

## Sowing Autonomy - Gender and seed politics in semi-arid India

by Carine Pionetti, IIED, September 2005

When reading this book, what appears to really stand out is just how complex and interconnected rural life really is in rural semi-arid India. There are so many factors intertwined in a delicate balance of culture, autonomy and food production within the communities described in this book. Yet these factors can easily be upset by the simplistic imposition, for example, of a new hybrid cash crop, with little thought for this extraordinary complexity and in particular with little regard to women. Women are so important to traditional agriculture, yet they are so readily ignored by those eager to drag these communities into a modern cash-economy. The impact on the communities has been profound.

The author, Carine Pionetti, has spent many years living and interacting with, and learning from, the communities of the Deccan Plateau of South India. The book is based on a participatory research study in eight villages from the Medak and Adilabad districts in Andhra Pradesh with a focus on seeds, crop diversity, woman and their ability to be autonomous. And although the complexity of the agricultural systems is striking, Pionetti manages to guide the reader through to its stark conclusion about the impact that industrialised agriculture is having on communities in Andhra Pradesh.

Localised seed systems on the Deccan Plateau coexist with the commercial seed system. But these commercial (invariably hybrid) seeds are being increasingly grown, supported by legislation and agricultural extension officers, as farmers (usually men) are enticed by the thought of increased cash income. These cash crops replace a diversity of local food crops which are usually grown by women. Local

seeds can be free, but cash crops need to be bought each year which leads farmers into a cycle of buying inputs for the hybrid crops, selling the crop to companies, buying food crops, and often indebtedness. Furthermore, these farmers also find themselves losing the ability to make autonomous decisions about the production and use of their land and crops. In particular women, associated with feeding the family, are also swallowed up into the cyclical cash-economy and lose virtually all their autonomy. The land also suffers from monocultures (much reduced mixed cropping), higher use of inputs, and sometimes a complete loss of local varieties of food crops and the knowledge that goes with them. Along with the local seed varieties, the whole local non-monetary economy is slowly destroyed.

In conclusion, the book provides details why localised, low-input and diversity-based farming is so important. This includes some guiding principles, such as the importance of keeping people within their communities rather than encouraging migration to cities, protection of the environment through low-input yet productive agriculture, increasing the local diversity of crops, maintaining the important non-monetary nature of low-agrarian economies, and supporting women's vital role in these communities. As seeds are so central to agriculture, the author brings out a number of other recommendations based on farmer-led participatory breeding and supporting local and diverse seed systems. Also, some recommendations are made on the legal aspects of seeds within India.

This is a wonderful book which can easily be read from cover to cover, yet still maintains on the

whole a certain rigorous quality and academic style providing full references, numerous images, tables and system flow charts. This review barely touches on all the issues which are brought up and analysed by the author and it is highly recommended as a source of information both on the extraordinary problems and benefits of the current agricultural systems and their interconnections, and also on the ability for this all to be destroyed by over-simplistic actions.

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