

# Small change crops

## the marginalisation of women farmers' priorities

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In India, as in many other countries, agricultural planning and policy are largely based on 'gender-blind' data. There is no systematic effort to identify and comprehend differences in strategies, responsibilities and concerns between men and women farmers in agricultural domains like soil fertility, weed management, seed production, agrarian rituals, access to technical advice, inputs and credit, marketing of produce. Considering that women undertake 70% of all agricultural work in many parts of India, the lack of a gender-desegregated analysis is concerning. Moreover, it constitutes a major barrier to evaluating the impact of new technologies and policies on women farmers.

This article aims to provide insights into the different meanings and values attributed to crop diversity by women and men farmers in the semi-arid Deccan Plateau. Based on a wide range of participatory discussions and exercises conducted with small farmers between 1999 and 2002 in several parts of Andhra Pradesh, these observations demonstrate that gender plays a critical role in Indian agriculture.

Keeping in view the multiplicity of situations which, together, make up Indian agriculture today, we look at three farming contexts, located on different points of an imaginary continuum going from primarily subsistence farming to largely commercial farming: Shamshuddinpur (Medak District), Satmoori and Pipri (Adilabad District), Borraj (Adilabad District).

### Shamshuddinpur

Located in interior parts of Medak District, Shamshuddinpur is characterised by diversity-based dryland agriculture, both in the *khariif* (spring) and *rabi* (winter) seasons. Regardless of their socio-economic situation, virtually all farmers follow a mixed cropping system. *Jowar* (sorghum), the main crop, is grown in association with pulses like pigeonpea, greengram, blackgram, cowpea, fieldbean, chickpea and a range of dryland oilseeds including groundnut, mustard, safflower, linseed, and niger. Minor millets (foxtail millet, little millet, etc.) are also grown on very poor soils and commercial crops like sugarcane, ginger and green vegetables are cultivated on a handful of irrigated fields.

Irrespective of gender, everyone in Shamshuddinpur acknowledges the importance of crop diversity in meeting food, fodder and fuel needs, evading the risks inherent to dryland farming, optimising scarce moisture, and minimising costs of cultivation. Yet of all farmers, small women farmers are perhaps the most resourceful in making the most out of crop diversity on their land. They see a clear connection between crop diversity in their fields and grain diversity in their kitchen, a key asset in preparing nutritious meals, food offerings for the deities, festival delicacies, and herbal remedies. Although there is no outright rejection of marketable crops on women's part (cash crops like castor, coriander, chillies, bishop's weed or turmeric are grown in very small quantities by most families in Shamshuddinpur), there is a strong sense that these should not be grown at the cost of crops that meet more immediate and vital needs.

Intra-species diversity is still high in this part of the Deccan Plateau. In Shamshuddinpur, for instance, ten local varieties of sorghum, six of pigeon pea, and three of chickpea are still grown today. When opting for a given combination of varieties, women

farmers call upon a great deal of know-how, planning skill and strategic thinking. Laxshamma, from the village of Chillammamadi some 30 km from Shamshuddinpur, explains that by growing two or three varieties of chickpea or pigeonpea, she increases her chances of storing the harvest as foodgrains for home consumption. The underlying logic is that her husband is less tempted to go and sell small quantities of different varieties in the market than a larger volume of a single variety. Small women farmers, then, can take recourse to elaborate strategies in order to keep as much control as possible over food grains produced on their land. Yet overall, in Shamshuddinpur, men do not downplay the value of crop diversity as they do in other parts of Andhra Pradesh.

### Satmoori and Pipri

In Gound adivasi (tribal) village of Pipri, in Adilabad district, there is a stark contrast in the depiction of farming practices by women and men. Men farmers eagerly speak of the cash crops that are now widely grown in the village, under rainfed conditions: hybrid cotton, hybrid sorghum, tomatoes, and chillies. The picture they convey is one of a largely commercialised agriculture, with inputs and outputs travelling in and out of the village. Women farmers, on the other hand, feel more inclined to speak about the food crops they grow on their land: pigeonpea intercropped with cotton, chickpea after a crop of rice, sesame on the border of sorghum fields, rows of fieldbean amongst sorghum plants.

Similarly, in Satmoori, an adivasi village in the same district, farming is based on a mix of food and cash crops with maize, sorghum (*jowar*) and cotton as the main crops (in terms of acreage). In 2001, a group of 22 women of all ages took part in a participatory exercise on the relevance of crop diversity to dryland agriculture (Table 1). Interestingly, the matrix they prepared reveals a very low consideration for cotton compared to all other crops on their part. Yet cotton is presently gaining ground in many parts of Adilabad District (as well as in other Deccan regions). Sorghum, considered by women farmers to be a crop of vital importance, is losing ground to the commercial crops. Men, being the main recipients of external advice, inputs and credit, are generally more inclined to expand the area under commercial crops; many women say that their husbands insist on moving towards cash crops.

