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## **How Does Localized Social Economy Sustain in a Globalizing World?**

*A Critical Analysis of Post-Developmentalist Initiatives in  
Andhra Pradesh, India*

Ashok Kumbamu  
University of Alberta

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UNRISD, Palais des Nations  
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Tel: (41 22) 9173020  
Fax: (41 22) 9170650  
Email: [info@unrisd.org](mailto:info@unrisd.org)  
Web: [www.unrisd.org](http://www.unrisd.org)

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## **Abstract**

Critical scholars studying the processes and strategies of the globalization of agri-food systems argue that neoliberal reforms have facilitated the privatization of agricultural research and development, the development and global diffusion of genetically modified varieties, the global imposition of intellectual property rights, the erosion of farm support programs, and the commodification of both agricultural inputs and outputs. While global capital using various mechanisms to control and govern the agri-food system, counter-movements have been rising with self-protecting measures against the intrusion of the market system. I critically examine this “double movement” in the agri-food sector in the age of the convergence of three global crises: Food crisis, energy crisis, and climate crisis. Particularly, I examine the reconstruction of social fabric within communities and the institutionalization and sustenance of community-based autonomous organizations that challenge the process of “accumulation by dispossession” and its implications for food sovereignty, seed sovereignty, social inequality, stratification and the nature-society relationship. To better understand these pressing issues, I use the organizational strategies and alternative development initiatives of the Deccan Development Society, a prominent non-governmental organization in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, southern India, as an illustrative case study.

## Introduction

Critical scholars studying the processes and strategies of the globalization of agri-food systems argue that neoliberal reforms have facilitated the privatization of agricultural research and development, the development and global diffusion of genetically modified varieties, the global imposition of intellectual property rights, the erosion of farm support programs, and the commodification of both agricultural inputs and outputs (McMichael 2000; Phillips 2006). While global capital using various mechanisms to control and govern the agri-food system, counter-movements have been rising with self-protecting measures against the intrusion of the market system. I critically examine this “double movement”<sup>1</sup> (Polanyi 1957; Block 2003; Kumbamu 2009) in the agri-food sector in the age of the convergence of three global crises: Food crisis, energy crisis, and climate crisis. Particularly, I examine the reconstruction of social fabric within communities and the institutionalization and sustenance of local social economies that challenge the process of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003, 2007) and its implications for food sovereignty, social inequality, stratification and the nature-society relationship.

Embracing neoliberal economic policies, the Indian state has restructured its agricultural policies to enable the entry of multinational seed and agro-chemical corporations (Kumbamu 2006). Furthermore, government funding for agricultural research and development and extension services for farmers has gradually declined since the early 1990s (Chand and Phillip 2001; Rao 2005; Patnaik 2007; Ramachandran and Rawal 2010). Seed corporations and government agencies used a similar claim to promote the new technology that the super seeds of the “Gene Revolution” can solve the major problems associated with conventional and organic farming methods, and can mitigate farmer suicides in India (Kumbamu 2009a).

While the Indian state enthusiastically pursues the neoliberal economic agenda in all socio-economic and public sectors, countermovements in various forms have been gaining momentum and challenging the intrusion of the capitalist market system into social and community life, and protesting the dispossession of people from their customary livelihoods and the destruction of the environment. In India, since independence in 1947, myriad social movements have arisen across the country, including peasant, women’s, *adivasi* (aboriginal or indigenous people), *dalit* (so-called untouchables), civil rights, and nationalist movements. These movements formed in a response to failures of the developmentalist state and to the negative repercussion of the market system.

In these social movements, there is a wide range of mobilization dynamics and political actions based on their political programs, strategies, and tactics. Revolutionary parties and organizations that follow the Naxalbari path have been waging protracted armed and militant struggles with a goal to end all kinds of oppression and exploitation of

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<sup>1</sup> According to social historian Karl Polanyi, the expansion of the self-regulating market to fictitious commodities (such as land, labour, and money) inexorably spurs society to take self-protecting measures against “the intrusion of market.” This countermovement is “more than the usual defensive behaviour of a society faced with change,” but in fact, it is a reaction against a market-controlled economy which destroys the “fabric of society” and social organization of production. Polanyi named the clash between these two contradictory trends — self-regulating market and self-protecting societies — double movement, and he argued this double movement governed the dynamics of modern civilization (Polanyi 1957:76)

semi-feudal and semi-colonial social formations. These are considered as “old-style” social movements. They reject the idea of building the peasant movement based on “economism” or “economistic reductionism,” (Banerjee 1984:26) which is a basic characteristic of the new social movements.

