

# *People in Conservation*

*Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood Security*



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## Opening Words

Multiple challenges beset Indian Agriculture. These include supply constraints, water scarcity, small landholdings, low per capita GDP and inadequate irrigation, public expenditure on R&D and protein quality. This of course raises issues of food security. But it will be a truism to say this is a part of an ongoing agrarian crisis that was kick-started around the time India decided to go neoliberal in the early nineties. In the almost three decades since then its most consistent and horrendous expression has been farm distress and the ensuing farmer suicides - estimates so far<sup>1</sup> vary from 2.5 to 3 lakh victims of agrarian policies that emerged out of a model of development designed to profit the few and deplete the many including ecosystems. The damage to land done through use of chemical pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, etc. need not even be mentioned in the cynical times of a post-truth world.

This prevails the world over. A decade ago the Scientific American carried an article by the title "Could Food Shortage Bring down Civilization".<sup>2</sup> This would have been a laughable suggestion a few decades ago, but not anymore considering the context of climate crisis. Around the same time, food riots spread through many countries in the global south as people struggled to obtain small portions of food from the rapidly shrinking supply. Worldwide, almost a billion plus people suffer from perpetual and severe hunger while more than two billion live in perennial food insecurity –living on few meals and often not knowing where their next meal will come from, even as television channels broadcast food programs highlighting the delights of multicultural cuisines which only a minority on the planet can afford.

The issue is systemic. The manner in which the economy functions- based on the predatory model of capitalism - ensures that the pursuit of profit results in:

- Disruption of soil nutrient cycle due to spread of capitalist agriculture
- Ecological damage due to chemical and fossil fuel intensive agricultural practices

- Consolidation of corporate control over input sector and farm practices overall owing to the increasing role of genetically modified (GM) seeds
- Farmers becoming laborers for agribusiness
- Mass migration of peasants from the countryside (depeasantization) and to urban slums, competing for the few jobs available.

All this has led to several ecological disasters. These include pollution of groundwater and surface water with nitrates, phosphates, pesticides; nutrient depletion on farms that raise crops and so on.

So what is to be done? Individuals and communities are responding in their own way- by adopting newer practices of agriculture such as agroecology, permaculture, etc. that are based on principles of ecological resilience, social justice, localization, etc. They are forming cooperatives, rekindling lost traditional practices like maintaining seed banks, conserving seed biodiversity, multi-cropping, etc. This issue of People in Conservation is dedicated to such people.

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1. The government has not released farmers' suicide data post-2015. Also see: <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/india-may-become-farmer-suicide-capital-agri-adviser-773068.html>

2. See [http://www.earth-policy.org/images/uploads/press\\_room/SciAm-final.pdf](http://www.earth-policy.org/images/uploads/press_room/SciAm-final.pdf)

# 1. News and Information

## Major steps needed to improve food security

India needs to take big initiatives to improve its food security as it faces supply constraints, water scarcity, small landholdings, low per capita GDP and inadequate irrigation, the Economic Survey said.

In addition to growth in agricultural output, allied sectors such as dairy, poultry, fishing and livestock also needed a boost, which would help increase rural prosperity in line with the government's aim to double farmers' income, it said.

India ranked 76th in 113 countries assessed by The Global Food Security Index (GFSI) last year, based on four parameters—affordability, availability, quality, safety.

"India's food security challenges lie in the areas of low GDP per capita, sufficiency of supply, public expenditure on R&D and protein quality" it said.

The survey said India needed to address these issues not just for food security, but welfare of rural India, where the majority of the people live. Farmers also need real-time data about weather conditions and prices of inputs and output to help them increase productivity and prosperity, it said. It said mobile phones had already helped farmers get useful information. "In the context of poor infrastructure, adoption of ICT in agriculture will promote market access, facilitate financial inclusion and contribute significantly to early warning signals that are critical for the development of smallholder community."

The survey said efficient use of water and fertilizers was necessary because many prevailing practices and schemes were contributing to water scarcity and wrong use of nutrients.

