

# PEOPLE'S AGENDA FOR BIODIVERSITY

## Story of the Mobile Biodiversity Festivals of D D S

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Year 1999 was a watershed year for the DDS communities of Zaheerabad region in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh.. These communities in the Deccan region of South India celebrated a festival: Paata antala Panduga: the Festival of Traditional Crops. This was an unusual festival, a festival to rejoice the diversity of local crops, seeds, animals and their relationship with local culture. People flocked to the festival to re-connect with their culture and traditions, which have not only practiced ecological agriculture but also revered it for thousands of years.

The festival was also a forum for the community to get over their collective amnesia. Amnesia about the enormous wealth of traditional seeds and cropping systems they have inherited from their ancestors.

About five thousand women farmers participated in the discussions. At the end they appeared doubly convinced of the strength of their traditional cropping system and took a pledge in chorus:

### **WE PLEDGE TO GROW TRADITIONAL CROPS ON OUR FARMS**

This was the genesis of the Mobile Biodiversity Festivals of the Deccan Development Society, DDS, a grassroots NGO working in the region for over 25 years. The Biodiversity Festival was the finale to a year long study on Farmers Perception of Biodiversity sponsored by the IDRC, International Development Research Centre, Canada under its Using Diversity programme. The research had explored in depth the perception of farmers about their on farm biodiversity : why they plant diverse crops, their relationship with their soils, food systems, culture, life etc. A publication called Crops of Truth had documented all these factors.

The Biodiversity Festival – Paata Pantala Panduga – was meant to disseminate this study among the farmers and give them a celebratory platform to discuss these issues and advance them further.

The Deccan region of South India principally hosts rainfed agriculture and is the home to a fascinating biodiversity of crops. Millets, legumes, oilseeds, uncultivated foods produce an incredible matrix of diverse crops on farmers fields.

Medak District in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh where the DDS works has thousands of amazing women farmers who have kept alive a vibrant diversity on their farms and fields. Women like Susilamma of Raipally grow upto 23 crops on just one acre of land. Anjamma from Gangwar village regularly replenishes her bank of landraces which consist of over 70 seed varieties by regularly renewing them on her eight acre farm. It is women like them, marginalised and working on marginalised lands that have courageously preserved and conserved agrobiodiversity in the Deccan..

The diversity followed by these women is an unbroken tradition that has lived with them for centuries. This is the tradition that inspired the biodiversity festivals of the DDS. The Paata Pantala Panduga became mobile from year 2001 and moved on wheels, year after year, from village to village.

This mobility ensured unprecedented participation from people. In five years between 2000 and 2004, the Festival dialogued with over 150,000 farmers. Such an overwhelming response was not visible in the beginning. When the carts rattled along the village streets in the first year, very few people attended the Festival. The interest was thin. The processions looked bare.

But as years rolled on, the slenderness disappeared and the festival started filling up. Singers and dancers joined the carts to add a distinct cultural flavour to the caravan. The number of people taking part in the processions and discussions started swelling. The participation grew from tens to hundreds

to thousands. Such increasing involvement of the farmers attracted the Village Council chiefs and other local body officials to the festivals. The modest village level meetings morphed into large symposia at the level of Mandals, the administrative units covering 40-50 villages.

Members of the local parliament started attending the Festival. Inspired by the atmosphere, they assured their support to the issues raised in the Festivals. Top agricultural scientists, bureaucrats and politicians came to the festivals, learnt new perspectives on biodiversity from the people and gratefully honoured them. The festivals gradually grew in stature and attracted international campaigners, civil society activists, academics and environmentalists.

As the years passed by, the Biodiversity Festivals etched for themselves a permanent place on the cultural calendar of the community and earned an enduring spot on their cultural consciousness. This manifested itself in the various actions of the community. People washed entire streets, plastered them with cow dung and drew rangolis [ritual motifs] as they would do for their major festivals. When the bullocks walked these streets, people washed their feet, put Bindis, [holy marks] on their forehead and worshipped them as Gods.

The caravan stopped in front of every shrine, mosque and church of the village and offered prayers. The Biodiversity Festival had thus transcended religions as people from all faiths had embraced the Festival. People, in their own fashion, added a number of cultural and religious subtexts. Diverse religious and celebratory streams started joining the Festival year after year.

Another remarkable growth was in the artistic and aesthetic character of the festival, which climbed greater heights year after year. Once a plain procession, the caravan of carts started adding singers, dancers and drummers with each passing year. Different sets of artists brought their own stamp of novelty and creativity to the caravan. The decoration of carts went through a sea change. Every new festival witnessed a new kind of cart design and a new sophistication in the motifs and backgrounds which together, enhanced the overall aesthetic quality of the Festival.

Evenings in every festival village were special. They were marked by food festivals and screenings of films made by the Community filmmakers of DDS and attracted huge crowds.

The T Shirts in the festival spoke their own language, political, agricultural and cultural. Around the Third Year of their evolution, the Biodiversity Festivals had developed a new celebratory discourse within which framework the communities discussed their food and farming futures. In every village that the Festival entered, the entire community sat down to discuss the current scenario in their agriculture, the role of the government in undermining the biodiversity embedded in their farming and the ways to address these concerns.

Year 2001 was a watershed year for the Mobile Biodiversity Festivals. Over 50,000 farmers participated in the village level discussions that year. They firmly presented their agenda for the revival of traditional ecological farming systems of the region and the biodiversity inherent in it. Together these communities produced an Action Plan for the Agro Biodiversity of the region. This plan became a major part of the Government of India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan created as a part of India's commitment to the International Convention on Biological Diversity.

For the first time in the history of India, a small community had come together to discuss their concerns and eventually turned it into a national plan. This was a phenomenal achievement for the people in the Zaheerabad region of the Deccan. Over a period of six years, the biodiversity festivals of the Deccan Development Society had covered a remarkable distance.

- They had moved ecological agriculture from an environmentalist's agenda to a farmer's agenda.
- From a sanitised laboratory environment they had transformed agro biodiversity into a vibrant community celebration.
- From the concerns of small farmers groups, they had elevated it into a national concern.
- They had provided a new path and vision to a plan of a massive nation like India.

Through an exciting community process they had redefined ecology, agriculture, biodiversity and

governance.

The Mobile Biodiversity Festivals have moved on relentlessly, gathering with them people's force, vibrancy and enthusiasm. In 2010, the Paata Pantala Panduga celebrated a decade of the Festival. The Chair of the Andhra Pradesh Biodiversity Board who was the Chief Guest in the Inaugural Ceremony of the festival was so inspired by the festival that he said that the Board will work with the DDS to have such biodiversity festivals in different districts of Andhra Pradesh. This was a remarkable way forward to the women of DDS communities.

Please see film on People's Agenda for Biodiversity at the below link  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIZ2yb7I9BY>