

THE HINDU

Survival of small farms crucial for food security

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For the last 25 years, Deccan Developmental Society (DDS) in Medak District, Andhra Pradesh has been working in more than 70-odd villages along with 5,000 dalit women farmers.

“More than 60 per cent of their livelihood is derived from small holdings. In fact there must be more than 300 million small and marginal farmers in this country. And everyone who analyses Indian agriculture and farmers clearly says that the survival of these small farmers is crucial to the nation’s food security and well being,” says Mr. P.V. Sateesh, Director, DDS.

Food analyst

Some of the most respected food analysts in the world such as Miguel Altieri, after a decade of study have categorically concluded that small farms are the most efficient food producers. Hence the criticality of small farmers for agricultural future today stands undisputed.

Most of these farmers were either landless or marginal farmers two decades ago. But with support from DDS they got into active agriculture.

“All of them are ecological farmers and producers of food crops. Through their magnificent efforts they have become owners of lands between 5-20 acres though all these lands are non irrigated dry lands,” says Mr. Sateesh.

Take the case of Rayapalli Susilamma, a 40 year old woman farmer who owns three acres of rainfed farm of which half an acre is mango plantation, one acre not cultivable, grows an amazing variety of food crops.

She is proud that she does not have to buy food grains. She goes to the market for buying only cooking oil, coconut oil, soap and soap powder.

Along with Susilamma are five others, all of whom share the same socio economic and agricultural profile. They all want to own about five acres of farm, a pair of bullocks, one milch animal, a couple of goats and a few chickens.

Governments role

“The government must ensure that all farmers like them must own these animals that generate additional cash to support the needs of their children as they grow and get educated,” adds Mr. Sateesh.

Increasing cost of cultivation is a major worry for these women.

“Weeding wages have gone through the roof. What used to be about Rs.100 per person just two years ago, has gone upto Rs. 250 now.

“And even then we find it hard to find labourers,” says Susilamma.

She thinks the 100 days rural employment scheme (MNREGA) has caused this situation. Everyone seems to echo this feeling. Though all of them also are benefited by it since they all go for wage work in other people’s lands, they still think that the scheme has dented their own agriculture.

To make MNREGA small farmer friendly, they suggest agricultural activities be included in it. Weeding, ploughing (incidentally ploughing costs have gone up by four times in last five years, they point out) and harvesting costs can be borne under the scheme.

“If this is done, surely their agriculture will not be under any threat,” asserts Susilamma. Another farmer, Cheelamamidi Laxamma, in her late 30’s has nurtured her three acre dryland farm with great love and care for decades.

Weeding cost

“During monsoon, weeding must be done quickly in two or three days. Depending on the soil type, 20 to 40 persons are needed. Current rates are around Rs.200-250 per person. Therefore it costs between Rs. 4,000 and 6,000 per acre. The total income from one acre might be around Rs.8,000. Under these circumstances how can the weeding wages be met?” she asks.

Agriculture officials think that weeding is something that a small farmer can do on their own. They treat this argument with heavy contempt. In drylands, particularly on red soils weeding during Kharif must be finished within two or three days. If you prolong it, it becomes unproductive, according to her.

An acre needs a minimum of 25 persons. If the farmer does this on her own, it takes 25 days for her to finish the job. Weeds become unmanageable over this gap of time.

Local money lenders

Most of these women borrow from local moneylenders at three per cent interest to complete weeding.

Add to this the fact that crops like millets and other food crops need more weeding compared to cash crops.

Therefore the government must offer 100 per cent subsidy for agricultural activity on millet lands and 50 per cent for cash crops by including these activities under MNREGA scheme.

Need encouragement

According to Mr. Sateesh, this is the only area where these proud women farmers in spite of their small holdings and difficult farming need help and encouragement from the Government.

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