According to social historian Ramachandra Guha (1989:12), the new social movements are struggling on two levels: (i) at the “defensive level,” in protecting “civil society from the tentacles of the centralizing state” and market forces, and (ii) at the “assertive level,” in changing civil society from within and proposing an alternative conception of “good life,” which rests on the notion of sustainability, local knowledge system, and cultural identities. The assertive dimension of the new social movements often involves “constructive resistance”:

That is, not only do these movements articulate dissent (and often noncompliance) with central and state government policies, but they also actively seek to articulate and implement alternative development practices. Viewing the state-directed development process as inimical to local tradition and livelihood, many social movements actively affirm local identity, culture and systems of knowledge as an integral part of their resistance. (Routledge 1993:17)

Rather than evaluating the merits and demerits of “old” and “new” social movements<sup>2</sup>, this paper examines the politico-ecological implications of “constructive resistance” in reclaiming a range of autonomies in agricultural and rural life. As an illustrative case, I use the socio-political and organizational dynamics of peasant mobilization in the villages of the Deccan Development Society (DDS) *sanghams* (grassroot associations of the poor) network in the Medak district of Telangna region, Andhra Pradesh. For this study, I conducted interviews in December 2010 with the *sangham* women and PV Satheesh, one of the founder members and current General Secretary of the DDS. I also used various documents published by the DDS.

## **Building autonomies: Beyond the state, the market and the hegemonic development project**

In the politics of autonomy, there are three major discourses: Autonomy beyond capital, autonomy beyond the state, and autonomy beyond the hegemonic development system (Bohm, Dinerstein and Spicer 2010). First, autonomy beyond capital can be achieved by “self-valorising movements” that organize production and exchange activities in new politico-economic spaces that are autonomous from the capitalist system. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue “the creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges.” (Hardt and Negri 2000:xv; 2004). They further argue that “when the multitude works, it produces autonomously and reproduces the entire world of life. Producing and reproducing autonomously mean constructing a new ontological reality (Hardt and Negri 2000: 395)<sup>3</sup>. Second, to achieve autonomy from the states, social movements negate all forms of state power. They distance themselves from institutionalized political processes that constitute the state. They believe that social change is possible even without taking power, thus they do not

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<sup>2</sup> There is a plethora of literature on the critical analysis of the “old” and “new” social movements in India, see, for example, Guha 1989; Routledge 1993; Brass 1994; Byres 1994.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical analysis of Hardt and Negri’s Empire and multitude, see, for example, Kumbamu 2010 and Borón 2005.

struggle to capture the state power. Rather they aim to transform public discourse and actions by self-regulatory and autonomous constitution, which does not recognize state legislations (Holloway 2002). Third, autonomy from development is possible if social movements and civil society groups resist the hegemonic systems of imperial knowledge and development that has historically produced and reproduced inequalities, dependency relations, and unsustainable ways of living within the capitalist world system. This discourse of autonomy from hegemonic development is strongly advocated by dependency theorists and post-developmentalists (Bohm, Dinerstein and Spicer 2010). In this paper, I focus on post-developmental initiatives of building autonomous communities in agrarian societies.

In the field of agricultural and rural development, particularly since the inception of “Green Revolution” technology, proponents advocate that technological change in an agrarian society can promote social change, altering the farmers’ material conditions of life by changing the socio-cultural and institutional frameworks of society in which the technology operates (see Parayil 2002:123-129). Others advocate that poverty and hunger in the global South can only be solved through new technological interventions in agriculture (Conway 2003; Serageldin 2003). The adoption of Green Revolution technology has been presented as a “rational choice” for farmers, and farmers who adopted the new technological package were viewed as active agents of change towards ‘development’ in the countryside (Parayil 2002:143). This process is described as the diffusionist approach.

A diffusionist approach to modernization offers a technological “solution” to underdeveloped countries to help them catch up to developed countries. Proponents believe that the widespread adoption and diffusion of new technologies in farming is a decisive factor in development process. Development should increase because of the process of “diffusion” and “acculturation.” But, in underdeveloped countries, there are many constraints to diffusion (Frank et al 1972). The modernization theories assume that underdeveloped countries will welcome the diffusion of Western knowledge, skills, institutions, values, technology and capital, which made the West economically successful (2009a).

According to sociologists Shripad Deo and Louis Swanson (1990:584-585), the implicit assumptions of the advocates of modernization approach ( see, for example, Rostow 1960; Eisenstadt 1963; Moore 1963; Levy 1966; Nash 1984) were: (1) new technologies would solve the socio-economic and political problems in a given society; (2) once the new technologies were developed, then the development process would take off the social and economic needs; (3) the core reason for poverty and hunger was insufficient production, not unequal distribution of resources and wealth; (4) “diffusion of innovations” (such as the “Green Revolution” package technology) would lead to elimination or reduction of the “knowledge gap” between the laboratory scientists and farmers; and (5) science and technology were neutral and benefited all users in a similar way.