**Source:** <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/major-steps-needed-to-improve-food-security/articleshow/70082108.cms?from=mdr>

### India must be cautious about agri, food and marine imports from China amid Coronavirus Scare: Trade Experts

India should be cautious at ports about imports of agricultural, food and marine products from China amid outbreak of deadly corona virus in the neighboring country, trade experts say.

The experts said port authorities should follow properly all the protocols related with sanitary (related to animals) standards.

"As this deadly coronavirus is spreading at a fast pace, India should be cautious while importing agricultural, food and marine products from China," Professor at Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) Rakesh Mohan Joshi said.

Sharing similar views, Trade economist and Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Biswajit Dhar said this is an opportunity to upgrade infrastructure at ports on the back of spread of the virus.

"Sanitary standards should be followed and maintained properly," he said.

He added that although there is no fool-proof theory that this virus is spreading through non-living things, "we should not take any chance".

Dhar said the government should also provide protective gear or masks to workforce working at ports, particularly those handling agricultural, food and marine product consignments coming from China.

"This is also an opportunity for us to upgrade infrastructure at ports with regard to sanitary standards," he added.

China is a key trading partner of India. The bilateral trade between India and China has dipped to USD 87 billion in 2018-19 from USD 89.71 billion in 2017-18.

While India's exports stood at only USD 16.75 billion in 2018-19, imports aggregated at USD 70.31 billion. The trade deficit between the countries was USD 53.57 in 2018-19. India is pushing hard to increase its exports to bridge this ballooning trade gap. When asked whether India should put restrictions on imports of these items from China, another expert said this will not be "good idea", instead "we should take precautionary steps to deal with the situation and government departments should consult commerce ministry before considering any measure".

China has expressed hoped that India will not put trade restrictions and limit movement of people to the country in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic in its Hubei province.

The death toll in China because of the virus has gone up to 490, while the number of confirmed cases has touched 24,300.

The World Health Organization has declared a global health emergency after coronavirus cases were reported in several parts of the globe.

**Source:** <https://www.news18.com/news/business/india-must-be-cautious-about-agri-food-and-marine-imports-from-china-amid-coronavirus-scare-trade-experts-2489021.html>



## 2. Perspectives

### Nutrition and Food Security

#### The Challenge

With nearly 195 million undernourished people, India shares a quarter of the global hunger burden. Nearly 47 million, i.e. 4 out of 10 children in India are not meeting their full human potential because of chronic under nutrition or stunting. Stunting has consequences such as diminished learning capacity, poor school performance, reduced earnings and increased risks of chronic diseases. The impacts are multi-generational as malnourished girls and women often give birth to low birth-weight infants. There has also been an increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents in India, which has life-long consequences of non-communicable diseases in adulthood.

The government has large food security and anti-poverty programmes but there are critical gaps in terms of inclusion and exclusion errors. Women and girls are particularly disadvantaged. Despite the achievement of national food self-sufficiency, new challenges have emerged: Slowing agriculture growth, climate change, land degradation and shrinking bio-diversity. Large tracts of farmlands in India have become barren due to imbalanced fertilizer use and excessive use of a single fertilizer, urea.

#### Government of India Programmes and Initiatives

With a five-fold increase in food grain production from 50 million tonnes in 1950-51 to about 250 million tonnes in 2014-15, India has moved away from dependence on food aid to become a net food exporter. In 2016, the government launched a number of programmes to double farmers' incomes by 2022. These seek to remove bottlenecks for greater agricultural productivity, especially in rain-fed areas. They include: the National

Food Security Mission, Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), the Integrated Schemes on Oilseeds, Pulses, Palm oil and Maize (ISOPOM), Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, three-marketplace, as well as a massive irrigation and soil and water harvesting programme to increase the country's gross irrigated area from 90 million hectares to 103 million hectares by 2017.

The government has also taken significant steps to combat under- and mal-nutrition over the past two decades, such as through the introduction of mid-day meals at schools, anganwadi systems to provide rations to pregnant and lactating mothers, and subsidized grain for those living below the poverty line through a public distribution system. The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, aims to ensure food and nutrition security for the most vulnerable through its associated schemes and programmes, making access to food a legal right.

