

ON P D S AND BIODIVERSITY

p v satheesh [april 14, 2002]

The Indian Public Distribution System is one of the largest pro poor affirmative action by the state anywhere in the world. It is commendable for the fact that it has successfully fought famine in this country as well as provided food security for millions of poor.

But its impact on the agrobiodiversity in India is an issue, which has not been adequately debated either in academic or in policy circles. This debate must begin now, before it is too late and the impact of PDS negatively impacts the agrobiodiversity so completely that we reach a point of no return.

The point for us to note is that the Public Distribution System, like the growth in food production, is fuelled only by two crops : rice and wheat. This phenomenon must be seen against the fact that over 65% of cultivated area in this country belong to dryland tracts where neither wheat nor rice is produced. These are the tracts that grow sorghum, pearl millet and a host of millets. They are also home to a wide-ranging agro biodiversity.

The government statistics point to the fact that over the last couple of decades the amount of cultivable fallows in the dry land belts has increased in almost direct proportion to the amount of rice supplied through the PDS system. The seven dryland states of AP, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu account for nearly 70% of the cultivable fallows in the country amounting to roughly 60 million hectares.

And these seven states receive upto 70 million tonnes of rice through PDS. Considering the fact that the present productivity levels of drylands in India are estimated at 0.9 tonnes, if the rice were to be replaced by sorghum [jowar], Pearl Millet [bajra], Finger Millet [ragi] and other millets all of which are *locally grown in complex diverse farming systems*, all the food needs of the local communities could be met easily. The greatest beneficiary of this system would be the local farming systems that could regenerate their lost biodiversity.

Therefore it must be recognised that one of the most important threats to agro biodiversity comes from the rice-wheat based PDS. Consequently a

strong recommendation in the SAP could be that PDS should be decentralised with local grain procurement and should be run on a multi-grain basis rather than on single grain [either wheat or rice] basis.

THE ACCOMPANYING ARTICLES SHOULD BE READ IN THIS LIGHT AND CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FOR DIFFERENT SITUATIONS.