Some proponents of ecological modernization perspective (see, for example, Mol 2000, 2001; Mol and Sonnenfeld 2000; Mol and Spaargaren 2002) strongly argue that the advancement of technology in agriculture along with “political modernization” can solve the economic and environmental problems by boosting productivity and reducing dependency on agro-chemical inputs. But ecological Marxists disagree with this, and argue that “it is not technology that is the primary issue, but rather the nature and logic of capitalism as a specific mode of production” (Foster 2009:144). Although ecological

Marxism and Marxist ecology provide powerful conceptual tools for analyzing the dialectical relationship between nature and society and socio-ecological crises, it mainly focuses on economic factors – for example, how the capitalist mode of production and the process of the accumulation of capital create a rift between nature and society (Burkett 1999, 2001; Foster 2000; Moore 2000, 2001), and destroy the mere “conditions of production” (O’Connor 1998) – and neglects non-economic factors such as socio-cultural beliefs and values, gender, ethnicity, caste, and local knowledge systems. It is important to consider the non-economic factors of nature-society relationship because the socio-cultural practices of everyday life provide a foundational basis in the interaction between society and nature. Post-developmentalists address non-economic factors of development and label technological diffusion “monocultural” and “Eurocentric,” a project that aims at homogenization that ignored socio-cultural diversities in the non-western societies<sup>4</sup> (So 1990; Shiva 1992, 1996; Escobar 1995; Naderveen Pieterse 2001).

Post-developmentalists approach offers a political and cultural critique of modernity, techno-scientific progress, and development. Post-developmentalists reject Western science and development models, considering them as the instruments of imposition of power, “cultural violence on the Third World” (Escobar 1995:13; see also 1992), homogenization, and environmental destruction (Naderveen Pieterse: 2001:98; Nandy 1989). For them, science is questionable output of Enlightenment thinking and positivism, which promote the mastery of nature and destroy any harmonic relationship between nature and society (Shiva 1991). But, the “critique of science” and “anti-science” are not the same. Critics of science acknowledge the limitation of science and technology in solving socio-economic and political problems. They criticize the use of scientific knowledge for expansion of political power by the developed countries (Kumbamu 2007, 2009a). Many dissident intellectuals, green parties, popular organizations and other non-governmental organization who oppose modern development expertise and policies are not anti-science per se. However, those who hold the views of anti-science often suggest the traditional methods of production as an alternative to western technologies.

In most development projects, the transfer of technology and knowledge became an important component and it is often considered as neutral and inevitably beneficial to all in the Third World. But Escobar argues it creates a new cultural and social order or disorder in the Third World (Escobar 1995:36). For him, the diffusion of western knowledge in the form of development projects notably marginalizes and disqualifies non-western knowledge systems (Escobar 1995:13). He finds that development programs restructure the social relations, deepen western modernization influence and often depoliticize problems in the Third World (Escobar 1995:12). Therefore, as post-development scholars argue, the concept of Eurocentric development should be “deconstructed” and endogenous development, where “the goals and values of development generate from within, should be pursued.” (Naderveen Pieterse 2001:86) Contrary to the modernization project, which considers ‘state’ as a unit of development, the post-developmentalists approach considers different sites such as people, community, local, and grassroots as the units of development. Moreover, it focuses on endogenous development, autonomy, and “the revalorization and adaptation of existing social and cultural capital.” (Naderveen Pieterse 2001:86). But, some Marxist scholars consider these initiatives as anti-Marxist and postmodernist movements (Brass 2007; Das 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> Sociologist Marion Levy Jr. writes “as time goes on, they and we will increasingly resemble one another ... because the patterns of modernization are such that the more highly modernized societies become, the more they resemble one another” (cited in So 1990:33)

The critical analysis of the Deccan Development Society will help us understand whether autonomy beyond the “development project” (McMichael 2007) is a new populism or new possibility to build autonomous communities to improve rural livelihoods, harmonize nature-society relations, build social economy, and enhance community wellbeing.

## **Defensive localisation and mending the metabolic rift: The case of the Deccan development society**

In the early 1980s a group of Hyderabad-based professionals from development studies, communication technologies, and social sciences came together with an idea to do something to improve the living conditions of the poorest of the poor. They debated among themselves on how they should help the impoverished. Among many development ideas, they also thought of initiating saving and credit groups; at that time the word “self help groups” (SHGs) has not come in to existence. But, some of them strongly opposed this idea, because they thought that it will end up as a kind of a chit fund group (a group that organizes money saving schemes). Finally, with an understanding that the market system, the state, and development programs are not in the favour of solving the problems of the poorest of the poor, they decided to build alternative community-based institutions which can effectively address the issue of rural livelihoods, food security, health, biodiversity, child education, local knowledge systems, and other. They set up the Deccan Development Society in Pastapur, Zaheerabad mandal (sub-district), Medak district in the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. They worked with dalit women, the most vulnerable section of the highly stratified Indian society, organized them into *sanghams* (grassroot associations of the poor), and developed a network of *sanghams* in the region working in 75 villages. Although mobilizing women and organizing them into *sanghams* is a typical NGO practice, DDS's special focus on dalits and its alternative development model are unique. The Organization has 5000 dalit women members and “has a vision of consolidating these village groups into vibrant organs of primary local governance and federate them into a strong pressure lobby for women, the poor and dalits.”<sup>5</sup> Over the years, while working with the *sangham* network they consciously moved away from the rights-based approach to the autonomy discourse. The major objectives of the DDS have become: building autonomous, self-protective and subsistence communities, reconstructing the social fabric of communities, and mending the metabolic rift<sup>6</sup> between nature and society.

