

The power of women's networks for agroecology in India

A photo story by Soumya Sankar Bose and Amrita Gupta

Commercial, industrialised agriculture has made women farmers invisible in much of the Global South. India is no exception. This is changing with India's Zero Budget Natural Farming practices (now more often referred to as Community Managed Natural Farming), which are being used by nearly a million smallholder farmers. Women, with little access to credit, land, or commercial seeds, have turned out to be its strongest advocates.

Through their community networks and self-help groups, they have scaled agroecology from village to village; improving not only household nutrition, incomes, and soil health, but also their own agency and dignity. Within their practices, feminist logic takes precedence over traditional market dynamics. However, the approach has also created political tensions and controversies. This photo story presents highlights of this experience.

1 "We knew we needed a space to save our native varieties of seeds and transmit the traditional knowledge of farming which is agroecological, which does not harm nature," says Chukki Nanjundaswamy, coordinator of Amrita Bhoomi near Bangalore, Karnataka; a peasant agroecology training center established to prove that an alternative farming model can exist. As a member of La Via Campesina, the center offers training based on the farmer-to-farmer approach, centering agroecology, peasant rights, food sovereignty and social justice.





2 Nisarga Nisargaka Savayava Krushikara Sangha is a self-sufficient cooperative group in Honnur, Karnataka. All members practice natural farming together, keeping social and caste discrimination aside. While Zero Budget Natural Farming is successfully being scaled, its popularity also brings political challenges and controversies. Central to ZBNF practices is the use of cow manure and urine to enhance soil microbial activity. A major challenge, however, is that Hindu extremist nationalist parties, who consider the cow to be sacred and advocate for bans on cattle slaughter, are attempting to politicise these practices. Such a stance is extremely problematic as it threatens to criminalise Muslim and other minority populations in India that rely on cattle for their livelihoods and food security. Some critics have argued that these controversies result in communities that are not currently part of ZBNF farming networks being excluded. Another concern stems from confusion about the programme's stance on genetically modified seeds. The Andhra Pradesh government shuns the use of GM and hybrid seeds in this approach, while other groups have approved their use. Thus, despite the scale it has achieved, there is still doubt about whether ZBNF practices will be successful in systems that have become heavily dependent on industrial inputs and technologies, such as the Bt cotton belt of India.



3 In much of the world, women like Bayamma Reddy have long been the guardians of indigenous seeds; through agroecology, their wealth of knowledge and role on the farm has regained value.

When Bayamma's sons left for higher education, she began to practice natural farming on the plot of land near her house, using the knowledge and skills that had been passed down to her across generations. She is from Balakabari Palli, Andhra Pradesh, which lies in one of the most drought-prone districts in the country. In these regions, commercial crops that require irrigation and other expensive inputs have proven to be untenable. To ensure a diverse food basket and mitigate the risk of crop failure, she and her husband follow the traditional practice of *navdanya* (sowing a combination of nine cereals and millets) before the onset of the monsoons.

4 Kavita Kuruganti is the founder of ASHA, the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture. She is also associated with MAKAAM, a nationwide forum of more than 120 individuals and women farmers' collectives, civil society organisations, researchers and activists, drawn from 24 Indian states, which works to secure due recognition and rights of women farmers in India. In a recent interview, Kavita explained how women were traditionally engaged in labour-intensive farm work like transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. However, as she explains: "As agriculture gets oriented towards markets, with an increasing reliance on herbicides and machines, men take over the decision-making." Practicing agroecology allows women to reclaim their decision-making rights.





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5 In Andhra Pradesh, women’s self-help groups have been instrumental in spreading the principles of agroecological farming from village to village – without this grassroots women farmers’ movement, it would have been impossible to scale these practices up and out to the nearly 600,000 farmers reached today, or to reach the targetted 6 million farmers by the end of the decade. Most of the programme’s staff and trainers are women farmers.

6 There are many landless women farmers in Anantapur (Andhra Pradesh) – some are widows of farmers who have committed suicide (an ongoing tragedy in India), others were rescued from trafficking. Nearly all are victims of caste discrimination. A group of them has come together to collectively lease land that was previously lying fallow. The women share their skills, knowledge, and labour amongst themselves, growing pesticide-free food for their families. They sell the surplus at their farm stores, and also deliver vegetables to customers’ homes by bicycle – micro-enterprises that they are eager to see grow. The women in the collective have devised a rota system for farm work that allows them to manage both production and care work at home. Here, feminist logic takes precedence over traditional market dynamics. The women pay each other partial wages during the agricultural season, ensuring pre-harvest cash flow to cover household needs. Beyond improved finances, agroecology also pays dividends in the form food sovereignty, self-reliance, and dignity.



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7 Sujatha and her husband Jagadish have been practicing natural farming for nearly ten years on their 4-acre farm in Gottigehally, Karnataka. The transition from chemical farming was challenging, says Sujatha, but as they learned about the health hazards associated with chemical pesticides and fertilisers, their resolve strengthened. Now, their farm is being cultivated according to the five-layer model of natural farming: an ecosystem that is more forest than field. “There are maybe more than 200 varieties growing on my plot,” says Jagadish. The couple grow bananas, coconuts, guavas, jackfruit, sweet potatoes, pulses and lemons, while also experimenting with coffee on the sloped areas of their farm. Chickens and goats are free-range. Taller trees – silver oak and moringa – form a natural fence, and when these trees shed their leaves, this serves as a mulch, building humus in the soil.

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This photo story is based on field visits and workshops during a week-long learning exchange in February 2020 in Southern India, where nearly a hundred agroecology practitioners, advocates, researchers and policymakers from more than 30 countries convened.