The seeds of revolution

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She does not shout slogans and sit on dharnas, she is unlikely to have heard of Marx, and armed rebellion is nowhere on her horizon. Her revolution is embedded in the basics of life: soil, seeds, water, sun, and knowledge born of generations of living with these natural elements. On just 3 acres of rainfed land in one of India’s driest regions, she has grown 45 crop varieties, produced enough to feed her family for the whole year, and earned Rs. 2 lakhs selling the surplus. Having spent Rs. 18000 on the farm, this has given her a hefty income of Rs. 1.8 lakhs. This, in a year where the region saw 40% less rainfall than normal. This, with no chemical inputs whatsoever. She has turned the Green Revolution logic on its head. Namidoddi Vinodamma, ably helped by her husband Vinayappa, is modest about her achievement. Surrounded by a bewildering array of jowar, bajra, ragi, red gram, green gram, til, sama, korra, and other food crops in the midst of their land, Vinodamma talks quietly about how she is merely using knowledge handed down over generations, trusting the land and traditional seeds.

Namidoddi Vinodamma with her jowar crop. Pic: Ashish Kothari

Some colleagues of Kalaviriksh and I are in Nagвар village, near Zaheerabad in Telangana, visiting Vinodamma after having heard of her remarkable story. Continuing with traditions is not the only reason for Vinodamma’s success. Another major factor is the presence of the organization she belongs to, the Deccan Development Society (DDS). Over the last almost three decades, DDS has quietly worked with and through Dalit women farmers, all small or marginal land-holders, to point the way to food sovereignty, sustainable agriculture, women’s empowerment, and community-led communications. More on this in a bit.