### ***From Food Security to Food Sovereignty***

In the *sangham* network, a majority of dalits are marginal farmers with poor quality land and landless agricultural labourers. Thus the first issue the DDS has confronted was food insecurity among dalits. To address this issue, initially they helped them to buy foodgrains from the government public distribution system (PDS). Later, with the help of the DDS, the *sangham* women started leasing in land and worked on it as a collective. They were all very efficient farm labour and excellent agriculturists but they

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5 [www.ddsindia.com/www/default.asp](http://www.ddsindia.com/www/default.asp), accessed on 10 January 2008.

6 The concept of metabolic rift developed by Karl Marx (1906) and elaborated by Foster (1999, 2000) provides a useful framework to understand nature-society relations. Marx used the concept of “metabolism” to explain the relationship between nature and society in general, and to underscore the potential socio-ecological crises that emerge as a result of the capitalist mode of production in agriculture in particular.

never had an idea of managing large pieces of land as “farming collective.” But, within a short period of time they became experts on the self-management of collective farming, and they formed committees at the village level to make decisions on the management of this collective action. The central idea in this initiative is that the DDS advances money to the *sangham* members to lease in available land (fallow lands, lands of rich farmers, temple lands and other) in villages, work collectively, and share equally whatever they produce. But, the agreement is that the money advanced by the DDS should be paid back by the *sangham* members not in the form of cash but grain, which will be stored in the same village as a grain bank. Food grains in the grain banks are sold to other poor families in the village at a cheaper price. In this way, the community grain bank is working as an alternative public distribution system. *Local production, local storage, local distribution* all led by Dalit women. In each village, a committee of dalit women is democratically elected by the *sangham* members to lead and manage the alternative food distribution system. By all these alternative development initiatives, the *sangham* network has moved from attaining food security to food sovereignty, which “emphasizes farmers’ access to land, seeds and water while focusing on local autonomy, local markets, local production-consumption cycles, energy and technological sovereignty, and farmer-to-farmer networks” (Altieri 2009:104).

In the late 1980s, the DDS also helped marginal farmers to improve their poor quality land by introducing minimum 100 days of work a year for every member of the *sangham*. The DDS has effectively implemented this program well before the central government introduced rural livelihood schemes such as the Employment Guarantee Scheme, or what is now called the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The 100 days of work translated into improving their lands. With this initiative, the lands which used to grow just about 50 kilograms of grains per acre in a year started producing about 300-400 kilograms, six to eight times increase. In the first year of this project itself, the *sangham* women brought over 2600 acres of fallow land in 32 villages under cultivation and produced an extra of 800,000 kilograms of sorghum in their villages. This program not only increased cultivable land and productivity, but also increased the number of crop variety cultivated. The *sangham* members consciously brought many marginalized or neglected crops, particularly millets, under cultivation. This conscious effort has dramatically increased crop biodiversity in the region. Moreover, in the entire production process the *sangham* members follow ecological principles to sustain soil quality and yield.

Along with bringing changes in food production and distribution, the DDS also revitalized the marginalized *dalitbahujan* (an umbrella social category that includes the so-called “untouchable” castes/*dalits* and “backward” castes/*bahujans*) food culture and promoted the consumption of the “forgotten food” i.e., millets. Although millets were staple food for *dalitbahujan* in this region, with the introduction of the “Green Revolution” varieties such as rice and wheat in the 1960s and 70s, the perception of eating millets has gradually changed. Consuming rice and wheat has become a symbol of modernization and development. Because of the construction of this kind of cultural domination, until recently, people including *dalitbahujan* used to feel shy of saying “we eat *korralu* (foxtail millet) or *raagulu* (finger millet).” But, today they say it with a lot of pride. This transformation has happened with conscious efforts of the *sangham* network.

As part of the revival of *dalitbahujan* food culture, the DDS has established a little restaurant (Café Ethnic) in Zaheerabad to construct a new social image of millets (see Image 1). The logo for the restaurant is: *Taste, health, nutrition*. The *sangham*

management of the restaurant has taken a challenge to demonstrate that whatever food items are prepared with rice can also be prepared with millets. They also prepared a lot of millet recipes and introduced them in their restaurant to build people's confidence in the taste of their food. They prepare korra idly, korra dosa, korra upma, anything that is cooked with rice they cook it with millets. This can also be understood as a process of the creation of a new taste, particularly for younger generations who do not even know that millets are also healthy edible produce and they were part of their culture of consumption. For a detailed analysis of the traditional food system of dalits in Zaheerabad *mandal*, see Salomeyesudas and Periyapatna 2009. Moreover, to promote consumers' confidence in millet, at the restaurant, they also provide an information sheet about the nutritional value of food items<sup>7</sup>.