#### UN Support

To address the linked nutrition and livelihood challenges in India and to ensure that vulnerable groups are not left behind, the UN priority group partners with the government to scale-up nutrition services and improve feeding and caring practices in the home. It assists government efforts to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the safety nets under the NFSA, and work towards increasing farm incomes for small and marginal farming households. The group provides support the strengthening of agriculture and livelihood dimensions of anti-poverty programmes, particularly under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission.

In previous years, the group has collaborated with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to hold a national consultation on wheat flour fortification, and with the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India to organize a workshop on advocating for a national food fortification policy.

Led by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the members of the priority groups include the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and World Food Programme (WFP).

**Source:** <https://in.one.un.org/un-priority-areas-in-india/nutrition-and-food-security/>



## **Borrow, Save, Share: 3 Ways Seeds Can Democratize Our Food System**

Originally published by Yes Magazine authored by Neil Thapar.<sup>3</sup>

Our food system is broken and needs to be fixed, many say. But it isn't broken. In fact, I think it's working exactly how it was intended. The current food system, and the legal rules that govern it, have been built by and for only the largest producers, retailers, and manufacturers. The bigger the better, the logic goes, which is why our food economy is dominated by large, increasingly consolidated, vertically integrated corporations.

An especially consolidated sector of our food system is the seed economy; for example, just six companies control 63 percent of the commercial seed market. Because most of our food starts off as seed, instead of trying to fix a system that isn't intended to work for the vast majority of people, animals, or the planet, we should try to create our own.

If we want more equitable access to healthy, affordable food grown locally by small farmers who steward natural resources responsibly, this is exactly what we need to do. The task is tall, but so achievable, especially if we all commit to working together in the right direction. Here are three simple steps we can take to reintroduce democracy back into our seed system and into our neighborhoods.

### **1. Borrow**

If you haven't been to your local library recently, you might be surprised to find a seed library there. Across the United States, there are about 400 of these community-based seed sharing initiatives, which allow neighbors to share seeds with one another. It basically works like this: You borrow seeds, grow the plant, and harvest almost all of the fruit (which you eat!), and save and return some of the seeds back to the library, where others will repeat the process. Seed librarian extraordinaire Rebecca Newburn, cofounder of Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library, says it like this: "It's like checking out a book, except that you've added a chapter when you return it."

Seed libraries make seeds freely available to its members or the public, relying on reciprocity and a sense of interdependence to ensure that its stock is continually replenished. By treating seeds as a common resource to

be stewarded for the public benefit, libraries create what is called the seed commons.

The 'commons' reframes our role in relationship to seeds as that of caretakers instead of owners. While owners only have a responsibility to themselves, caretakers have a responsibility to the seeds and to the community that placed them under their care. By bringing seeds into the commons, we have the power to democratize access to, and control over, one of our basic necessities: food.

### **2. Save**

Seed saving is nothing new. If anything, it's likely one of the oldest continuous human traditions, going back some 10,000 years. Just in the last century or so, we as a society have lost—and been removed from—our connection to seed. In this time, seeds have been transformed from a common resource into a commodity, bought and sold, and owned by fewer and fewer companies.

But saving seed is not necessarily simple. That's why libraries exist as educational resources to help us rediscover the art and skill involved with it. Re-skilling ourselves means that we will be able to provide healthy foods to ourselves and our families, build community resilience in the face of climate change, and rediscover the cultural history and significance attached to the seeds we save.

In practice, it also means growing food for ourselves and our communities. The more food we grow ourselves, the less we rely on a global food system that prioritizes profit over environmental, human, or animal welfare. It also means that we are buying and selling food locally, circulating our dollars in our communities, and generating local wealth. Seed saving is at once an act of resistance and renewal.

### **3. Share**

The success of our new food system relies equally on our independence from the current system as it does on our interdependence on each other. What that simply means is that we should share more and share more equitably. We should share the risk and the reward, the profits and the losses, the efforts and the outcomes. By sharing, we also begin to take part in an alternative economy, one not based on transacting money for goods or services, but on relationships, gift giving, and mutual aid. At a time when dollars in our economy are increasingly scarce and consolidated in the hands of the wealthy few, sharing gives us the means to provide for ourselves.

