

Seedsaving in India

March 2011

Daylight is fading as the Hyderabad Express leaves Mumbai, a low mournful whistle marking its passage through dusty, overcrowded suburbs before silence descends and fields of green crops appear, stretching endlessly toward the horizon. After the noise, traffic and chaos of the megacity the effect on this observer is akin to a soothing massage and a hot bath.

My fellow passengers settle themselves, accommodating bags and removing shoes snatching a first glance at their companions for the next twenty four hours. I am travelling 2nd class a/c, a comfortable option outside the reach of most Indians. A middle aged man pops the inevitable *'where are you from?'* and the conversation takes off, shifting from the long reach of the British Empire to the joys of spicy food. A group of young women, eavesdropping from the next carriage, edge closer.

I am on my way to the Mobile Biodiversity Festival, an annual celebration of traditional organic farming with an emphasis on saving and swapping seeds in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. My mission was greeted with incomprehension, no one knew what seedsaving was about and the idea of spending valuable tourist time in remote villages didn't impress my audience. Talk turned to Hyderabad overtaking Silicon Valley as the software capital of the world and the need to keep a close eye on advancing China. *'They put Hindi on their school curriculum two years ago!'* exclaimed one of my companions, a raised eyebrow hinting at the need to keep a close eye on such wily buggers.

'So, what do you all do then?' I asked.

Raju, opposite, owned a construction company. Beside him, Tampu, a retired soldier; Rasia, working in computers, Rajish, another IT worker, living in New York. The four young women were all at university, studying to be diplomats, entrepreneurs and finally, a pharmacist.

'So, where are you all going to get your food from?'

There was general laughter before a longer, unexpected silence imposed itself on the gathering; *'that's a good question,'* admitted Rajish, the New York-based computer engineer. When I asked if any of those present could imagine themselves working in agriculture and living in a village, the response was immediate - not a chance. I am surrounded by the 'new' India: English-speaking, business-oriented, with an unshakeable faith in technology as the engine driving the Great Leap Forward. Progress means bricks and steel, shops and offices, foreign investment and economic

growth. The Indian village, as seen by this group, is a grim unit of perpetual poverty and backward thinking, closely associated with hierarchy and Caste-based oppression.

But the issue of growing food is a matter of life and death in a country with a population of 1.2 billion. When India achieved independence in 1947 one of the guiding principles of the freedom movement was 'Swadeshi' or self reliance, a conscious decision to build the nation from the village up, with food production the basis of future wellbeing. The universal term for a farmer, Annadatta, combined the words for god and food, signalling the prestige attached to India's primary profession. In 1951 a detailed farming strategy was drawn up, taking every village into account, sometimes individual fields, raising production and yields while preserving traditional mixed cropping patterns as up to 23 crops cohabited in a small field.

In the decades that followed however, under US and World Bank pressure, India introduced hybrid seeds to fuel a 'green revolution' which promised a new age of dynamic crops and food for all. The key ingredients of the food revolution would be chemical inputs and a changeover to monocrop wheat and rice varieties. The yields rose for a while but the impact of large scale monocrops soon exhausted the land, spray-resistant pests scoffed increasing quantities of chemicals and farmers ended up in debt and dependent on seeds purchased annually.

Since 1997, according to the government's own statistics, 250,000 farmers have taken their lives rather than live with the shame of indebtedness and the burden of failure in the field. *'If this many people had died in an earthquake or of disease it would be considered a grave national emergency'* explained PV Satheesh, director of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), organizer of the Mobile Biodiversity Festival.

The DDS comprises 5,000 women from 75 villages, all seedsavers and all Dalits, the 'untouchables' at the bottom of India's social ladder

In the area where Satheesh works, the number of farmer suicides have been very low and not one farmer who has stuck to 'heritage crops', (produced from locally sourced seeds), has made the terrible decision to end their life. Despite drought and shifting rainfall patterns, their crops apparently never fail. One of the key elements in this success lie in the exchange of seeds on a non-commercial basis; *'In large parts of India until recently seed was a matter of exchange, everybody would go and borrow from his or her neighbours in the community and after they planted the*

seed and harvested their crop they would repay in seeds, there was no money exchanged, even today, many farmers believe that selling seed is a crime, because seed is a part of nature's bounty,' explained Satheesh.

India's small farmers are still responsible for 80% of seeds used in agriculture and the government, currently drawing up food security legislation, faces an organised and growing movement of seedsavers. However the corporate biotech sector, keen to establish a foothold for GM crops, enjoys huge influence in the corridors of power. India's Environmental Protection Act may soon be replaced by the Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI) which would fast-track Genetically Modified Organisms and throw critics in jail.

Hyderabad appeared soon after sunrise and my companions gathered up their belongings and bid farewell, disappearing into a throng of seven million souls sharing at least one common aspiration - a plate of food to start the day.