

“Living with less: a challenge most needed”

by

Asha Kachru, India

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This year’s theme for World Food Day ‘World Food Security: the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy’ points rightly to man-made crises and global imbalances caused disproportionately by the industrial North but affecting mostly people from the Global South and accelerating food insecurity in these regions.

I have been asked to speak to an audience of children, students, farmers and politicians in the Province of Ravenna on the World Food Day, based on my personal experience of last 16 years as an organic farming promoter, small farmer advocating empowerment of women in agriculture, living and working in a few villages in rural South India. The particular areas of interest on which I am supposed to share my experiences are the socio-economic and cultural situation of rural women farmers and the reasons behind their motivation for bio-agriculture.

What we can learn from the “poor” in India?

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In spite of the desperate sustenance situation that most rural and tribal Indians are in, many of their attitudes and qualities of character are all the more admirable and worth being adapted by the many, many urban and Western people in the world. Their food habits are appropriate: it is their simple, least input oriented, fresh, local and indigenous way of food preparation, mostly using own crops, cereals, oilseed-oil, herbs, vegetables and fruits. They often celebrate festivals in praise of nature, water, trees, animals etc. often during the year. This keeps them happy and humble towards Nature/ Ecology, keeping the spiritual dimensions in life awake. They are very child loving. This keeps them family-oriented and social in nature, which also means that the men do not run away to other women all too easily, leaving the children behind. The men have a higher sense of self-integrity than their urban or western brothers. They do not cheat as much. They believe in keeping their word of mouth. “Jaan jaye par wachan na jaye”, is a common saying in rural areas. It means word of mouth is more important than living itself.

Influx from South and East to North:

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Policies preferring the economically privileged, force the economically disadvantaged to look for alternatives in the urban and Northern regions. Even in India we have the problem of rural poor moving to urban areas. One should also not forget that using migration to urban slums as a means of escape leads to many among the poor facing situation of conflict and contested claims on spaces that provide livelihood-earning opportunities. The connection between lifestyles and behaviors of the rich people and countries and the situation of the majority of people in the developing countries becomes clear.

Credits for Self help groups of women:

There is a great surge of rural women's self-help credit-based groups in our villages. The vulnerabilities far outweigh the benefits from taking credits from banks and/or private individuals/ institutions. The rural women's self help groups have become a good outlet for many private institutions to have a regular interest base. Credit based asset development has had limited success in raising people sustainably above the poverty line. With the exception of the aggressive policies to encourage family spacing, economic policy interventions have been stronger than human development policies.

Why women and organic agriculture?:

In a study by the NGO Agriculture Man and Ecology (AME) in Bangalore they came to the conclusion, that women try to grow some sustenance crops, even within the constraints of the conventional farming system (cotton mono-cropping). For the sustenance of their families, they sow vegetables, pulses etc. within the cotton fields and the like.

We have found it easier to promote organic and ecologically sound agriculture through empowerment of women, hence we have come to believe that supporting matriarchal societies could be an alternative worth reflection in today's times

Poverty and hunger in India:

India contains a substantial proportion of the world's poor. Large number of households in rural India experience long spells of poverty (over 3 years) even without crop shocks. With crop shocks due to climatic changes, another year or so adds the poverty spells. The MDGs set at the UN general Assembly in 2000, to which India is a signatory, to erase extreme poverty have hardly been attained. FAO too realises that more needs to be done on "Challenges due to climate change and reasons to save bio-energy", to be able to address the needs of the hungry and poor.

Rural Politics:

Rural India is ruled by a nexus of feudal landlords-kulaks-dishonest traders-petty officials political party men. Trying to ensure that panchayats function in a way so as to further the interests of the rural poor is an invitation for a struggle with this nexus of vested interests on every issue. A lack of representation of the chronically poor explains part of persistent poverty and deprivation.

The devolution of power to local government through the Panchayat Raj System in India has been beneficial to a small extent in terms of improving accountability of local leaders and decision-making processes, but hardly as regards removing poverty.

The chronic poor, more so the women, children, Minorities and the old in rural areas have a right to benefit from growth and development.

International efforts:

- Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food to the General Assembly, A/58/330 (2003)) and International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), sponsored by the FAO and the World Bank that “the way the world grows its food will have to change radically to better serve the poor and hungry if the world is to cope with a growing population and climate change while avoiding social breakdown and environmental collapse.

The challenge we face, in sum, is not simply to increase production, but to promote sustainable forms of agricultural production, benefiting small-holders who are most in need of support, and where the impact on poverty alleviation will be greatest

- The report argues the importance of ensuring that "the hungry and malnourished have legal claims against those whose actions or inactions have an impact on their situation”.

Role of women:

Elsewhere, the previous Special Rapporteur on the right to food explored why the full respect for women’s rights is crucial to the enjoyment of the right to adequate food, particularly in its nutritional aspects.^[ii] As noted by the World Bank, “in many societies, women bear the primary responsibility

for feeding the family, yet without having control of family resources. In many countries, women and girls are also frequently less favoured in the intra-household distribution of food.”

The Comprehensive Framework for Action is explicit on this issue. There is a high degree of consensus, therefore, on the need to strengthen women’s rights, particularly in rural areas as required under article 14 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and on the contribution this could make to food and nutrition security.

Organic agriculture:

The way that the world grows its food will have to change radically to meet these changes, and organic agriculture is an approach with strong potential to address the problems,” observed the UNCTAD Director General.

“The growth of organic agriculture presents a very good opportunity for farmers to participate in trade”, noted the FAO Deputy Director during his remarks at the public session. “Market demand is strong and consumers know that the quality of organic products is high and the production system is environmentally friendly.”

If you really want to avoid pain you will have to avoid pleasure.
ashakachru@gmail.com, mobile: 09000346148