**Image 1: Café Ethnic Managed by the DDS *Sangham* Women in Zaheerabad.**



**Source:** Picture was taken by the author, 13 December 2010.

To build farmer-consumer solidarity, the DDS operate a shop in Zaheerabad to sell organic millets and pulses locally (see Image 2). It also has a mobile market which goes to Hyderabad, the capital city of Andhra Pradesh, which is about 100 kilometres away from Pastapur, and stays there in different localities for three days a week and sells directly to consumers. And, they also provide certain recipe books and little pamphlets about nutritional values of millets. Beyond these initiatives they have not done anything such as consumer workshops to sensitize consumers. Except in Zaheerabad where for a period of time they did it very systematically. During every Ganapathi (the Hindu Elephant God) festival they used to have food exhibitions to reach out local consumers. Considering the importance of millet in the agri-food system, the DDS has been demanding the government to introduce millets in the public distribution system. Now it has reached a situation where almost every woman who is a member of the DDS *sangham* (if she is a landed person) grows all the food she needs for the family and diverse kinds of foods, quality foods, nutritional foods because their farming is absolutely ecologic not just organic. Thus the alternative public distribution system effectively addresses several socio-ecological concerns: Household food security,

<sup>7</sup> For a comparative analysis of nutritional value of millets, rice and wheat, see [www.ddsindia.com/www/gendering\\_agriculture.html](http://www.ddsindia.com/www/gendering_agriculture.html). Accessed: September 1, 2011.

fodder security for livestock, health security, nutritional security, livelihood security, and ecological security.

**Image 2: Organic Millet and Pulses Shop in Zaheerabad Managed by the DDS Sangham Women.**



**Source:** Picture was taken by the author, 13 December 2010.

### ***Seed Sovereignty, Subaltern Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation***

Seed is the heart of agriculture. It is often considered as a storehouse of culture and history (Shiva 2001). Thus, seed saving was one of the core activities of farmers in India, involving four vital activities: firstly, the identification, separation and collection of good quality produce from the harvest for reuse as seed in the next season; secondly, properly cleaning the seed before preserving them in earthen pots; thirdly, checking them regularly and properly sun-drying them on the floor at appropriate intervals (usually once a month or so) to avoid infections and to kill insects if any had entered into the seed storage pots and fourthly, cleaning them well again before the sowing season starts (Kumbamu 2010a). According to Shiva (1993:168, emphasis added):

In most cultures women have been the *custodians of biodiversity*... [which] is ecologically and culturally embedded. Diversity is reproduced and conserved through the reproduction and *conservation of culture*, in festivals and rituals which not only celebrate the renewal of life, but also provide a platform for subtle tests for seed selection and propagation.

In an essentialist and functionalist manner, Shiva further contends: “when women conserve seed, they conserve biodiversity and therefore conserve balance and harmony.” (Shiva 1993:168-169) There are several problems with this kind of generalizations about women-nature relationship. First, Shiva considers women as a homogenous category; she does not pay attention to caste and class dynamics in women-nature relationship. Particularly, in the Indian context, women of *dalitbahujan* and *adivasi* social categories constitute a major portion of the total agricultural labour force (Da Corta and Venkateswarlu 1999). Predominantly, women belonging to these subaltern sections engage with nature everyday as part of the gendered division of labour in a household environment. Indeed, they are the “custodians of biodiversity.”

On Shiva's suggestion for the "conservation of culture," whose culture has to be conserved in order to preserve biodiversity? For example, in India, whether dominant *brahmanical*<sup>8</sup> culture or subaltern *dalitbahujan* culture has to be conserved. I would argue that the conservation of dominant *brahmanical* culture will not help the conservation of biodiversity because *brahmanical* culture appreciates the ideological and aesthetic dimensions of *prakriti* (or nature), but not its materialist dimension. *Brahmanical* culture does not value labour interactions with land or nature, and labels *dalits*, who work with soil and nature every day, as "untouchables." She does not explain why and how do women have special relationship with nature? Is it women's innate nature to conserve and celebrate biodiversity, or protect the environment in which they live? Or, is it because of socio-cultural conditions that shape the relationship between men, women and nature? Neither Shiva, nor her intellectual collaborators in eco-feminist perspective, consider these questions in the critique. Contrary to the populist and spiritualist notions of eco-feminism, feminist environmentalists argue that "women's and men's relationship with nature needs to be understood as rooted in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment." (Agarwal 1992:126; see Seager 2003) Feminist environmentalist Bina Agarwal further argues that:

The link between women and the environment can be seen as structured by a given gender and class (/caste/race) organization of production, reproduction, and distribution. Ideological constructions such as of gender, of nature, and of the relationship between the two, may be seen as (interactively) a part of this structuring but not the whole of it.