In particular, sharing seeds is an easy place to start, because seeds by their nature almost beg to be shared.

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3. This piece was written in the context of the USA but there is much we can learn from it to implement in India.

One tomato plant might produce upwards of 500 seeds, which, in theory, could be planted in 500 different gardens the next season. Now, imagine that 100 households grow five crops each to share their seeds. It's not difficult to picture the multiplying effect community-based seed sharing could have on the total amount of local food production!

Yet, no good deed goes unpunished. Right now, seed libraries across the country are struggling to protect their ability to facilitate local sharing. In partnership with others, Sustainable Economies Law Center, where I work, has been leading a campaign to raise public awareness of this struggle and to advocate on behalf of seed sharing organizations. You can learn more about it at our Save Seed Sharing website.

Creating a true bottom-up democracy means that we need to envision democracy not just in our government but in all aspects of our lives. Civic engagement is not just about choosing who to vote for—it's also about choosing how and where to spend a dollar. Seed libraries offer us an opportunity to become more civically engaged by reintroducing democracy into the food economy, reclaiming the seed commons, and empowering communities to begin creating their own local food systems.

Neil Thapar wrote this article for YES! Magazine. Neil is a staff attorney at Sustainable Economies Law Center and leads its Food and Farmland programs. He is passionate about building collective power to recreate healthy, just, and resilient food systems. Follow him on Twitter@NeilThapar.

**Source:** <https://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/borrow-save-share-seeds/>



### 3. Events

#### Mobile Biodiversity Festival ... dalit women's unique 20-year initiative

**PRESS RELEASE (by Deccan Development Society)**

February 15, 2020

The Two decadal Mobile Biodiversity Festival (MBF) closing ceremonies, which were held at Machunur, Jharasangam on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2020, ended with the momentous release of the Zaheerabad Agenda. From its inception, the Mobile biodiversity festival has given rise to the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the government of India and, marking its 20<sup>th</sup> year of life, it came up with the Zaheerabad Agenda, a document which discusses the local solutions for global problems and climate change.

With the 20 years of its journey, the MBF has been marked as the longest community led cultural campaign in the country. The festival which has its soul in the cultural roots of the region started with two songs ; one by the older generation another by the younger generation of sangham women. While the old sang the *song of hope* which is about continuing their distinct biodiverse cropping by their next generations, the young expressed how they have accomplished the hope their mothers by taking into their hands the responsibility of continuing their traditional agriculture, keeping the seeds and securing their communities and wildlife with food, nutrition and safe environment for their families.

The biodiverse farmer Smt. Annapurna speaking, 'there are so many advantages with the biodiverse cropping as some crops give manure, some are useful for the roots, some come for food, some for food and other for our cattle. We should grow multiple crops to ensure every life is sustained. We should continue to grow and save seeds for the coming generations. They also become food for birds. My husband says, we should feel good that we are feeding the birds and wildlife because they bring peace to our homes.

Director of DDS, Mr. P V Satheesh spoke 'This year, we have an important reason to celebrate the festival. We received Equator for combating climate change with solutions which are local, environmental, sustainable and permanent solution. With this recognition, we wanted to once again remind ourselves of the very own solutions we have and the urgency to make them sustainable and to

combat Climate crisis, the DDS came up with Zaheerabad Agenda. The agenda of DDS is not of few people, but is the agenda of hundreds of farmers, agenda of this land and its heritage. Over 10000 people and 158 Sarpanchs of Zaheerabad region have endorsed it. This campaign

renewed our energy to continue to do what we have been doing. The Biodiversity Festival is part of this community based campaign to tackle Climate crisis with biodiverse farming.

Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari





Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari



Photo : Ashish Kothari

Ashish Kothari, Environmentalist & co-Founder, Kalpavriksh, Pune, recollecting his visit to the Biodiversity festival after twenty years, appreciated the DDS initiative on Zaheerabad Agenda release, where he mentioned that the document came from local ordinary people involved in doing extraordinary things. Speaking about several crisis such as Climate crisis, threat to biodiversity, inequality and politics of hatred, he mentioned that the people's traditional & cultural centered practices like DDS Sanghams would be the only future solution to all the above crises. He also stressed that while policies from top trying to divide the people and biodiversity, communities like DDS were trying to build connection between people

and diversity, culture and lives through these campaigns. All the women who are honored today are all artists, you are all farmers, scientists, doctors, which we normally think only cities would have. You are all everything rolled into one, that has inspired me all these years.

Rukmini Rao, Director, Gramya Resource Centre for Women, highlighted that the women in this region are relatively stronger especially because they are eating the traditional crops. Recognizing that it is women who take 70% of the land's responsibility, she suggested that women should be inherited the land and not men as always. Reminding that this Biodiversity festival is not just



a millets festival but also women's festival with which they should carry a responsibility by joining more women into their Sanghams and continue their farming.

Michel Pimbert, Director, Center for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University, U.K, talking about the relevance of Zaheerabad Agenda for climate crisis, he said how it offers answer for the growing temperatures in the regions of Antarctica and those regions of south Africa. Despite the gravity in the crisis, the governments have no answers and are undermining the impacts of climate change, denying climate change and discouraging protests that are talking about this. He also mentioned that the Agenda highlights the women's knowledge and also it is the bottom up process which doesn't involve market or state but the people. More interesting is to think about the processes, the system as a whole interconnected with the landscape, customary institutions, rituals and sacred practices which generate the social security. What is remarkable is that the Zaheerabad people's agenda is backed by government; 160 Sarpanchs. I really want to salute the support of the government. Local government can achieve a lot when they can support local communities in self organising in finding their solutions. It is important to note that partnerships between communities and government can find greater solutions and peace in the region. Zaheerabad agenda has broken new grounds in finding local solutions and it will travel beyond this region and inspire many others.

Hanumantha Rao, the Collector and District Magistrate, Sangareddy District, congratulating DDS on Zaheerabad Agenda release, he told that the Agenda came from the local people to tackle the present global crisis of climate change. Sarpanch is the ultimate representative of the people and hence receiving the acknowledgment of 160 Sarpanchs to your work is remarkable and inspiring. DDS has brought the district to the global map and the Zaheerabad agenda is the direction for the world, it's significant that it's a bottom up agenda unlike those which are developed in large cities. Marketing the food which you produce, is very critical and programmes such as beyond organic are the real marketing systems that we should promote. We have to grow forests and what woman like Algole Ratnamma has done is commendable in rising forests in the rocky lands.

Another issue is anemia can be tackled by promoting millets and conduct studies to prove and scale up the consumption of millets in Anganwadi centers. I am proud to represent the district which is home to DDS that has brought the district on to global map. I will also work and extend my complete support to take forward the Zaheerabad agenda.

Dr. Sanjay Marthur, Agenda is people's thought but the agenda needs organizational and institutional system to be realized into reality. And none other than Government officials like District Collector has the power to do this. And I as an academican who believe it am a request to the collector to support of district mechanism to take forward the Zaheerabad agenda.

**Source:** <https://ashishkothari51.blogspot.com/2020/02/mobile-biodiversity-festival-dalit.html>



## 4. Signs of Hope

### Kutch's Wagad or Kala Cotton: Back from the (almost dead)



Photo courtesy Khamir

Once upon a time, in the semi-arid plains of Kutch, grew plants that bore soft white tufts of indigenous, Wagad cotton. The cotton's softness was in contrast to its hardy nature—it required little water, no pesticide, and overall, very little care—perfect for the present-day situation of drought and water scarcity.

However, with the introduction of the long-staple variety of American cotton, indigenous or '*desi*' cotton varieties such as Wagad lost its popularity, until the point that it was *almost* lost. An initiative to revive this short-staple, indigenous variety of cotton—particularly when the charm of Bt-cotton is wearing off and water scarcity is becoming a stinging reality—is, however, slowly bearing fruit.

#### Shifting dynamics

Around the time of Indian Independence, the ratio of *desi* cotton to American cotton was 97:3. "Today," said V. N. Waghmare, director of the Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR), Nagpur, "the ratio has flipped. *Desi* cotton has reduced to just about 3 percent."

