

Our Local Santha (Farmers' Market)

The idea of fresh, seasonal vegetables, freshly plucked leafy greens making their way to your plate in a few hours has immense appeal to most of us. While it might be a bit of a dream for the urbans among us for those of us living in this corner of rural Rayalseema it is a real possibility. On most evenings women come around to our houses with fresh greens, brinjals, okra, gourds (or whatever else the season permits). The idea of having a *santha* however was more exciting. One could pick up a few recipes along with the vegetables and some local gossip as well! Although agriculture is one of the main sources of livelihoods for small farmers in the area they would travel about 10-20 km to the nearest wholesale market or bus depot to transport vegetables to Bengaluru, Chennai etc. It was surprising to some of us that there was no local *santha*. After a year and a half of deliberation and discussion at hamlet level meetings, womens' group meetings etc. the *santha* became a reality on January 19, 2014. Women were vocal about the need for one and their reasons were many.....

Food prices have skyrocketed. Those among us who are landless or have land but no water have to go to the santha at Angallu or Madanapalle (which are 10-20 km away). This means we have to take an auto or a bus so add the transport fare to the cost of the vegetables and it becomes inaffordable. How can we afford to eat vegetables regularly?

Our men usually go to the santha since we have to cook, clean, take care of animals and children. The men take Rs. 100 with them, come back with vegetables worth Rs. 50 and spend the rest on drink or some other worthless item. If we have a santha nearby, we women can go there walking, buy fresh vegetables and greens for a lesser price without spending money like the men do! And we can do this while managing the home.

Our own santha will mean that all of us living in this Panchayat can sell our produce locally. We don't have to pay for transportation, take it to another santha where a middleman will offer to take it off us for a wholesale price and make money on our produce. We the producers will get a good price...a price that we deserve for our produce. The customers like you and other teachers at Rishi Valley and the residents of our Panchayat will also benefit. They will get fresh produce at a reasonable price.

In the face of all this what arguments can there be for not setting up a *santha*.

Most of the arguments were political. A leader must get credit for setting up the *santha*....political mileage could be pretty high. The previous Panchayat leadership kept postponing the setting up of the *santha*. As the old order changed yielding place to new - we elected a new Sarpanch in June-July 2013 - all barriers (political and otherwise) to setting up a *santha* were overcome. The site selected was by the Paleti Gangamma Temple (goddess of rain for the goatherds and shepherds) under the shade of tamarind trees and a Nux Vomica tree lining both sides of a Panchayat road that connects the Highway to various hamlets in the Panchayat.

So here we are creating our own markets!



Fresh veggies - beans, tomatoes, chillies, greens, radish, field beans, potatoes, onions, garlic.....in this season. We can look forward to all shapes and types of gourds in the summer.

Our *santha* is a Sunday market, a socializing space where stories and recipes are exchanged and where bulls and cows wander in and out.

This week's market saw the *Devayaddu* or the sacred bull blessing the vendors. He picked on a few tomatoes from one vendor, a few veggies from another and moved on...taking only a little as tax for his blessing unlike the Indian tax man or the Finance Minister as a friend remarked :)

