

There have been many discussions about farmers and their suicides in the last year, after the new Congress-led government took over. Sonia Gandhi's visits to rural areas and the many promises that she and her Government have made over the last year may have given false impressions that a lot is really being done for farmers. Let me give you my own recent experiences as a woman living in a village, namely Medak in Andhra Pradesh!

We find no difference whatsoever in our lives, compared to earlier times!

In November 2004 I went to the Branch Manager of the Kohir State Bank Hyderabad to ask for a loan so that we would be able to plant some sugarcane on our partially irrigated two acres of land, as we badly needed cash. I was told that we first had to return the old debts. I told the manager that newspapers had reported that the Government and the present Chief Minister Rajashekhar Reddy had ordered that the new loans would be given irrespectively of the old debts, given that farmers in Andhra have been in terrible distress for several years. The Branch Manager coolly replied that the government promises a lot, but that he did not receive any such orders. After a long drawn argument, he finally decided to give us a loan of Rs. 47,000 but only after we paid the old dues of Rs. 27,000. This left us with Rs. 20,000 in our hands, for handling nine acres of cropland!

If this was my, an urban-educated farmer's, experience, readers can well imagine how the Bank Managers deal with rural small farmers. I underwent the pain of witnessing this when I took Narsimlu, the husband of a woman of one of our self-help groups, to get his earlier loan of ten thousand rupees increased to fifteen thousand rupees, after paying the rest installment. He started as a

beneficiary, with a loan of mere two thousand rupees six years back. He has been repaying regularly all these years. Still, he was treated rudely, and the manager was not really willing to give him the loan. I wanted to know why, and only with great difficulties — after making him run around for days and after we had to go to the next town to fetch stamp papers and the like—the officer finally gave him only thirteen thousand rupees. The stamp papers were to be collected from the registrar's office, because of the Telgi stamp paper scam, as the sub-manager told me. Narsimlu had to pay one hundred sixty rupees for the paper along with transport costs between Kohir and Zahirabad. Again, an example of how the poor have to bear the burden of the corruption rackets of the already privileged people!

Except for one manager of the Central Bank of India in Zahirabad a few years back, I have not come across one single farmer-sensitive bank manager. They use a very rude language and often humiliate the small farmers in front of everyone, just for a few thousand rupees loan, considering that it is not even their own money.

Why does the government not hold training programmes for bank managers on how they should speak to their customers, big or small, rich or poor? In a country with millions of small farmers, is this not a big potential for a bank's transactions, if all of them could be involved in the process of borrowing and paying? I

have seen enough good examples to state that the villagers, particularly the rural women, repay their loans quite regularly.

We, a rural family, share nine acres of farmland where we practice organic agriculture. In November 2004 we had turmeric, pulses, oilseed, fodder, and maize growing on our approximately eight acres; the rest was used as pasture for grazing our two oxen, cow, buffalo, and lamb. The two acres of turmeric land was harvested in March and has provided us with just about five quintals of dried turmeric seed. So we may earn approximately Rs. 6000 to 7000 for a year's work on two acres of land if we sell four quintals and keep the rest for making turmeric powder for our own and our friend's use, as well as for seeds.

Turmeric is like ginger, a delicate but extremely good medicinal spice. Turmeric processing is a lengthy procedure. After harvesting the seed, you have to cook it in big pans and then dry it. Every now and then due to irregular rains, some bits of it always get spoilt, even if you try to protect it immediately each time. This also means a series of labour intensive procedures, which have to be carried out with speed. These involve moving the produce to a safe place and then again spreading it out, as you do not know how long the rains may last and if the crop may get totally spoilt. Then one has to clean the turmeric of root hair and mud and finally to grind it in local grinding shops or to sell it as dry seed.

Un-kept Promises

Some Truths about Organic Farming

○ Asha Kachru

This also shows how life is made immensely difficult for farmers, as none or very little post-harvesting infrastructure is made available to the farmers by the government. There are no drying houses/storerooms available to the average farmer. A farmer runs the risk of losing a good part of the crop if timely protection and storage facilities cannot be organised.

The quantity harvested was very low, because the turmeric crop got some root disease, and we did not want to use chemicals. The parasitic and tough parthenium grass grew extremely well in between the turmeric crop, however. Although I sent a sample of my turmeric to the Spices Board of India in Calicut/Keral for testing and adequate advice — as the local Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) in the interiors in Algol village — it was totally unhelpful, even the Board could only suggest a chemical pesticide.

The Bengalgram fetched us approximately nine bags from a little more than two acres, and we sold it to the organic Shop in Hyderabad Rytobazar at a slightly better price than the local market. We kept some as seeds for the next season.