(Agarwal 1992: 127)

In seed saving activity, except the collection of seed, all other seed activities take place in the domestic sphere of production, where women remain responsible for activities such as cleaning, nurturing and cooking. In my field research as part of another study (Kumbamu 2010a) in Kadavendi village, Warangal district, when I ask farmers how and why women possessed special knowledge about seed, the most common response was that protecting seed was an important female responsibility because it consisted of female activities such as cleaning and caring. Moreover, men were always busy with other on-farm activities (such as ploughing, land development and watering crops) as well as off-farm ones, such as going to the market. Thus, the patriarchal relations of production reproduced the gendered division of labour in household and agricultural activities. But the interesting point to note is that the gender division is not just of labour but also of knowledge. Hence, women possessed the multigenerational knowledge of seed, which provided them with intra-household bargaining power and social recognition as custodians and providers of local seed. But, since 'women' is not a homogeneous category, the immediate question that follows is: Which women?

In Kadavendi, when I ask this question the majority of male and female members of farm households replied that the women of *dalitbahujan* castes possess more knowledge about seeds and agriculture. A female farmer even sarcastically questions: "What upper caste women know about seeds? They don't know anything about seeds and agricultural activities. They would know if they ever go and work in the field." But, another female

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<sup>8</sup> *Brahmin* is a priest caste group, which stands at the apex of the hierarchal caste system. They keep their traditional authority by imposing dominant cultural values on the rest of society in order to keep hierarchy and inequality intact. Critical *dalitbahujan* scholars consider *brahmanical* culture a culture of domination and exploitation (See, for example, Ilaiah 2005).

member of *dalit* household disputes this and says: “it’s not the question of caste but women who work on the field everyday and who deeply involve in agriculture know more about seed development and preservation.” However, since the introduction of hybrid seed and the rise of production for the market, farmers tend to buy the seed from the market for every season. With the commodification of seed, women’s role as the protector of seed has diminished and their knowledge about seed has become obsolete. Examining market–nature relations, social historian Karl Polanyi wrote that “land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man's institutions. To isolate it and form a market out of it was perhaps the weirdest of all undertakings of our ancestors.” (Polanyi 1957:178) This is doubly true to all elements of nature, including seeds. To counter the “weirdest” phenomenon of seed commodification, the DDS *sangham* network has been consciously working to decommodify seeds and to keep them as a precious bounty of nature for a sustainable future through community-owned and managed seed banks. To encourage farmers to conserve traditional varieties, since 1999, the *sangham* network has been annually organizing a month-long cultural campaign called the Mobile Biodiversity Festival (*paatha pantala jaathara* / traditional crops festival), which begins on the local harvest festival of *Sankranthi* (usually 14 January) and ends on 12 or 13 February. Emphasizing the importance of culture and rituals in farming and biodiversity conservation, Satheesh says:

We see that especially farming cannot be divorced from rituals and culture. If you do that, then farming becomes a mechanical activity and then it loses the value base that it has and you cannot nurture the earth as such. Therefore, it’s important that we continue to have rituals and festivals and other kind of manifestations of that relationship without having to particularly identify ourselves with any religion. For example, in our mobile biodiversity festival, we have replaced all Gods and Goddesses with seed. For us, seed is a God in that festival. So for the first time, all communities have come together in the worship of seed. That’s a very important thing for us. When that moves it stands in front of all churches, masjids and temples and all castes support it... none of the things that we’re doing in terms of culture has reproduced the old structures and the old oppression. So we think that without having to be pompous and without having to claim too much, these women may be creating a new society, where culture has a place and culture doesn’t have to represent a stratified society.

(Interview with Satheesh in Pastapur, 13 December 2011).

Since 1998, hundreds of women participated in the Mobile Biodiversity Festival every year and talked to about 150,000 farmers about the importance of biodiversity and the methods of conservation in the region. Within the first two years itself, through this program the *sangham* women recovered 50 traditional crop varieties and established community seed banks in 30 villages. As Sahteesh observes, “we see an amazingly thing among these women: a complete absence of helplessness. They have all the seeds that they need, they have all the inputs into their farming whether it is farmland manure, whether it is vermicompost, whether it is composted manure. So they are independent of all outside inputs.” (Interview with Satheesh in Pastapur on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011) Every village has its own seed bank managed by one of the women selected by the *sangham*. In recent years, even the seed banks have become redundant as every woman started saving seeds themselves. Thus every woman became a seed bank herself. As a community, they achieved seed sovereignty. Moreover, the DDS sees the conservation of biodiversity initiatives as a tool to reproduce local knowledge systems, to reconstruct

social identity and power of dalit women, and to reconnect people with land and nature. In response to the appeal of the DDS, considering the Zaheerabad region as a “treasure house of biodiversity,” the National Biodiversity Board Committee visited the *sangham* villages in 2010, and agreed to declare the region as an agro-biodiversity heritage site as per the guidelines of Section 37 SC of the *Biological Diversity Act 2002*<sup>9</sup>. Convinced by the DDS efforts, the Medak district administration has decided to initiate the “Medak for Millets” program, and promised to give 10,000 hectares of land to the *sangham* women to collectively manage and produce millets on large scale.