American cotton had a lot going in its favor—"the ball size is bigger and it is easier to pick," according to

Waghmare —while the *desi* variety has smaller ball size and harvesting was laborious.

"In the beginning, the fiber quality of *desi* cotton was also poor and it led to more research on American cotton," Waghmare said. "In 1971, the first hybrid cotton variety was released. It further led to a decrease in *desi* cotton area."

Kutch's Wagad cotton suffered the same fate. The lower yields, as compared to the newly introduced varieties, became an issue and as Mavjibhai Paddhar, a farmer and mill-owner in Kutch said, "When drip-irrigation and water from the Narmada became a reality, farmers turned to irrigated cotton varieties instead of the rain-fed Wagad."

Photo courtesy Khamir



*Kala cotton on the farm.*

Another reason for its diminishing demand in the market was that like most other *desi* varieties, Wagad cotton is a short-staple variety. Unlike the long-staple variety, this gives a coarse texture. Ironically, this very coarseness of the "people's cotton" that we were used to wearing earlier and was ideal for the country's weather conditions led to its downfall.

Shailesh Vyas of Satvik, an organization that works on organic farming, in fact, went on to say that "low-yield was not as much of an issue as its lowering significance was." "In 1987, we saw the worst drought—Bhuj received only 2 mm rainfall. Even then the production of Wagad cotton was 3.5 metric tonnes," he said, "But once its significance was lost, its price became stagnant. It was branded not-a-modern-day-cotton."

It is ironic that *desi* cotton, with its 5000-year heritage of producing the finest fabrics, even muslin, should have suddenly lost its significance. Meena Menon, journalist and co-author of the book, *A Frayed History: The Journey of Cotton in India* said that during the colonial rule,

the long-staple variety that produced finer cotton was introduced by the British.

"Mills were set up and long-staple cotton was encouraged so much so that farmers left food crops to grow cotton," she said.

From being spun into everyday wear, Wagad's significance was reduced to being used for making things like mattresses and bandages. "All of this effectively broke the unique value chain between *desi* cotton farmers, weavers, those doing natural dyeing, and the market," said Ghatit Lehru of Khamir, the NGO that pushed the revival process of Wagad cotton a decade back.

### **Not all hope is lost**

To be fair, Wagad was not completely lost in Kutch, although the downward spiral had been gaining pace. According to the CICR's Vision Cover 2050, the cotton area in Gujarat doubled to reach 3.03 million hectares in 2011, from 1.57 million hectares in 2000. "About 50 percent cotton area in Gujarat is irrigated," states the report. The rain-fed Wagad cotton has however continued to be grown in pockets of Rapar and Bhachau talukas of Kutch, mainly because "these areas suffer from water scarcity and irrigated farming has not yet reached them." Wagad requires less water, unlike Bt-cotton, and is resilient to pests and diseases. "It is diploid, unlike Bt-cotton that is tetraploid, which means that it doesn't yield to cross-pollination and is self-conserving," said Vyas from Satvik.

Wagad is typically sown in September and is harvested around February. About 2,500 farmers in Rapargrow Wagad cotton, said Devsi Parmar of the NGO SETU Abhiyan.

"Even then, the numbers are not as high as they used to be," Parmar, who is also a farmer, said. "About 20-25 years ago, 25,000 out of 50,000 farmers in around 20 villages of Rapar were growing Wagad cotton. Here, although Bt-cotton was not an issue because of the water problem, farmers started replacing Wagad cotton with crops like castor and cluster beans that fetched a good price in the market," he said.

Almost two decades back, Wagad cotton would fetch Rs 1300-1400 per 40 kgs (1 'mun'); it dipped to Rs 600-700 per 40 kg about ten years back.

No wonder then that farmers like Kalyanbhai Nathubhai of Rapar, who used to grow Wagad on 20 acres of his 35-acre agricultural land at one time, gradually decreased his *desi* cotton cultivation and replaced it with other more profitable crops like castor. Organizations like SETU tried

to arrest this trend by encouraging farmers to do mixed cropping—for example, Wagad cotton and castor, Moong and Bajra—to minimize losses. Land rotation—when one crop is grown one year and a different crop the next, is also practiced to retain soil vitality.