Vinodamma and Vinayappa As we walk through Vinodamma and Vinayappa’s farm, they point to five varieties of jowar (sorghum), telling us how one grows fast and with v. little water (and is therefore called ‘poor person’s jowar’), another is good for diabetics, a third one has high productivity, and so on. They tell us how the harvesting will be staggered over a few weeks, as different crops have different maturing periods. We ask them if their output this year is enough to feed the family the whole year; beamng, Vinodamma says yes, plus there is surplus to sell. The only groceries they need to buy from the market are salt, sugar (they consume v. little), coconut oil, soap and detergent; and during the February-April period and drought years, some vegetables. We notice some trampled jowar and bajra; Vinayappa tells us that wild pigs sometimes get into the field, but even after the pigs and birds and other creatures have done their damage or taken their share, there is enough for the family! What fertilizer do you use? Nothing artificial, only vermicompost, cowdung powder, dried neem powder. What about pests, what do you do when some attack a crop? We see jaggery water on crops, which attracts ants that will feed on pests; and we use neem oil and other natural products if there is a greater pest attack. For the last several years, there has been no serious pest problem. Noticing that the neighbouring farm has only cotton growing in it, we ask about why that farmer is not doing what Vinodamma and Vinayappa are. They say he was attracted by the incessant advertisements, often featuring famous Andhra celebrities, that promise bumper cotton harvests and immediate wealth. But despite repeated applications of fertilisers and pesticides, his yield this year was so bad (and input costs as high as ever), he has suffered a financial loss. Is he then attracted to their way of farming, will he switch to millets and pulses? Apparently he is definitely dropping cotton next year, but whether he will try out yet another promised miracle with sucargane, or emulate the Namidoddis, they are not sure. What about rice, do they not need to buy that since it does not grow here? Vinayappa grins, he says that hardly anyone here likes rice. They do eat it occasionally because it is available free or very cheaply as part of government welfare scheme, but millets are given significantly higher priority. A collective endeavor Vinodamma is part of a Sangham, a collective of Dalit women of her village. This is one of several such Sanghams in 45 villages affiliated to the DDS, with about 3000 women members. Through seed exchange, fund collection and management, knowledge sharing, collective labour, and other joint activities, the Sanghams have overcome the barriers and limitations that each individual marginal farmer faces, especially as a woman. As the umbrella organization, DDS has helped in many ways: getting credit and linking women to banks, conducting participatory natural resource documentation and planning exercises, overcoming resistance from men and upper castes, trying to get women ownership over or rights to lands they are cultivating, dealing with hostile or indifferent government officials and bringing in helpful ones, providing information on the dangers of chemicals and hybrids and genetically modified seeds, helping build capacity to understand policies and laws, marketing of organic produce through a cooperative called Sangham Organics, and in many other ways facilitating the empowerment of farmers to take back control over their lives. DDS has also been trying to get the area it operates in declared a Biodiversity Heritage Site, a status under the Biological Diversity Act that could possibly provide the move towards sustainable farming greater security. Though legally unclear, such a status could for instance perhaps be used to check the entry or spread of genetically modified (GM) crops here (Bt Cotton is already here, and DDS has actively documented it ill-effects, see Video Gallery in www.ddsindia.com). Unfortunately the State Biodiversity Board has been delaying a decision on this. The demand for a Biodiversity Heritage site status is partly an outcome of DDS’s involvement with national networks and campaigns. These include the Millet Network of India(MINI) which DDS itself initiated, the Campaign on Community Control of Biodiversity which ran for a few years to highlight the need for democratization of the governance of biodiversity, and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP, 2000-2003) in which it helped formulate a farmer-centred biodiversity action plan for the district. It was in this process that DDS introduced the idea of biodiversity festivals, since when it has spread to many parts of India; DDS still undertakes, annually, a month-long mobile festival in January-February, with wonderfully decorated bullock carts with all the local seed diversity and traditional dishes, holding discussions in dozens of villages about the importance of organic, sustainable, biodiverse farming, and the dangers of corporate control over food. These processes and the sheer weight of the success of farmers like Vinodamma are also used for advocacy at district, state and national government levels. The day before our visit to Nagвар village, we had participated in the inauguration of a programme titled ‘Organic Medak’, organized by DDS. The aim is to build on what the Dalit women have achieved, to spread the message of going organic and focusing on millets, across Medak district as a whole. The function’s chief guest was the District Collector D. Ronald Rose, and also present was the Superintendent of Police, B. Surnathi. Both the DG and the SP appeared very genuine in their assurance for all possible help to DDS to make such a vision come true. Several of the Dalit women who have stories like Vinodamma’s, were also honoured at this function. Inauguration of Organic Medak. Pic: Ashish Kothari One of DDS’s most important innovations is the parallel Public Distribution System (PDS) it has helped set up. Tuljema of Pastapur explained it in detail to us. Loans given to poor dalit women farmers by DDS are repaid in kind, a specified quantity of jowar, this jowar is then made available to the poor in each village, at cheap rates. People therefore have an alternative to the official PDS, which only supplies wheat and rice (that also often of poor quality), and which is often ridden with corruption. It also helps localize the food economy to some extent, reducing dependence on external forces over which farmers have no control. This example has been used to advocate fundamental changes in the official PDS system across India, including its decentralization (in terms of democratic control) and localisation (in terms of diverse foods relevant to local ecologies and cultures). Perhaps as a result of this and advocacy from other groups, the Food Security Act 2013 states that “the Central Government, the State Governments and local authorities shall, for the purpose of advancing food and nutritional security, strive to progressively realise the objectives specified in Schedule III”, and Schedule III includes “(a) incentivising decentralised procurement including procurement of coarse grains; and (b) geographical diversification of procurement operations.” Without any mandatory, time-bound provision, however, it is not clear if this part of the Act will get implemented in the near future, or at all. Another achievement worth emulating elsewhere is that the local Krish Vigny Kendra (Agricultural Science Centre) is run by the DDS women with help from government-appointed scientists, one of the few in India where the curriculum is set by farmers. And to make the local organic food more popular, DDS has set up Café Ethnic and a Sangham Organics shop in the town of Zaheerabad, where millet-based products and dishes predominate. Not restricting itself to agriculture and food, DDS has also facilitated the transformation of the women into film-makers, community radio managers,
teachers, and much else. India’s first rural community radio station, Sangham Radio, was started here in 2008. The Community Media Trust is run by the women farmers who double up as film-makers. Perhaps most importantly, all this has also dramatically altered their triple marginalized status as Dalits, as women, and as small farmers. The respect they have gained in their own communities, vis-à-vis the government, and in national and global circles, is palpable. Several women have also been able to travel to other parts of India and abroad; film-maker and farmer Narsamma has been to about 20 countries, showing her films, exchanging experiences with similar movements. 13-year old Mayuri, under the mentorship of P V Satheesh, one of DDS’s founders, has also become a film-maker, documenting the wisdom and knowledge of her elders and of how her family’s farms are also her school.

Kandakamkadi Mogalamma at PRA, Pastapur. Pic: Ashish Kothari

A fascinating exchange programme with farmers from Peru is documented in the film In the Lap of Pachamama, Bhootali, Mother Earth (for this and other films by Mayuri, Narsamma and other DDS women, see under Video Gallery in www.ddsindia.com). With such exposure, several women can speak confidently about not only their crops and soil and cuisine but also about the national and global politics of food and agriculture.

There is much else that can be said about the DDS women, both their successes and their weaknesses or failures and what more needs to be done. Of the latter, Satheesh for instance laments that they have not been able to do much about the education system, which with increasing privatization and English-orientation is creating students alienated from their cultures and ecologies; their own alternative school Pachasaale now has students mostly from the Lambada community rather than the local farmer families. The larger context of the ‘job market’, the attractions of the city, and other factors are acting against the sustainability of agriculture-based livelihoods. A holistic revival of rural areas that covers the entire range of needs and aspirations including for secure livelihoods and jobs in manufacturing and services as much as in agriculture and pastoralism, good learning opportunities, health services, and so on, are beyond the scope of any single organization. DDS’s forays into media and communications, education, and health are providing partial solutions, but only partial. Notwithstanding this, the women of DDS have shown that amazing transformation towards well-being based on ecologically sustainable and culturally rooted processes is possible within a generation. Contact the author First published on India Together Read Daughters of the soil: Meet Telangana’s fiery dalit women fighting all odds to save environment Also read about further developments in participation of farmers at Pastapur (by the same author) in 2018