

ENHANCING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

- A DIFFERENT WAY -

The small-holder farmer, in dryland/rainfed areas such as Anantapur district, is today being systematically wiped out. They are being told that they do not know farming, their economies of scale are not alright, they need to grow high bred or genetically modified cash crops and use nitrogen intensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides not just if they want bumper crops but even to survive.

Both Central and State Governments have been reluctant to invest on dryland/rainfed farming over the past 60 years. As a part of its strategy to grow edible oil seeds, the GoAP lured the farmers into adopting Groundnut as the single main crop, supplied high-bred seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides at subsidy rates. And after 30 years, when the farmers had all but adopted Groundnut as the sole crop of Anantapur district, the GoI opened the doors to uncontrolled import of Palm oil, which is being dumped at ridiculously low prices.

After 30 years of groundnut mono cropping and nitrogen based chemicals, the soil of Anantapur district is as famished as small-holder farmers themselves, if not more.

In this situation, rather than buttressing the position of the small farmer, the State seems to be bent on confirming the unviability of small farming, promoting the ever growing intrusion of corporate control over agriculture, and the industrialization of agriculture, through which the independent small farmer is converted to a mere supplier of labour. *'The co-operative farming bill'* may be another nail in the coffin of small farming in Andhra.

At the risk of reaffirming a shared position, we would like at this stage to re-state the critical importance of the small-holder farmer to Indian society. The small-holder family is the largest segment of Indian society today. A mass migration from rural to urban centres caused by threats to this segment will unleash anarchy on an unimaginable scale. The stability of food production, of the health of rural society, its inherent strengths of managing and maintaining diversity, its sound traditional ecological basis, rest squarely on the continuing presence of the Indian small-holder farmer in conjunction with the small artisan producer.

NGOs have championed the cause of the small-holder farmers, the artisans and other marginalized peoples, by themselves playing an intermediary role between the constituency and the market, which however they are ill-equipped to play, or like the left in general, by resisting the encroachment of market forces through strikes, dharnas, lobbying, etc. fearing that small

farmers and marginalised people would be exploited by the far stronger market forces. This may have slowed the process of market expansion in the countryside but the strategy has served only to increase the distance between small producer and the market, while market forces remain as strong as ever.

We propose a change in strategy at this juncture. It is time for small-holder farmers to start engaging with the market, not as weaker opponents, but from their so far unrealized strength, the strength of collective numbers. We believe that the small-holder farmers, masters of the theatre of survival, know this. Farmers till now have negotiated with the market as individuals. At this juncture, in this globalised era, this is not possible for small-holder farmers. They have to come together as producer owned cooperatives or companies, growing good food and husbanding their soils individually in the best ecological traditions, and coming together as collectives to process and sell it.

Why go back to old farming practices? Because that is the only way the soil can remain healthy and productive. It means no chemicals, total seed sovereignty, less water consumption, low capital costs, more bio-mass, more livestock, multiple and varied crops, multiple livelihood options, good food and good health for the producers and the consumers.

By growing, processing and marketing organic food farmers will be able to reach out to the ever-growing demand in niche markets. This is the only way they will be able to sell their produce for what it is really worth. But most importantly they will be able to heal their lands, bring back the cattle, sheep and goats into their lives and farms, increase the productivity of their lands and earn more from their animals. They will eat better and grow what is right for themselves, their animals and their land. Leading to food security and food sovereignty, for the country and for the farmer.

The *Timbaktu Collective* has been working on these lines to make the market work for the poor. It has promoted a producer owned farming and marketing co-operative, the *Dharani FaM Co-op Ltd*, with small and marginal farmers as its share holding members, to positively engage with market forces and also to ensure increased returns for the producers.

THE TIMBAKTU COLLECTIVE

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