We also kept the cereal crop Sorghum and the Safflower oilseeds for our own use.

We are just able to survive, even though we work very hard and also try to keep the soil healthy and untouched by chemicals.

Where is the difference compared to the earlier times? We have no access to proper/required loans, no subsidies, no extension help, no storage facilities, no easy direct access to the market, and no protection from the whims of traders and the recent trend of multinational companies, who are by and large not interested in organic foodstuff! We are being given false hopes and we feel all the more frustrated.

Let me give another example: I thought a way out of this drudgery would be to get my 4.5 acres turned into an orchard, so that I would not have to be bothered any more about agricultural work. A typical rural family has no other alternative, but I can go out and make a living from other work. So I went to the Fruit Research Station (FRS) in Sangareddy to talk to the scientists and get advice before I began planting the trees in the coming rainy season. I also took samples of my soil for a scientific test, as the local KVK never wanted to do it for us. As the Andhra Pradesh State Agricultural Department Office was also there, I thought I would discuss with them the formalities regarding the subsidies that I could avail of for planting, irrigation, etcetera.

The Agricultural Department told me that the officer who dealt with the matter was on a Padyatra called Farmer's Awareness Campaign (FRS) Ryuto Jagrata, organised by the Rajashekhar Government and that he would be available only in about two weeks. I was given his mobile number, so I called him twice later. The first time, he said he would meet me and visit my land when coming into my area. The second time, he said there was a change in his programme and that he had already visited my area when I was out of Kohir.

The researcher in the FRS gave me a lengthy introduction to what should be done before I started planting trees. For example, I had to bring four samples from the soil of a six-foot dug hole, from different depths inside. And this was to be done at four places in the field! She also said that before planting the trees, I had to have the water tested and to place a very good fencing around the property. Finally she advised that because fruit trees do not grow so well on black soil, which is supposed to be more fertile, that I

should rather stick to the crops which deliver a profit in short intervals like onions, maize and sugarcane!

She advised me to meet the sugarcane expert from the office nearby, attached to the Agricultural University of Hyderabad. I later went to his office and he was very smart and promised me many things; for example, he would come to my field and even use my place for his training programs for the farmers in my area growing sugarcane crop. He even gave me dates for training. But when the time came and I tried to contact him, he excused himself saying that his wife had fallen ill and he had to postpone the visit. I was later even warned by my bio-dynamic farmer friends, who have had a long interaction with him, that the sugarcane expert did conduct training programs, but more to exploit the funds he received from the government for own use, rather than to help the farmers.

The same sugarcane scientist also gave me the address of an organic farmer and a baby-corn exporter in my area. I was told that the organic farmer grew sugarcane in an innovative way and that the man who exports the baby-corn gives good prices to the producers. Whenever I contacted the baby-corn exporter, he tried avoiding me, saying I did not have enough irrigation and the like, and that he would contact me when the rains came. I suppose that my small scale farming did not relate to his ideas. I merely wanted to sow baby-corn on two acres to make some money quickly.

As regards the innovative organic sugarcane grower, my friends told me how he had misused their market as an organic producer, which he was really not. So I did not contact him.

Why did the Hyderabad University scientist advise me to go to him? Do they really believe in organic agriculture at all?

After all of these frustrating experiences, we have finally decided to do whatever is in our own capacities and to do whatever we think is right. No one is actually interested in our problems: neither the Government nor the scientists. We know we are not doing harm to the soil and the animals, and that is enough for our own sound conscience.

My rural family keeps stressing that they will never commit suicide, because they have hands to work with and can earn a living for survival. I am now convinced, after spending 13 years with them, that they are not saying this because I help them in

the background with cash but rather because of their own strong spirits—they are generally so courageous! Of course, I am not undermining the farmers' suicides at all. It is certainly not so—as one lady extension officer from Rangareddy District once told me—that farmers are committing suicide because they are being offered a lakh of rupees as compensation. This only reflects the height of ignorance, avarice and arrogance on the part of the privileged lot in this country who think that way!

We are trying out sugarcane on two acres, grow maize on another two acres, and leave the rest for rain-fed agriculture. Our seven bags of

sorghum and our five bags of turmeric are lying in our storeroom to be sold at a better price one day. Who knows whether that day will really come and whether we will be able to repay our various loans amounting to lakhs of rupees meanwhile?

As for now, we cannot say that there is any help being provided from any source for our desperate situation. Most of the smaller organic/bio-dynamic farmers are suffering, while the NGOs working with the organic farmers are telling lies in order to continue to receive donor funds and to upkeep the privileged jobs of their directors and staff as well as retain the institutional empires they have built. □

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