

# Genetically Modified Seeds: Women in India take on Monsanto

The way to food security

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“We do not buy seeds from the market because we suspect they may be contaminated with genetically engineered or terminator seeds,” says Pavamma, a Dalit woman in village Palarum, near the town of Zaheerabad, about 110 kms north-west of the high-tech city of Hyderabad.

George W Bush signed “**Knowledge Initiative in Agriculture**” [KIA] with Manmohan Singh [the Indian Prime Minister] in March 2006, cheered by representatives of Monsanto and Wal-Mart, in the same city. Pavamma does not know about KIA. .

Pavamma looks after a household of 14 members, from 2 year old infants to 80 year old grandparents. She owns nine acres of land in semi arid Deccan plateau. One acre, she says, is sufficient to feed her household highly nutritious three full meals every day all year round. The surplus from eight is sold or stored in the household food bank. I spent about two hours with her and learnt that she has a bank of fifty different seeds that she says she needs “to feed her household properly.”

Palarum is a habitation of about thirty households and is part of Village Council of Devrampalli in district Medak. Each village has its own “sangham,” comprising of all households, of all castes and religion. A Village Council is a Constitutional body whereas the sangham is a community-based organization. The seventy-two Sanghams are part of a regional federation welded together by Deccan Development Society, nominally headed by PV Satheesh, that won the COG Award for “Best People’s Defense” on 25th March 2006. [See [www.ddsindia.org](http://www.ddsindia.org). See also ETC Group website.]

## Women manage seed bank

Earlier men managed the household seed stock. Now, it is women. “Men wanted to store fewer seeds and preferred to buy from the market. We want all sorts of seeds for all sorts of food that we eat,” said the women, while men stood nearby smoking local cigarillos.

They have a very simple contraption to store seeds. A basket, about two feet in diameter by eighteen inches deep, is plastered with cow dung. When it dries, seeds are placed in it, covered with grass and capped with cow dung. This simple contraption protects all their seeds. It hardly costs a few rupees.

## And women ensure the bio-diversity...and health

Pavamma and her friends showed me four varieties of green moong and sixteen varieties of millet. Real tongue twisters but try to pronounce these: Korralu (Foxtail millet, 4 varieties), Saamai (Little millet, two varieties), Thaidalu (Finger millet), Sajjalu (Pearl millet, two varieties) and Jonnalu (sorghum, seven varieties). And then five local varieties of lentils and another four wild varieties, so effectively nine, all edible and rich in proteins. They have two varieties of rice in just one village; one is harvested for its medicinal properties; it is easy to digest and given during convalescence. [India had 100,000 varieties of rice just 40 years ago; today with much difficulty one may get seeds for 50]

### **Crops of truth [Satyam Pantalu]**

Nature has given us plants that do not seek anything in return, not even water. One simply has to broadcast the seed and in time reap a nutritious harvest. These are called the “crops of truth” locally. In fact crops of truth abound everywhere that do not take anything in return but give you nutrition and health, provided we seek the truth.

These are hardy genes, evolved over centuries. It is important that these crops of truth are protected from the venal buccaneers. The women of Zaheerabad have done just that because they are mothers.

These local sources of nutrition have not even been properly surveyed or listed by the National Institute of Nutrition or the Indian Council of Agriculture Research, according to PV Satheesh.

### **Nutritive content**

These women grow nutrition, not just food. Data on nutritive content of these wild, un-listed, un-catalogued, indigenous foods that nature has given these people, is available at <http://www.cine.mcgill.ca/DALIT.htm> (Click on community food system data tables).

This is a huge data bank on nutritive content of foods from the cluster of villages I am writing about. These foods, some of them classified as wild, are highly nutritious.

Nutrition does not come from the factories of trans-national corporations; it comes from Mother Nature. I realized that these illiterate women of Zaheerabad understood that truth more than any one of us would ever appreciate.

### **Social organization**

The sangham is an informal social security network. What happens when the going gets rough within the community?

If crops collapse and a household is short of seeds for the next season, it can borrow seeds from the community seed bank. The seed is given on loan and after harvest; the household must return twice the amount borrowed to the community bank. If the crop fails again, the household must return four times the borrowed seeds.

Landless labourer, and there are many because this region was once the most impoverished in India, are entitled to 25% of the gross produce of the land they work. If a household reneges on sharing, the entire village boycotts that household. I met a few landless labourers; they have no complaint.

If the entire village faces crop failure, the neighbouring villages come to its rescue on similar terms.

### **Seeds Festival**

These 72 villages organize an annual seeds' festival lasting about a month to mid February. Small groups of villagers visit each of the 72 villages. The host village takes care of their shelter, food and water needs. These groups inspect how each village is managing its seed bank. The village with best managed seed bank gets an award and the award is never given to an individual; it is given only to a community.

### **Interaction with market**

There is minimal interaction with market. Main items of consumption like soap, books for children, light bulb, clothes, etc., are purchased locally. Cooking oil is obtained by sending oilseeds to a local facility for oil extraction. The facility uses traditional cold-press method, i.e. oil is extracted at low temperature thereby retaining the nutrients in the seeds.

A small group of men takes the produce of a cluster of household to the market and returns with whatever the households need from the market, a system that has reduced shopping by individual households.

### **Communication's strategy**

These villages got together and realized that they need to communicate more effectively particularly because of what was happening to farmers in neighbouring regions and districts. Majority of farmers' suicides took place in and around these parts and behind each death there is a ghastly story of GM/hybrid seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, loans, and indebtedness.

