Youth can play a significant role in solving farm crisis, says Kavitha Kuruganti

Kavitha Kuruganti, 46, set out to be a development communicator and went on to become one of India's foremost champions of sustainable agriculture. While still studying for a Masters degree in communications at Hyderabad Central University, she was drawn into the world of NGOs, particularly the Deccan Development Society. Kuruganti is now the national convener for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), a network of farmer groups that promote both ecological and financial sustainability. Firstpost spoke to Kuruganti, who has acquired an in-depth technical knowledge of the agricultural sector over the years and has spearheaded the campaign against genetically modified (GM) crops. She has served as a member of the Government of India's High-Level Committee on the Status of Women in India and as a member of a government panel set up in 2013 to examine the methodological issues in fixing a minimum support price (MSP) in agriculture. Edited excerpts follow:

What feelings does Swaraj evoke for you 2017?

That it doesn't exist... that it has been taken away more or less completely. Can you enumerate the reasons behind that feeling?

Resource grabbing in rural India comes to mind, where you have no control over resources today. Land acquisition has always been there but there are numerous other ways in which resources are going away now. This includes seemingly attractive land purchase deals by outsiders who come into villages. It takes away the ability to determine what will happen to your land. Is that because people's lives change when they move from living off the land to dealing with a large amount of cash?

We are not necessarily talking about whether the cash is large in quantity or reasonable or not or whether it will last for long. Lack of opportunities after that for sustainable livelihoods is what I'm referring to. There are no opportunities in rural areas when these resources are taken away. It could well be that what (cash) you get is spent immediately on building a house or marrying off a family member. Resource grabbing applies to not just large assets like land but also things like seeds – farmers have been lured away from any physical stocking of seeds that they have. In the past 15-20 years of my work, I have seen this happening at a more rapid pace because corporations have discovered this wonderful strategy of tying up with agricultural departments for supplying seeds to departments and not selling or marketing seeds to farmers in villages. Departments then give away seeds free of cost for two or three years to farmers and when you start getting seeds like that, you stop storing them. And once that happens, you lose stocks of seeds and the dependence on external sources becomes a perpetual dependence after that. Even in people's movements, when they talk about (people's control over) 'jal-jungle-zameen' (water, forests, land) they don't necessarily bring seeds into the picture. What then is the larger reason for the farmer crisis?

A substantial part of the crisis can be connected to seeds as they are no longer a singular input in farming. Today, when you bring a hybrid seed, it's an entire package of practices that you are bringing along – which you are forced to use, that necessarily involves a certain cost and requires a certain debt. But the crisis is also at the output end – whether farmers are able to get remunerative markets, what's happening in trade deals, procurement policies and so on. Are you referring to global trade deals?

Yes, international free-trade agreements. We've reached a stage where we are not talking just about the autonomy of individual farmers or farming communities but of governments foolishly making themselves extremely vulnerable to litigation due to trade agreements. Consider RECP (Regional Economic Comprehensive Partnership), that involves 50 other countries. It's a mega trade deal where the government is signing away its own ability and authority to adjudicate on matters. If there is any conflict on the agreement it is not supposed to be resolved as per our national laws and our sovereign policies. You (the nation) are signing away your power to bring the investor to obey your own laws. You are saying it's okay, let's go to an international tribunal which is filled with their corporate lawyers and whoever has greater money will win the case. So, we should be talking not just about saving people but saving governments and our own government which is needed for our democracy to be functional. Are you saying that it is basically Indian sovereignty that is at stake here?

Certainly, and if you are talking about Swaraj then we'll have to cover all these aspects. It's not just about one individual woman farmer, whether she has swaraj or not, or an Adivasi farmer somewhere, but about nations themselves. Also, did it mean anything that the Indian Constitution said that state governments will have the ultimate authority on agricultural decision-making? It's not seen in implementation at all. The Centre decides even wrong policy and states are forced to bear the consequences of what happens later on. So, we are talking about autonomy being taken away at every level by very large corporate forces and the lack of wisdom in (central) governments when they signed this (autonomy) away willingly.

One reason for this has been the argument that India cannot afford to be left out of the global market place. And if the price of participation in that market place is to be party to these various international trade deals, then so be it...

But that is a poor justification for what you do to the majority of your citizens. Very often in these trade deals, for getting a little more space for sectors that are non-primary, like the IT sector and other services sector, we are trading away many things that become matters of life and death for a large majority of people. For a little more profit or little more margin for one sector, you can't violate the right to life of a large number of people. That is unacceptable. You have been part of the movement to resist these trends for over 24 years. Could you say, to what extent, mobilisation has been able to make a difference? Or is the mobilisation in favour of the farmer losing out?

