

Guardians of Karnataka's Agri-Heritage: These Women Farmers Are Sowing a Revolution!

Author - Priya Pillai, Vandana Raj, Published on - 4.4.2019

Groups of 10-15 women farmers in Ramanagara district, Karnataka, owning anywhere between 0.5-1.5 acres of land, come together to conserve and produce indigenous seeds, cultivate and process grains, and compose organic inputs.

The 15th Indian Census noted a 24% increase in the number of women as agricultural labourers in the decade from 2001-2011. At 61.6 million, it is more than half (58%) of the 98 million women who are employed in agriculture in the country.

The same period

saw a 10% decline in the number of female farmers as the main cultivators and a 20% decrease in the number of marginal female farmers. The trend reflects the distress in Indian agriculture dominated by small and marginal farms or subsistence farmers. Changes in patterns of agricultural production and trade, which favour large landholdings; mechanised production and cash crops that weaken the production of subsistence food crops, often grown by women. Defying these trends is a small but growing movement of women farmers in Ramanagara district, in Karnataka.

Here, groups of 10-15 women farmers, owning anywhere between 0.5-1.5 acres of land, come together to conserve and produce indigenous seeds, cultivate and process grains, and compose organic inputs.

The farmers from Ramanagara. Photo: Priya Pillai In 2006, the

Genetic Resource, Ecology, Energy and Nutrition (GREEN) Foundation

promoted Janadhanya, an association of women farmers to protect agro-biodiversity, and promote organic farming and market linkages for farmer produce to advance sustainable rural livelihoods. Representatives from a cluster of five to seven villages are nominated to be the Board of Directors of Janadhanya. They make decisions, monitor and evaluate the activities of the groups and the federation, and ensure that members receive information and services. The association also facilitates linkages between government agricultural departments and other institutions, builds capacities of Community Resource Persons to support the village communities in livelihoods, and quality assures the farmer produce through a decentralised organic farming certification, the Participatory Guarantee System. From Janadhanya's network of 3,000 women across 17 villages, 694 have formed smaller Producer Groups (PG). **The 21 groups operate Seed Banks, process grains, and produce organic inputs and vegetable seeds; mill edible oil, make vermicompost, vermishash, and cattle feed.**

The women involved in mill activities. Photo: Priya Pillai

The activities of these groups are funded through member contributions, low-interest loans from the Janadhanya Farmer Producer Company Limited (JFPCL), and revenue from the sale of the produce. Ratnamma, from Gollaradoddi village, learnt to farm after she married a marginal farmer when she was just 14 years old. She works along with her husband in his half-acre land, growing Ragi or Finger Millet. Today, she is the leader of the producer group, Siridhanya Millet Processing Unit and a member of the village local government. She talks about how women often have to travel distances of 25 km to the neighbouring villages to find work. **She says, "In this village, women are meant to work in agriculture as labourers. If it is not available here, then we have to go to other villages. We leave home at 8 am and return by 7 pm. We are paid Rs 200. It is difficult for us to finish all our household work, and then travel out to earn. Getting work also depends on demand. We don't find it all the time."** Providing on- and off-farm economy-based employment for women is a significant achievement of these groups. Ratnamma says, "If the mill gets a regular order, then we get work. And we don't just involve the members but also other women. We involve other women when the demand is large and needs to be delivered in a short time. Many women find work in the garment factories in the cities. But my desire is for women in the village get work here." The flour mill gives additional work opportunities for members and non-members of the group and keeps their income flow steady. It reduces the drudgery of women's daily labour as they choose their share of work based on their convenience.

Grain processing at a small-scale ensures food and nutrition security of the village community, as it allows farmers and other families to get small quantities for self-consumption.

Photo: Priya Pillai

The indigenous Seed Banks and Seed Production groups reduce the dependence of the farmers on hybrid seeds, which cannot be replanted after the harvest, thereby increasing the financial burden of the small farmers. Janadhanya supports the women farmers to set up seed repositories and trains them on seed selection, storage and seed bank management. The women gather and store seeds, conduct germination tests at the bank and preserve traditional varieties in-situ by planting them in test plots and their kitchen gardens. The 38 farmers from three Seed Production groups have conserved 249 varieties of 39 crops, including rice, millets, oilseeds, nuts and vegetables. In Finger Millet alone, a popular crop in the region, due to its low cost of production and drought tolerance, there are 120 local varieties conserved. Local farmers, even outside of the Jandhanya network, can get these seeds on the conditions that they allot a portion of their land to generate new seeds and return twice the amount that they borrowed from the group. The Seed Banks (SBs) and production groups develop women as resource persons, who promote the adoption of traditional agricultural practices and organic farming methods and monitor the farming practices of seed contributing members to ensure the quality of seeds. Women become critical agents of change in these local communities by strengthening livelihoods, ensuring a steady supply of quality seeds for cultivation and increasing the availability and access to pesticide-free food for consumption.

The positive bias in favour of growing subsistence crops impacts nutrition security and family health.

Women become critical agents of change in this rural district of Karnataka. Photo: Priya Pillai Kalavathi, a Board Member of the JFPCL and leader of the Uttara Community Seed Bank Unit in Veerayanadoddi village, shares her pride, "Everywhere, we see men as farmers and forming groups. But here in this village, it's us women who farm. We are role models. Other farmers learn from us." The effectiveness of these Community Seed Banks led the Government of Karnataka to establish such SBs all through the state. Women farmers in Jandhanya's network villages are no longer just low-wage labourers or confined to their homes. They are farmers and producers, leading the revival and adoption of locally sustainable agricultural practices. They make decisions, their opinions are heard, and they create employment for other women in their communities. "People in our community visit our Oil Mill, see the machines and our business and say that we have done what even men did not think about doing," says Sumathi, the Director of JFPCL and leader of the Sri Maruthi Oil Processing Unit.

Suma, her neighbour and member of her group, adds, "For years, my husband and family would ask me where I was going when I left home, as I did not have any work outside. This Oil Mill has brought me out of my home. I meet other women and am not dependent on anyone for my pocket money. I don't have to explain myself anymore to step out of my house."

In August 2016, [Vrutti](#), a non-profit centre for sustainable livelihoods started supporting this network of women farmers. Janadhanya benefits from Vrutti's three-fold model that aims to build wealthy, resilient and responsible smallholder farmers. Farmers receive a bundle of services including capacity building and

mentoring support, business planning for enterprises and diversification, access to key inputs and services, access to capital and financial inclusion, local and corporate market linkages and personal growth planning. A specific example is that of the organic millets and processed grains, marketed under the Janadhanya brand, gaining access to domestic markets through corporate linkages. The producers can tap into the dietary transition and preferences towards healthy eating among urban consumers. Till now, the groups have mobilised 0.85 million INR and sold produce worth 2.5 million INR, including organic seeds, inputs and food, cattle feed and silkworm rearing trays or Chandrike. The Janadhanya model leverages local food systems to sustain inclusive rural development. Women emerge as custodians of agricultural biodiversity, influencing food production and consumption patterns, improving rural livelihoods and incomes, and building ecosystem resilience. In Kalavathi's words, "There is something special about women coming together. Our concern is not just money. We respect and respond to each other's feeling and needs. We step out of our house to conserve seeds, are proud to serve healthy food and have our voices heard, within and outside our villages." First published by [The Better India](#) on 30 Aug. 2018