So, they collected fund and with some external support they got their own FM radio station to forewarn their communities if a wolf is around and, of course, to continuously inform and educate people on key issues of survival. They now have a transmitter, microphone, recording studio but the Government of India has yet to grant a license to broadcast! Oh yes, India is a democracy with right to freedom of speech, so long as it does not affect the buccaneer's profits.

Undaunted, they record programmes in the studio and send it across to the people on ordinary ten rupee audio or hundred rupee video tapes. The manager of this FM radio station is barely literate but an excellent communicator, a Dalit woman, affectionately called "The General." The general travels on her bicycle to keep her troops ready to take on the Terminator.

### **Green schools [Pachasala]**

The Deccan Development Society has organised a Green school but it is yet to cover the entire population of the seventy-two village councils. The green school is unique in that it trains its pupils in nine skills such as carpentry, computing, pottery, book binding, Para-veterinary science, herbal medicine, sewing, farming, waste management and agro-forestry, skills that "Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture" of George W Bush and Manmohan Singh can never match.

The facilities are simple, low cost, and adequate but the teachers are each imbued with missionary zeal to prepare the kids for sustainable living and in the process ensure that they achieve equivalency of primary and middle schools. The society has specifically targeted school drop outs, children of landless labour and those of “bonded labour.” There is no attempt to help these kids take up regular employment, if they want they can, but majority elect to remain in the village.

### **The uniqueness of Sangham**

The sangham portends shape of things to come. Unless, local communities work to preserve local seeds, especially indigenous seeds of crops that are highly nutritious and tasty and can be grown at low or no cost, and no energy input, we shall cease to exist as a viable society. Please also remember that low and no cost and no energy input also implies that there will be minimal or no CO2 emission from such farming activities. That is the emerging concept of Dream Farm [See Dream Farm, Institute of Science in Society, UK], but these women have created their own Dream Farms at virtually no cost. All they need now is to produce their own energy for lighting.

The second unique thing is the social organization. Every member of the community has access to food and is assured of some work even if landless.

### **Lessons to be drawn**

Social engineering can be achieved in about two years. These seventy-two villages were once horizontally and vertically stratified along caste, class and religious lines, food scarcity was endemic, people were malnourished, majority worked as unskilled day wager. Today they are cohesive, interdependent. I did not see one malnourished person; not one. Rarely do people go to urban centres to seek work.

Social engineering does not cost much in terms of money but it does require a change agent, a good communicator, and a person of character who refuses to take no from anyone.

Third, it is possible to minimize interaction with the market, possibly eliminate the system. The community is the most important entity that can help us ensure food and nutrition security and cope with the post-carbon contingencies. The market mechanism in its current form actually works against the interest of farmers and the communities. Most crucially, market responds to many irrational demands of the consumers, invariably driven by convenience, whereas an honest farmer has to balance the environmental costs that are not factored in by the market in its cost calculations. For a full discussion on this issue, I have yet to see anything better than the essays of Richard Norgaard, who gave a talk in Delhi in 1997 on the need to accept the alternative economics.

Fourth, it is important to realize that we can't separate human rights from right to seeds and food as well as right to grow food for our consumption. Most people in the west have forgotten that access to food is a basic human right and they have been misled to believe that that right can only be exercised in a supermarket run by Wal Mart or Tesco. We all can exercise this human right by refusing to purchase engineered and manufactured food and by claiming our right to grow any food that Nature gave us. It is important to inform our political representatives the consequences of refusing to accept that essential precondition for survival. That basic human right to food [and water, and air, and forests, and rivers, and

the planet in which we were born] is a fundamental right which no living entity should be allowed to expropriate. And we have inadvertently done just that. All over the world.

Fifth, it is important for us, especially those of you who live in Anglo-Saxon countries that the time is upon us when Community Rights will have to take primacy over the rights of the State, Corporations and the individuals. Most of us in most countries, emulating Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence, believe that individual right is the mother of all rights. The Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence gives primacy to individual rights and untrammelled rights to the corporations and the state. We will all have to work to change this. Actually, we can't survive even for a day in post oil world without the help and support of our community. Therefore, legal instruments for giving primacy to community rights should be developed and legislated, everywhere.

Sixth, right of access to natural resources-like land, rivers, forests, air, and everything that Nature has given us including seeds-is the fundamental right of the communities, not of the corporations or the state or the individual. No corporation has the right to expropriate what Nature gave us. We have all been misled that the state cares for us and will use natural resources for our welfare: this has been the Father of all bullshit.

And lastly, whilst community rights will help us survive, tide over the crisis of survival and may be extend our survival by a few centuries, it'd require a different standards of equity, and different constructs of morality, mores and law. Only that paradigm shift would ensure our survival. Otherwise, I have a nagging fear that we as human race do not have much to look forward to.

But I have faith in the women of Zaheerabad. They have the seeds to grow nutritious food, to feed their men to fight the goons, the corporations, who are slowly taking control of seeds and our food.

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### **Post script**

A word of caution: The Centre for Indigenous People's Nutrition and Environment [CINE], based in Canada, whose website I have referred to is financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, which puts them in an obvious conflict of interest. I know what Rockefeller has done in India; the "Great Gene Robbery," documented by Dr. Claude Alvarez, is a classic example of the way Rockefellers and the US government works.

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