

Ancient roots, contemporary shoots

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Simple Pride: A woman shows a pineapple from a home garden. Photo by the author

A unique forest complex characterises Uttara Kannada district, where women farmers have nurtured and intimately engaged with their forest home gardens (FHGs) for centuries. These highly diverse spaces - which are home to upwards of 320 species of both cultivated and wild plants - have played a key role in the lives of the local communities.

Anchoring a base for sustainable lifestyles, FHGs provide food, fodder, fuel, fibre, and medicine. They also embody a spiritual and psychological connection to the forest landscape. A key aspect of these gardens includes the unique ethnic cuisine of the region.

A local initiative

Vanastree is a trust that began work in Sirsi and its environs in 2001. It set out to endorse the worth of small-scale forest home gardens in the region, and explore the ways in which people-especially women gardeners-use and conserve their diverse resources. Some of the recent pressures in the area have been deforestation, migration, agrarian crises that include farmer suicides, declining interest in agriculture among youth, the dramatic rise and fall of cash crop prices and development projects without proper foresight.

Aware of these stresses, the initiative has worked alongside the collective of forest gardeners who are growers, seed savers and innovators. Vanastree also does outreach, spreading its ideas through other agencies working with local communities. Take the instance of Manorama Joshi who has been with Vanastree since 2002.

Her family has lived in the Malnad in their ancestral village for generations. Manorama is the backbone of the group's effort to overcome invisibilisation of women in agriculture, while renewing the value and self-awareness of their deep wisdom. Her focus is also to hone the women's ability to respond to sweeping changes happening around them.

Working on the premise that change needs to happen both at societal and individual levels, Manorama has evolved an adaptive leadership model that goes from private homes to public platforms. Building bridges of kinship, issues of the endangerment of agriculture and culture have been brought to the fore. Instead of dwelling on insurmountable problems, incremental solutions have been sought and proven workable.

Mobilising a community rooted in the very specific world of the Malnad comes with profound challenges. But the conviction that a local movement can make a difference has been one of the drivers of Manorama and Vanastree, and it has inspired a range of activities and achievements. The pivotal challenge has been choosing the best approach for an eco-region in serious peril, and the strategy and courage it takes to manage initiatives effectively.

A key approach of the group has been to recognise the Western Ghats as a fragile biodiversity hot spot. Within this ecologically sensitive area, forest gardens are treated as age-old food repositories. Reflecting through generations of traditional knowledge - but organised to respond to a modern crises - the women who largely tend these FHGs are powerful agents in creating a living example of how to address the food and economic crisis.

It has been possible for multi-caste groups to integrate together and steward themselves towards action at a personal and village level, and feel they can take part and make a difference.

Manorama's approach to effectively bring change to her community has been nuanced and complex. It was important not to lock horns with the existing social system, or disrupt the domestic and farm rhythm. She worked with the system, using traditional skills and striving for victory without a battle - while making a difference in her life and in the lives of others.

Raising awareness of the women in the richness in themselves and their natural surroundings was a good starting point. From there, cultivating and nurturing the group has meant an emphasis on restoring the valuable and age-old practice of seed saving and exchange.

Between 2010 and 2013, a total of 220 kg of traditional, organic, open pollinated seeds were brought in by 60 seed savers. With FHGs occupying thousands of hectares and a huge number of gardeners tending them, a priceless landscape-level seed bank exists here.

The import of the Food Security Bill, the Seed Act, and introduction of genetically modified (GM) seeds are topics that aren't easy for the farmers of the Malnad to connect with. The contentious issue of GM seeds was addressed through a brinjal exhibition at the annual Malnad Mela-a Vanastree-organised festival-in 2010. Numerous seed groups had displays and 13 different local brinjal varieties were brought by growers. A powerful connection was made to the attendees of the mela of the ongoing Bt Brinjal debate-with the dangers of GM seeds and foods stressed.

The future

While several actualised solutions exist, questions loom large. Should farmers-especially women who form a vital component of the food production system-bear the burden of both growing crops and having to keep abreast of rapid outside changes churning their worlds? What are the real choices they have?

Manorama herself feels the future of local food systems is intrinsically linked to the Malnad forests, and rests in proactive and vigilant efforts of the community and alliances with those working on advocacy and policy issues.

Unlike many surrounding regions, Malnad is blessed with biological diversity, and its ecosystem provides food security and a robust community dynamic. Working models of small scale revival exist and have spread. Despite the obvious uncertainty about the future of forests, agriculture and the people of this unique milieu, there is hope that local communities can continue to have control over their seed and food resources with awareness and organisation.

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