No, I would not say that everything is negative. I do think there have been huge gains made in terms of ecological agriculture as a way to Swaraj and self-reliance. Today, government research agencies are producing a lot of material to prove that organic farming does yield higher returns, we have large flagship programs of governments that are investing Rs 500 to 600 crore on an annual basis, all promoting ecological agriculture. The government actually accepts things like a PGS (participatory guarantee system). I'm not talking about just understanding around technologies and post-modern science. I'm talking about even institutional approaches changing from being highly top-down to those approaches which appreciate that farmers have something to contribute to fellow farmers in terms of knowledge, skills, confidence building and so on. For example, in programs like Mahila Sashaktikaran Pariyojna, women farmers get autonomy from not being dependent on spouses, who have higher power when it comes to market-based transactions. (Instead) when you have commons based transactions, women immediately regain spaces and autonomy in decision making at the household level. So, I go down to that (individual) unit level, not family level. Ecological agriculture and movements like the Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch are part of a network in India today of something like 350 seed saving and seed breeding farmers. They are breeders creating new popular varieties and these are also some farmers who are conserving 200 different varieties of crops. Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch, which got created about five years ago, spreads a traditional variety of seeds and revival of physical stock of seeds back with individual households as well as entire communities. One sees in certain pockets of Odisha, with Kondhs trying to resist mono culture from the forest department. They are trying to banish hybrid seeds and chemical agriculture from their farming. I do think these are all ways of re-possessing autonomy over own lives, livelihoods, future, and resources. So, these are essentially struggles for Swaraj?

They are and they are doing well at their own level. The one big problem as to why these efforts will not be enough is that with one stroke of a pen, they...
True. The fact that you could gain autonomy by cutting yourself off from the mainstream market, is being dependant on others in a different way. If urban consumers and rural farmers can tie-up directly there is a certain dependence there also but it's not exploitative. The Belgaum organic food club does it. There is a CSA (community supported agriculture) model that has emerged in Bangalore – one self-help group of farmers is supplying to hundred consumer households in Bangalore. But all these little initiatives can vanish in no time at all if the government decides to take away the basic productive resources. And that's one area where autonomy is not in sight. You may regain things at the grassroots level but if larger legal or policy weapon is unleashed on you then everything gets wiped out.

Can we take hope from the example of Sikkim, where the entire state has gone organic?

Yes, anywhere where people are cutting themselves off from the corporate controlled input market and are able to find sympathetic markets, markets where consumers are explicitly saying 'I am for you, I realise that I have a greater advantage than you (the farmer) for various reasons, and I will support you in my own interest as well as because I think you will stand a better chance'. There is a new concept of printing the break-up of what the consumer is paying in some places for instance. There is a chain of outlets in Bangalore which, on every product, give a break-up of the MRP – saying how much is going to the farmer, how much was spent on transportation and how much on themselves.

How can we cultivate these kinds of creative endeavours, which are enhancing people's sense of agency at the ground?

We need more people who have particular skills and capabilities and outreach in urban India to get back to supporting small communities. One finds that in Tamil Nadu, there's been a large movement because G Nammalvar (organic farming expert) inspired lots of educated youth to chuck their jobs and come back to villages. Even if you don't take up hands on farming, you are there to support a group of farmers. We are talking about a thousand young people who are well networked. You need an inspiring leader, you need youth to network with each other to egg each other on in a positive sense. It also requires an entire curriculum to be built around encouraging youngsters to go and do these kinds of work in rural India. (Such as) Bhoomi is drawing people from different sectors, including students. But at the same time, it is widely reported that most young people, under 25, who are currently on farms are not interested in agriculture and for them, Swaraj could well mean an escape from the land to an urban setting. Are these reports valid?

They are. The larger picture is like that. But I'm saying not everything is lost. There is a movement that has begun to regain those spaces and if we don't act fast, it is true that for a large majority Swaraj will appear to be in running away from the village. You have also been involved in knowledge Swaraj activism for many decades. Could you say what is knowledge Swaraj and what does it mean today?

For me, it means that corporate science doesn't hijack research agendas and bring in products and technologies into the market which essentially benefit a few but cause larger harm in terms of both economic resources being taken away as well as environmental harm. To that extent, a large part of what I imagine as knowledge Swaraj is a push back against corporate science and corporate technology. Is it also an issue of indigenous knowledge systems vs the more formalised Western systems, which are now deemed to be the only viable form of knowledge?

There is enormous local experiential knowledge and skills pool which we have never carefully looked at. A part of what Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch does is to characterise traditional seed varieties to show that they actually have superior nutritional qualities and sometimes higher yield. These seeds were not just given by nature, they have been bred by farmers so it's about their skills and knowledge that has evolved into such wonderful material, which the mainstream has ignored continuously. Modern science analytical tools can be applied so that (indigenous) knowledge and science can be packaged in a way that (modern) science understands – to bring about hitherto unseen appreciation for indigenous knowledge.

What gives you hope to restore and regain Swaraj?

I do see a small movement beginning among youth who have been schooled in a particular manner, who are still able to de-school themselves and come back to rural India. I see that movement more strongly in Tamil Nadu and Kerela. Apparently, this is not happening as strongly in northern India yet. That is the hope – this great wish to contribute something in a sustainable way.