### Bhoraj

Agriculture in Bhoraj, a village located close to the town of Adilabad, constitutes yet another scenario. Cash crops like cotton and soybean dominate. Hybrid sorghum and pigeon pea are grown for direct consumption and for sale.

In this context of commercial agriculture, there is a clear demarcation between cash crops and so-called '*chillar pantalu*', meaning 'small change' crops, which do not bring in a sizeable income. These crops encompass most of the pulses (except pigeon pea) and oilseeds to which Shamshuddinpur and Satmoori women farmers attribute so much importance.

Although men openly discredit minor food crops in Bhoraj and in neighbouring villages, women have not entirely given up on them. One of their practices consists in going into cotton fields soon after germination, carrying seeds of field bean, green gram, black gram or roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*), and sowing these wherever

a cotton seed has failed to germinate. Even though crop diversity has been almost entirely sidelined in the present cropping pattern, women are not deterred in their determination to see pulses and oilseeds grow on their land. This is true not only of small women farmers, but also of large farmers. Gangamma, who belongs to a high caste family farming 30 acres, explains that she too tries to grow small amounts of green gram and black gram wherever she can. Yet, it is also significant that it took two hours of discussion for her to say that she was growing these crops and storing a few kilos of these seeds in small plastic bags. This would indicate that she had internalised the idea that it is worthless to grow 'small change crops'.

### Women and crop diversity

The demise of crop diversity can be seen as a metaphor for the marginalisation of women's agenda in agriculture. "Small change" crops are suited to dryland conditions, grow without any extravagant need of inputs, and meet the food and fodder requirements of the household. As a woman farmer from Pipri said "If we only grow cotton, where is the fodder for our cattle going to come from?". Yet, most agricultural extension officers, scientists, breeders, rural bank managers and even policy-makers pay no attention to the concerns of women, especially when they are 'merely' poor farmers. The entire agricultural support system is geared towards men farmers who can be more easily persuaded to adopt new seeds and technologies and to spend money on chemical inputs.

In the emerging paradigm of agriculture, which is spreading like wildfire in many parts of India, commercial crops are equated with modernity, and there is very little room for diversified cropping systems. As local dealers become the main suppliers of inputs, credit and advice, and the main outlets for the crop, women's domain of expertise in agriculture drastically reduces. The recurring allegation made by men farmers that "Women don't know anything about farming", in villages like Bhoraj, is but one sign of this alarming trend.

Cosmetic changes in policy (like creating 'niche areas' for women, such as poultry-raising or sericulture) and initiatives that fail to address the contradictions of the dominant paradigm of agricultural development (like micro-credit schemes for poor rural women, that leave the problem of indebtedness via money-lenders unexamined) are not what is called for. A profound change of attitude towards women farmers is needed, and a shift in the way agricultural policies are conceived and implemented.

Finding out what women know about farming, and why their knowledge has been devalued, is a crucial step. There must be a sustained effort by extension workers, scientists and policy-makers to understand women's practices and perceptions about agriculture, including cultural, social and symbolic dimensions.

In domains that are typically women's responsibility, like seed saving, weeding, and cooking, it is vital that women's concerns be allowed to emerge and inform policies. Small women farmers, for instance, have a preference for crop varieties that are suitable for mixed cropping, that can be saved as seed for next season, that require low levels of inputs and that produce enough fodder for their cattle. Unless these factors are given due consideration, there is a great chance that agricultural policies will continue to undermine women's agenda instead of strengthening it.

Finally, issues of control and access to resources (e.g. land, water, and seed), credit and markets need to be scrutinised with a special attention to gender. Unless women's control over productive resources is reinforced, through individual or collective approaches, it is doubtful whether women farmers will be able to continue contributing to agriculture with the same talent, aptitude and dedication that many Indian rural women still display today. ■

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**Table 1. Representation of crop diversity by women farmers of Satmoori**

	Food value	Fodder	Ambali	Soil fertility	Oil	Ritual	Green veg.	Sale price	Moisture need	Expense	Cost of seed	Crop rank
Sorghum (jowar)	■■■	■■■	■■■						■■■	■		1
Rice	■■■	■■■		■■■		■■■				■	■	1
Cowpea	■■■	■		■		■■■	■	■	■	■■■	■	2
Green-gram	■■■	■		■		■■■	■■■	■	■	■	■	2
Sesame	■	■			■■■	■■■		■			■■■	2
Black-gram	■■■	■■■		■■■			■	■		■	■	2
Field bean	■	■■■				■				■■■	■■■	2
Red-gram	■■■	■■■					■■■				■	2
Maize	■■■	■■■	■								■	3
Little millet	■					■				■■■	■■■	3
Foxtail millet	■									■■■	■■■	3
Soyabean				■■■	■			■■■		■		3
Chickpea	■	■■■				■	■		■■■		■	3
Roselle	■				■■■		■			■■■	■	3
Cotton								■■■				4

N.B. Ambali is a liquid porridge made from a millet, an important part of the summer diet.