

Women's empowerment in endogenous development

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Green Foundation, a grassroots organisation working with marginal farmers in the dryland region of South India, is working to enhance biodiversity as a means to sustaining the livelihoods of the rural people. Innovative methodologies have been developed to recover traditional crop varieties, medicinal plants and sustainable ways of producing food, within the cultural context of the people. Empowerment of rural women is a major objective and outcome of the programme, which was awarded an international prize this year.

The Green Foundation Compas project is being implemented in villages of the Irula tribe near the forest region. This is one of the oldest tribal communities of Karnataka state, which used to live by moving around within the evergreen forest. They hunted small animals, and collected edible plants and honey for sustenance. Their association with the nature was similar to the relationship between child and mother: the forest was their main treasure for food, fodder, shelter and medicine. Two decades back the government of Karnataka brought this tribal community into village settlements. The dependency on the forest was reduced, and farming became the only alternative for survival. This increased the erosion of the natural forest, however, due to growing areas under crop cultivation combined with the process of rapid urbanisation.

The Irula way of farming is based entirely on traditional ritualistic thinking and cosmopolitan practices. Several rituals, both in the field and in the house, accompany each agricultural activity. Perceived as part of the land the agricultural implements are also worshipped. Farmers also rear cows, sheep, goat and chicken as an integrated part of their farming system. Gowamma, a woman in Bilidale village, said that for her the cow is the main god of the family as it provides milk as food, dung and urine as food for growing crops. Before sowing she performs a *pooja*, or ritual prayer, and offers freshly cooked rice, sweets, sprouted seeds and fruits to the cows. It is her strong belief that animal prayer will bring good harvest and wealth to both the land and her family.

Villages under change

In Irula communities, usually the men take care of the ploughing, clearing the land, and collecting wood for agricultural implements, house construction and for fuel. Women play a key role in the house, in child care, and in various agricultural activities. On the farm, women take care of the activities such as sowing, weeding, fodder collection, earhead selection, and preserving the seeds for the future. When Green Foundation started to work in this area, the women in the villages were strongly dominated by the men. In general, women were barely consulted in decision making concerning the farming activities or in domestic affairs. They felt they were left out.

While the older members of these communities are often independent and rich in skills and knowledge, the young people are at crossroads. They are increasingly influenced by the monetary economy and formal education, and experience a lack of faith in traditional value systems. This situation is full of contradictions. The village elders feel that the younger generation is being deprived of past glory.

The elders are of the opinion that modernity is taking its toll, as youth prefer raising monocrops rather than mixed crops, and end up losing heavily due to dependency on this monocropping production system. The present generation is also paying in terms of reduction in livestock population, and loss of soil fertility and of traditional plant varieties. They migrate to cities in search of employment in industries, doing menial jobs which fetch them inadequate income to sustain themselves.

Not all traditional customs have been lost, however. In spite of modern agricultural practices, elderly women still conserve traditional seed varieties on a small scale for their consumption qualities, adaptability to local ecosystems and fodder needs of the livestock. Moreover, in some of the villages the communities still follow the traditional practices in case of a conflict, based on a set of rules and regulations: elders organise a *grama sabha*, or public meeting, to discuss and resolve issues. But, though this practice prevails in some villages, this system of resolving conflicts is generally declining.

Seed procession

Green Foundation aims to enhance endogenous development by linking biodiversity with culture, by working with farmers in general and women farmers in particular. Women are the major food producers in terms of value, volume and quality. They play a key role in biodiversity conservation, and have special responsibilities in all activities of seed conservation. They are instrumental in conserving and multiplying local seed varieties, and the major custodians of local knowledge and culture related to biodiversity. Since the woman is the one who cooks for the family, she knows the nutritional requirements. Hence she plays major role in influencing which crop varieties are sown.

When Green started working in this area about three years ago, it was quite difficult to bring the women together, however. In addition to the men's opposition to the women gathering, other reasons were also related to shyness, caste feeling, overburden of



After threshing the harvested crop a ritual called Rashi Pooje is performed. This ritual is essentially a thanksgiving for a successful harvest.

domestic work and lack of education of the women themselves. In order to get more women involved, Green Foundation organised a seed procession covering ten villages, to spread the idea of development through the revival of natural resources and indigenous knowledge of the farmers. About three hundred farmers of different age groups joined in this procession. Along with spreading the message through street theatre, folk songs and slogans, this provided an opportunity to exchange valuable local seeds and related knowledge. Knowledgeable women farmers were encouraged to demonstrate their experience in seed storage, germination tests and traditional pest management.

The impact of this event brought tremendous changes in the collection and preservation of indigenous seeds in the villages. It was recognised that elderly women have tremendous knowledge of conserving and processing seeds, and in the preparation of traditional foods. This helped women of other age groups to learn and develop their skills. Touched by this concept, the community members were the first to come forward to be part of seed banks. Later, small marginal farmers joined them. Seed banks were established with an objective to conserve, and multiply agro-biodiversity of the region. They were set up with the active participation of both men and women, and stimulated discussions with elderly and knowledgeable people. Local seed fairs were organised to disseminate the concept of seed bank.

Women's empowerment

The seeds collected in the seed bank

were distributed to the interested farmers of the same village, as well as to neighbouring villages. After harvest the farmers returned twice the quantity of seeds they had taken from the seed bank. With the double quantity of seeds after harvest in the seed bank, income generating activities were started. The seeds were processed and sold in the form of nutritious traditional food recipes, like pappads, pickles, ragi flour, millet mix, amaranthus balls, red rice and pulse snacks. In this way, the varieties of the seeds collected and grown by the members of the seed banks, have brought a new dimension to economic empowerment of the farm family.

These activities have resulted in a change of attitude in both women and men. The women now interact with outsiders without much hesitation, and take part in the village level functions. They now manage the seed banks, which have become centres of transformation in their villages. Women have included savings as one of the seed bank activities, and can borrow money from the groups to meet some of their domestic needs. In this way the women could also initiate other income-generating activities. All these activities have empowered the women, who are gaining a growing degree of economic independence.

Seeing this change in the family, the attitude of men towards women has also changed. They now encourage women to participate in com-

munity institutions like self-help groups and seed banks. This transformation reveals that given a space in decision making, women will contribute not only to meet their families needs, but also to the well being of society. The network of seed banks facilitates exchange of knowledge, practices and seeds among the farming communities.

Women's contribution essential

Culture and indigenous knowledge generated by resource users are under constant threat from external forces. It is our belief that crucial aspects of endogenous development, such as local economy, livelihood and culture can be protected from total erosion. Small initiatives to empower women's groups, such as these, facilitate the revival of local knowledge and culture, and thereby the kind of agriculture that stands at the basis of the livelihood of millions of farmers.

It is evident from the above that participation by the community in endogenous development is of paramount importance. These community-based activities have been built around the basis of local knowledge and cultural expressions, especially amongst women. This turns out to be an effective tool for biodiversity conservation, livelihood security and women's empowerment. The women's contribution is essential in the holistic approach to development, while holistic development can, in turn, improve the difficult position of women in traditional societies in marginal areas.

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The active participation of women in the community seed banks has empowered them and has resulted in a change of attitude in both women and men.

