, Chandramma and Adivemmma are three feisty women farmers - landowners all - who know enough about the land today that they are in a position to give tips to others who

work the land. Ratnavva, 80, of Dhanvad village, for instance, once used to harvest only a few kilos of grain from her small plot. Today, she is harvesting 1,200 kilos and owns some eight acres of farmland. The others too have similar success stories to boast about.

So what is the secret of their success? Sustainable farming. They talk animatedly about a method of cultivation where nature's biodiversity is used to protect crops without chemical pesticides. They recommend nurturing the soil with organic fertilisers so that farmers can grow some grain or the other throughout the year.

Adivemmma, 45, of Machinoor village spends her day in the mustard fields. She farms in a plot of 20 acres, owned jointly by 18 women like her. Instead of each tilling a miserly bit of dryland, Adivemmma and her friends got together in a self-help group and decided to tend their fields together. "From the same fields I first harvest mustard, then Bengal gram and chick pea and finally millet. I have work to do throughout the year," she says proudly.

The women of Machinoor village in Medak district grow mustard, chicken pea, millets, linseed, safola and sunflower on the same land, taking care to grow different crops in alternate rows. There is sound reason behind this practice. The gram, lentil and groundnut help to fix the nitrogen levels of the soil. Suresh Challa, the project coordinator of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), an NGO in Medak, which helps local farmers with effective agricultural interventions, explains, "The sunflower acts as a guard against pests. So do the fox millets, as its seed is very hardy and the insects try to drill into these unsuccessfully, leaving the rest of the crops free from attack. This is the kind of knowledge that the women of Medak want to impart to the farmers of Vidharba, where cotton farming has wreaked havoc on the land."

Ratnavva is another beneficiary of DDS's activism. Ten years ago all she managed to harvest from her two-acre plot of land were a few kilos of grain. And she was not the only one who had poor harvests. Many others in her village had forgotten what prosperity looked like. With the help of people like Challa and traditional knowledge of how to keep insects away and prepare organic manure, she was able to turn things around on her small farm. She has seen great results ever since. This year, too, Ratnavva expects a harvest of 1,200 kilos of millet and other crops. "This is the eighth year in a row when I have not put any fertiliser or pesticide in the fields," she states.

Adds Chandramma, 62, "Around 20 years ago, I got together with two or three other women and planted dryland varieties of crops like millets on abandoned, fallow land. We used organic manure and plant waste as nutrients. When we initially got to working on poor land, many people discouraged us. But in two years' time, when we began to get good harvests on this bad land, everyone sat up and took notice."

With her first savings, a tidy sum of Rs 15,000 (US\$1=Rs 44.6), Chandramma bought a neighbour's farm which was giving no yields. The farmer wanted to sell it off to the local landlord and money lender who was only offering Rs 5,000 for the one-acre plot. Chandramma decided to step in at that point, "I doubled the offer and everyone was happy," she recalls. Her family now own 20 acres of land and harvests many different crops from it. "I have now given my land to my two daughter-in-laws," she says with a smile of contentment.

But Chandramma has other accomplishments too. According to Challa of the DDS, she is the seed banker to her village. "She keeps a variety of seed and gives them to any farmer who needs them. They are not sold. Instead the farmer has to return double the amount of seed given when his/her harvest comes in."

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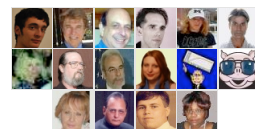
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All these women have benefited tremendously from these simple, but effective, practices. And it is this precious knowledge that they now want to share with future generations through a special farm school set up by DDS in Machinoor. The school offers integrated courses to 150 children from 60-odd villages in the area. Besides studying regular subjects like Maths, Science and languages, youngsters here learn all about the best farming practices. Every year, the Class 10 batch also writes the state board examination. The results have been extremely encouraging: a success rate of 90 per cent.

Chandramma has been a teacher in this farm school for the last 15 years. She has, for instance, taught the benefits of organic farming to young Mayuri and her fellow students in Class VI. Incidentally, Mayuri has made a film on Ratnavva and her farming success story. The little ones have also learnt ways to increase assets and to sustain farming during natural calamities like droughts and floods.

But it is not only children who have benefited from the expertise of the women of Medak. The villagers of Dorli in Vidarbha have reason to thank these enterprising Andhra farm women too. After witnessing their success in implementing the sustainable farm practices that they introduced, the DDS is now working to transform the lives of the impoverished people of Dorli.

P.V. Sathesh of the DDS, reveals, "In a pilot trial at Dorli in Maharashtra, we have been planting millets for the last two years. Our surveys show that 15 years ago the area had a host of local crops. But in the last 10 years the entire land was used only for expensive cotton farming. Low productivity and suicides have disheartened the local farmers. Two years ago we campaigned here for alternate farming. Last year we gave seeds to the farmers of Dorli to plant millets and chickpea. Unseasonal rains destroyed the crop but they at least took home the fodder and some income." The best news from the area was that no one committed suicide and in fact understood the importance of this approach.

For the farmers of Dorli, this is just the beginning. Things should soon change for the better in this area too. As Ratnavva of Medak observes encouragingly, "If we can do it, so can everyone else."

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