### **Cooperatives, Community Media, and Community Leaders**

When the structural adjustment policies were introduced into India in the early 1990s, the DDS has realized that whatever the *sangham* women have created in terms of autonomies will be sabotaged if they do not react defensively to the market forces. Then, in 1999, they established a credit and marketing cooperative, the Deccan Development Society Mutually Aided Credit Cooperative Society Ltd. They called this cooperative initiative “the market of the walkouts.” As Satheesh explains, “we don’t like the word ‘dropout.’ We haven’t dropped out of the system, but walked out of the system very consciously.” (Interview with Satheesh in Pastapur on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011). The cooperative has about 5000 shareholders now, all the members of the *sangham*. The main intention was to rescue the *sangham* members from the exploitative practices in the market place, and to provide them a fair price while selling their surplus produce and buying required farm inputs.

Seeing media as a handmaiden to the market, the DDS believes that it is essential to have an alternative media in the fight against the forces of neoliberal globalization, because public media space has been shrinking as big corporations are taking over media. Thus it became a necessity for them to create a space to propagate their politics of “defensive localization” (Escobar 2001) and “constructive resistance” (Routledge 1993) activities. In 2001, a team of 10 dalit women farmers trained in video production and formed a Community Media Trust (CMT). Over a six-year period, the CMT has produced 75 short films on various agricultural and rural issues such as biodiversity, local health care, women and agriculture, and genetically modified crops (For a detailed sociological analysis of the CMT, see, for example, Mookerjee 2009; Kumbamu 2009). Later, in 2008, on World Rural Women’s Day (October 15), they also launched a community radio, the DDS *sangham* radio, which is the first community radio owned, managed and operated by dalit women in the country. Every member of the *sangham* contributes about 5 rupees (about US 10 cents) every month, which is enough to sustain itself over a period of time. It completely rewrote the rules of the radio: All the experts who come to the radio are the local people, who have never gone to the school before, but have great expertise and knowledge in agriculture, natural resources, and water management. These are the “subaltern scientists” (Iliaiah 2009:25) whose knowledge has never been recognized by the capitalist, casteist and patriarchal systems. But, the DDS placed them in the centre of the knowledge production and reproduction processes.

For several years, decision making within the DDS was very centralized and top-down – a board consisting of urban-based development activists used to take all decisions. But, as the *sangham* network grew, they realized that the centralized decision making was unfair, unjust and unworkable to build sustainable autonomies. Then, they took initiatives to decentralize decision making mechanism by bringing in senior members of the staff on the board and creating a policy group with senior *sangham* members. Since

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<sup>9</sup> [www.ddsindia.com/www/pdf/BHS%20of%20ZHB%20A%20Profile.pdf](http://www.ddsindia.com/www/pdf/BHS%20of%20ZHB%20A%20Profile.pdf);  
[www.ddsindia.com/www/pdf/12%20MBF%20report.pdf](http://www.ddsindia.com/www/pdf/12%20MBF%20report.pdf), accessed on 1 September 2011.

then, the policy group has been working as an unofficial board of the DDS that work parallel to an official board. As Satheesh mentions that the unofficial board is there for practical purposes and the official board is there for legal purposes. The unofficial group sits in all meetings of various sub-groups or committees: health group, natural resources group, the staff council, and all other group meetings in the DDS. In all these meetings, they make appropriate suggestions and guide the *sangham* programs. While constantly reinforcing their decision-making capacities and building confidence levels, the DDS went a step further and formed various trusts with *sangham* members (such as food sovereignty trust, committee media trust, healer's trust) to make all the DDS *sangham* network decisions by themselves. Along with various alternative development activities, the DDS also formed conflict resolution committees in each village to handle issues related to violence against women. They also run community supported *balwadies* (kindergartens) in the *sangham* villages. Explaining the DDS understanding of capacity building and training, Satheesh says:

Actually we don't believe in the word 'training.' Training brings in a sense of arrogance. So mutual learning sessions and capacity sharing, these are the words we use. This constantly happens, basically for us training means exposure visits by other farmers and other groups. And a lot of our exposure visits happen when farmers sit down and talk to each other and learn from each other... Our seeds have travelled quite far and wide. And, every year at least 20 farmer groups come here and most of the time our people go to other places and hold discussions with those farmers. This is an ongoing activity, so we love to have a kind of a completely horizontal learning system among farmers. In any state sponsored training programs, a farmer trainer is always a man, and he always somebody who holds large holdings and who is quite systematic about the training module or other material. We believe in completely opposite: Our trainers are women, they belong to marginalized caste, and they don't have a kind of a systematic module to present. It comes in a kind of a cyclical way when you're talking, when you're discussing. So that happens, that continues to happen and that itself is a kind of, what shall I say, a transformation of the ideas, concepts and roles that farmers have to play.

