

Affirming Life and Diversity. Rural Images and Voices on Food Sovereignty in South India*

Deccan Development Society (DDS) Community Media Trust, P.V. Satheesh and Michel Pimbert, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Deccan Development Society, London, 2008.

Set of 4 DVDs, plus booklet

review by GRAIN

These four DVDs, which contain 12 films with a total length of almost six hours, are a veritable treasure trove. They are the result of a seven-year collaboration between the UK-based IIED, the Deccan Development Society of Andhra Pradesh, India, and women's sanghams (Indian village associations of the poor). The process was guided throughout by a steering group made up of representatives of all three partners. The films, which were shot by the women, deal with the struggle by farmers in the drylands of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh to develop socially and ecologically sustainable ways of living and farming. The semi-arid region is regularly hit by drought, and farming is difficult, yet the plateau enjoys a rich agrarian culture, with a wide diversity of crops and livestock, and a wealth of local knowledge.

The films, shot over several years, give a fascinating account of local farming struggles. The first film looks at the impact of the Indian government's Public Distribution System (PDS), by which Green Revolution rice is brought in from other regions of India to feed the poor, further



impoverishing local farmers, who find no market for their crops. It documents the way in which women's sanghams decided to set up an alternative decentralized, locally controlled PDS, in which they buy up locally grown dryland cereals (millets and sorghum), work out for themselves the families who need free food, and distribute the cereals to them. This scheme has proved so successful in improving livelihoods and sustaining the local ecology that it is changing official policy at state level. Another film documents over a year farmers' experience with BT cotton, recording their early hopes and their subsequent bitter disillusion. The filmmakers, it seems, had no *a priori* agenda: if Bt cotton had improved lives in any way, the farmers would have certainly had no hesitation in saying so. Another film shows the importance of uncultivated foods in the dalit food system: some 80 species of uncultivated leafy greens are eaten, and they are the source of many nutrients essential for good health. Other films deal with the difference that technology, when appropriate and introduced under local control, can make to farmers' lives, and a visit by sangham women to Quechua communities in Peru.

These films are beautifully shot and cogently argued, demonstrating conclusively that non-literate women from marginalised communities can articulate pictorially their understanding of the world around them to produce powerful videos. The films also show in no uncertain way that, when given the chance, local people can work out their own solutions to problems in a participatory process that strengthens their institutions and organisations. It makes no sense for external organisations to impose their own agenda on such vibrant communities, and yet that is still what happens in many parts of the world.

* The DVD series and book can be ordered from IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK.

<http://tinyurl.com/mujg2l>

