

Andhra Pradesh: the land is ours

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On the Deccan Plateau [1] of Andhra Pradesh in south-east India, 70% of the population are agricultural workers. The agrarian traditions of the Deccan Plateau are still very much alive. Villagers plough their fields with bullocks, weed their fields with hand tools, and grow a wide diversity of crops from seed that has been saved and has adapted over generations to the local environment.

Life in the villages revolves around agriculture. Women spend their days tending fields alongside their children, the elderly join in with simple tasks. Nights are spent cooking the food they have grown. Festivals throughout the year celebrate the passage of the seasons and the fertility of the land. Despite the fact that most of the villagers earn the equivalent of less than \$1.60 (£1) a day, people are genuinely proud of their skills as farmers.

I am a small-scale UK farmer. From my own experience I want to support Asfar Jafri and Vandana Shiva's plea [1] in **openDemocracy** for India to sustain the traditional crops of its indigenous food culture, in opposite to phoney 'modernisation' through the introduction of genetically-modified (GM) potatoes.

In November 2002 I travelled to Andhra Pradesh [2] to work with farmers who are campaigning to convince Britain's department for international development (DfID [3]) to listen to the farmers themselves and to provide aid for appropriate development for the rural poor. Instead, DfID has committed £65 million to a plan called Vision 20/20 [4] which aims to convert the state of Andhra Pradesh to industrialised agriculture, oriented towards an export economy and the use of (GM) crops.

Ammaji is a farmer who owns 4 acres of land. She was a member of the citizen's jury – a representative group of farmers who analysed the Vision 20/20 project and came to the unanimous conclusion to reject it. "We want to continue with our own agricultural practices, cultivate traditional crops and save our seeds."

DfID seems to think that the people who claim that small farmers do not want globalisation and intensive agriculture are just a group of middle-class, non-governmental organisation (NGO) activists and academics. My experiences in Andhra Pradesh have shown me that this is untrue: far from being the views of a handful of people, the anti-globalisation perspective is the general view even among the most marginalised of small farmers.

The main aim of my trip was to make a video of the Deccan farmers talking about their traditional agricultural systems and to find out what the farmers thought about the Vision 20/20 programme. I interviewed and spoke with farmers of different castes and backgrounds. Many were active in village *sangham* (women's self-help groups). Some had control of an adequate amount of land and resources to support themselves, while others were daily wage labourers who often seemed to be earning barely enough to feed their family.

Few of the farmers seemed to know much about Vision 20/20, but they did understand the issues involved in the programme, once these were explained to them. I spoke with them about their agriculture and culture in relation to development projects; all of them had very clear ideas about what would really be useful to them in overcoming their poverty.

The benefits of diversity

The area of Andhra Pradesh that I visited has a very strong network of village *sangham* [5]. These were originally organised by an NGO called the Deccan Development Society [6], but they have now gained enough confidence to organise themselves.

Anjamma is a farmer from the village of Gangwar who grows eighteen varieties of crops on her 10 acres. “I don’t go for wage labour because I like to own my own land and not purchase my food grains. If I grow my own crops I always have enough food and I know it is purely organic and healthy... If I grow ten varieties of crops, even if three are lost I still get seven varieties... I have bullocks for my fertiliser, so I don’t have to spend.”

The members of the *sangham* meet regularly to organise projects to help solve their most basic problems. The poverty-reduction projects that they are organising are brilliant – schools to meet the needs of agricultural workers’ children; medicinal herb gardens; *neem* oil extraction plants; radio stations; and projects encouraging female farmers to save and grow traditional distinctive seed varieties.

Perhaps the most important projects that they set up are those helping small farmers and landless people gain access to land for growing subsistence crops and traditional crops for sale at local markets. The illiterate women of the *sangham* are very aware of the flaws in the government programmes, and often set up their own alternative programmes to counter the drastic effects of the ‘development’ projects.

One of the most interesting programmes is called the ‘alternative public distribution system’. The government of India has a public distribution system [7] which gives rice to poor households. *Sangham* members noticed that over time, households dependent on the rice became ill more often than households growing native grains. This happened because rice is not as nutritionally beneficial as those grains.

The *sangham* obtained small loans from NGOs to buy fallow lands and lent the money to landless farmers, to enable them to cultivate the land with traditional crops. The farmers repaid the loans with grain or with small payments of money. The grains, such as *jowar* [8] and *millet* [9], were distributed to poor households and the money used to buy more land for other landless farmers. This is the most popular programme run by the *sangham*, because it meets the most basic need – for land.

The farmers glow with pride as they take me on expeditions across their abundant fields. Every one of the farmers who owns their own plot of land (2-10 acres) and farms it using traditional methods tells me with confidence: “I can feed my family and myself with my crops – we always have enough for what we need.” The latest growing season was low in rainfall, so most farmers expect half of their normal yields in many staple crops, but none seem to think that they will suffer drastic consequences, thanks to the diversity of crops that they grow.

Indira is a spokesperson from a group of ten landless women who got a loan from a *sangham* programme to buy land. “We don’t want money from the government, we want land, so we can grow our own food and sell our surplus produce. The money from wage labour is only enough for half of the rice our family needs to eat. For us, land is gold.”