(Interview with Satheesh in Pastapur, 13 December 2011)

The DDS is one of the key actors in the country who resisted the introduction of genetically modified crops. They played an important role in building discursive resistance and lobbying to influence state policies. On the issue of new technologies such genetically modified seeds, Satheesh says:

Firstly, if a technology is life destroying, we're against it. If a technology disempowers human beings, we're against it. And, of course, we're dead against any kind of monopolistic technology. Secondly, the word technology or science presupposes that the rural people have no science, no technology... our rural women and dalits have a technology of their own, they have a science of their own and this science must be respected. Dalit science reaffirms life and some of our [= so-called mainstream] technologies work against life and nature. If these issues are sorted out, then we have no opposition to technology *per se*.

(Interview with Satheesh in Pastapur, 13 December 2011)

Contrary to the neoliberal modernist view of agriculture that focuses only on growth and economic value, the *sangham* women farmers' holistic perspective incorporates socio-cultural and heritage values, ecological values, communal values, and the value of sustainability and wellbeing. Because of the holistic approach to agriculture, the *sangham* network area has been a *suicide free zone* in Telangana, which is a rare thing to happen. (For a detailed analysis of farmer suicides in Telangana and other parts of India, see, for example, Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice 2011.) The case study of the DDS also reaffirms that “‘greening’ the green revolution will not be sufficient to reduce hunger and poverty and conserve biodiversity. If the root causes of hunger, poverty, and inequity are not confronted head-on, tensions between socially equitable development and ecologically sound conservation are bound to accentuate.” (Altieri 2009:111)

Although all these alternative developmental activities of the DDS *sangham* network have been challenging the intrusion of the self-regulated market system into agriculture, it is difficult to imagine their functioning without the material support and intellectual guidance of urban-based professionals. Moreover, the dependency of the DDS on external (international as well as national) funding sources<sup>10</sup> to support the alternative community initiatives raises valid doubts about the sustainability of autonomous institutions that the *sangham* women have created. Although post-development organizations such as the DDS offer us a well-articulated critique of development, they do not offer alternative means for a systemic transformation. In fact, it is naïve to believe that building autonomous and subsistence communities alone would counter globalization process without militantly challenging political and economic forces that have vested interests in promoting the new “great transformation” and in perpetuating oppression and exploitation of subaltern peasantry. Moreover, the non-confrontational tactics and the non-party politics of the DDS have facilitated easy access to state institutions and national and international funding organizations. For instance, the DDS never challenged the unequal distribution of land in the region and the politico-economic power vested in landholdings. Instead, they opted for leasing in land from big land owners and fallow land in villages. This will be taken further in future research examining whether the activities of organizations such as the DDS pacify militant social mobilization in the region that have been demanding radical transformation in the social relations of production and distribution.

## Concluding remarks

In this paper, I examined the process and strategies of countermovements to the commodification of agriculture and food and its potential implications for the revitalization of sustainable rural communities. I also analyzed the role of post-developmental organizations in the creation of a constructive resistance against agricultural globalization and in the cultivation of ‘hope’ amidst agrarian distress. These organizations have adopted various strategies to build autonomous community-based institutions, to defend self-protective and subsistence farming communities, to mend the metabolic rift between nature and society, to promote the decommodification of nature, to revitalize local knowledge systems, and to re-reconstruct social fabric within communities.

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<sup>10</sup> The DDS receives funding from various international development agencies in Germany, Norway, Sweden, Canada, UK, the Netherlands and Switzerland, and also from various state and central government agencies. See [www.ddsindia.com/www/default.asp](http://www.ddsindia.com/www/default.asp), accessed 22 January 2010.

Environmental historian, Colin Duncan (1996:181-182) argues, and I agree, that “agriculture should be returned to its rightful, central place in agriculture, but on both a new ecological basis and a new socioeconomic basis. The institutionalization of ecologically sound agriculture will facilitate the return of agriculture to culture and of culture to agriculture.” But, this is a difficult political task in the current model of the corporate agri-food system and the political space of neoliberalism. Thus, to sustain agriculture and the farm community, it is important to build pressure on the state to reorient its policies towards revitalizing rural communities on sustainability principles and participate in political activities that challenge monopoly corporations, while building social economies.

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