Crop diversity is vital both to the culture and basic food security of the region. The traditional farmers grow between twelve and fifty different varieties of crops, which they have adapted over the centuries to the harsh dry climate of the Deccan Plateau. GM seed varieties, bred by corporations, require by contrast vast quantities of inputs and are not adapted to the Deccan climate and geography. The seed varieties which have been bred by local farmers are rain-fed crops which do not require irrigation or any other inputs which have to be purchased from companies.

The failures of the Green Revolution

All of the farmers here seem to have an intimate understanding of their crops, and use organic methods of building soil fertility, as well as natural pest control. This deep understanding of their land, passed down over generations, makes them deeply wary of changes to the structure of their agricultural system.

Traditional farmers have observed the problems encountered by large-scale farmers and farmers in other districts of India, who have made a transition to export-orientated, mechanised agriculture. India has been experiencing this transition since the 'Green Revolution [10]'. The past forty years of experimentation with industrialised agriculture has done nothing to help small farmers – and they can see that.

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For many small farmers the Green Revolution has been a failure [11]. They have come to realise that pesticides breed resistant pests and stop working over time; that their animals get sick when they eat sprayed fodder; that their soil gets compacted by tractors; that GM crops fail.

Some neighbouring farmers have committed suicide after building up debts buying seed, fertiliser and pesticides; others have grown monocultures of cash crops for export only to return from the market with a tenth of the value of their crop, and none of the money they need to feed their family over the next year. Most importantly, these small farmers have realised the value of being in control of their own land.

The 'efficient' road to destitution

The state government of Andhra Pradesh [12] outlines a vision [13] for the future of agriculture in Andhra Pradesh which focuses on the production of a few key cash crops, which will be produced 'efficiently' on mechanised large farms and then sold in the global market.

For this to happen, the small landholdings would have to be consolidated and given to larger farmers who could afford machinery, chemicals and hybrid or GM seed. The small farmers would be squeezed off their own land to work as contract or daily wage labourers on the plantation farms.

Because the farms would be highly mechanised, the number of jobs available would be significantly less than the displaced population. Vision 20/20 aims to reduce the population working in agriculture from 70% to 30%. That figure translates into 20 million farmers who would

lose their livelihoods. Most of the displaced would be forced to go to urban areas to scramble for non-existent jobs with the other redundant millions.

The government of Andhra Pradesh believes that this social transformation would reduce poverty. The small farmers [14] laughed when they heard this. They know that they are much better off owning their own land. The farmers said that they needed 4-6 acres of land for a family. People with less land had a harder time supporting themselves; those with no land lived in the worst poverty.

Laxmi is a village seed saver and farmer from Humnapu with 6 acres of land and three children. "I have grown up here and learned to save seeds from my parents. In my experience the traditional crops are the good ones to grow because they need no chemical fertilisers or pesticides, and they give fodder along with food for the people. Genetically modified crops and other single crops will give only income. We lose so much without diversity, so I tell all the people in my *sangham* not to go for these crops. We have a traditional connection to our crops. They are connected to our culture and daily life."

The people who work for daily wages on sugar cane and other plantations earn less than the equivalent of 50 cents (30 pence) a day. Most of them say that they can barely afford food for their family and have had trouble buying extras such as soap, oil, clothing and medicines. Some say that during the seasons when there is no work, their family has only one meal a day. Yet despite the problems with casual work, most agree that they would rather have this employment than no employment at all. They are opposed to any government moves to mechanise agriculture to the point where they would lose these jobs.

Gypsies and tribal (*adavasi* [15]) populations were the most dependent on work as wage labourers. Most have no title to land and are not eligible for government land access programmes. The labourers who live in sugar cane *tepees* and makeshift tents beside the vast monoculture fields say that while their living conditions are not ideal, the alternative would be to go to the slums around the cities – which for them spelt disease and destitution.

DfID has recently released a series of strategy papers [16] outlining its approach to agriculture and poverty reduction. DfID aims to support governments and agriculture development projects which focus on the production of cash crops for the global economy. DFID says that eventually the economic benefits of this model will provide employment for the poor. My conversations with farmers and other labourers make it clear how misguided DfID's view of what effective agricultural 'development' really is.

While agriculture focused on exports may give some employment to desperate, displaced farmers, it is not a long-term solution for poverty reduction. The unstable nature of the hyper-competitive global market provides no guarantee of employment for farmers. There may be a short-term increase in 'real wages' for the poor in Andhra Pradesh, but no long-term increase in their actual quality of life.

DfID claims to have formed an alliance with the state government [17] of Andhra Pradesh to alleviate poverty. Yet the Andhra Pradesh government does not seem to be working in the interests of poor farmers. Most government officials come from an 'aspiring yuppie' social background that seeks to isolate itself from 'backward' rural traditions. The government wants to propel Andhra Pradesh into their version of the modern world by boosting the economic competitiveness of the state. The government officials speak bold words about alleviating poverty, but have spent most of the Vision 20/20 money so far on flyovers and statues in Hyderabad.

A DfID official recently said that there is deep and entrenched poverty in Andhra Pradesh. This is undoubtedly true. But there is also a strong and resilient culture, which maintains the knowledge vital for long-term food security and environmental sustainability. There is a richness of culture, happiness and pride in the traditional methods of farming that will be lost if the Vision 20/20 project proceeds. DfID's development strategy for India equates poverty reduction with economic growth and trade liberalisation; the approach to poverty reduction favoured by grassroots groups in India is the promotion of self-reliance in food and farming by building on farmers' traditional knowledge and skills.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/people-foodwithoutfrontiers/article_1391.jsp

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