But the lowering demand in the market and poor price continued to beat upon the fate of Wagad cotton. A village called Bakhel in Rapar, for example, completely stopped growing this desi cotton, setting off alarm bells among organizations working on bringing back this indigenous cotton to Kutch.



Photo courtesy Khamir

*Sizing of Kala warp.*

It was the quintessential battle between the market forces; between demand and supply. To deal with this, parallel efforts by different organizations were underway. One of them was to get organic certification for this cotton, which many experts call 'by default organic' because farmers don't use any pesticide for it.

### **The path to revival**

"Getting an organic certification for Wagad cotton helped improve its stand in the market. This was in 2011-12 and it made a big difference in the way the market started viewing this Old World cotton," Parmar said. The change in the price went from Rs.700 per 40 kg to Rs.1500-1600. Vyas agreed that the certification helped Wagad cotton get the attention and importance it deserved. Satvik, in the meanwhile, was lobbying with different mills to use Wagad cotton in their cloth.

"We approached Arvind Mills in 2007-08 with Wagad cotton's unique feature of being organic, strong, and a little coarse. We worked together for three-four years," Vyas said, adding that this helped pass on the message that this Old World cotton can be used for modern day clothing.

"Unfortunately, the economic recession hit the organic market in Europe at this time and this affected us as well," he said.

Around the same time, the NGO Khamir was looking for alternatives to support small-scale weavers in Kutch who were reduced from around 2,000 in the mid-1990s to a mere 600-700, following rapid industrialization after the 2001 Kutch earthquake. The weavers could not cope with the changing market dynamics, and as Ghatit Lehu of Khamir said, they were looking for a local, natural fiber as an alternative to synthetic fiber.

"It so happened that Satvik approached us with Wagad cotton at this point. It was robust, local, and eco-friendly. We decided to make it a brand and promote it under the brand name, Kala cotton," Lehu said.

Wagad cotton was branded as "Kala cotton" in 2010-11. The name 'kala' means cotton pod — the core of the cotton.

Khamir's Kala Cotton Initiative saw other organizations, like SETU Abhiyan and others also join hands, thereby making it a collaborative effort towards a single aim of reviving indigenous cotton. Starting small, Khamir began working with 11 Kala cotton farmers and connected them to a small mill that is dedicated to this cotton.

Mavjibhai Paddhar, the owner of this mill, said, "The farmers send their harvest to us and we pay Rs.1500-1600 per 40 kg of Kala cotton."

"The rate for Bt-cotton is still higher—about Rs.2500 per 40 kg—and its production is about 1600 kg per acre of land. Kala cotton production is 20 mun (800 kg) per acre. But with water scarcity becoming a reality now, the production of Bt-cotton has gone down to 30-35 mun per acre; plus there's the cost of pesticides. Kala cotton has no production costs—it just needs rain at the beginning of sowing," the mill-owner added.

Bt-cotton, author Meena Menon said, has further added on the problem of secondary pests like white fly, further increasing the use of pesticides.

In its push for this Old World cotton, Khamir is also promoting hand-spinning and has brought in ginners, such that "the link that was broken—of farmers, ginners, spinners, weavers, and finally, the market—is slowly getting re-established."

The journey to this point, however, was not easy. Kala cotton's short staple-length makes it difficult to spin and weave and initially, Khamir and Satvik had to consult experts about developing a process to convert it into yarn. Convincing weavers was another challenge because it required working on a different loom set-up.





Raja Haja Vankar weaving Kala cotton.

After weeks and years of fine-tuning, Khamir finally launched its line of Kala cotton goods in 2010. Heading with its USP of sustainable fabric and fashion that is hand-woven and naturally dyed, Khamir also began associating with designers and found its first patron in Archana Shah of the brand, Bandhej.

"Initially we wanted to make it (Kala cotton fabric) very fine, but then we realized that its uniqueness lies in its natural form. So we decided to maintain the coarseness," Vyas said, explaining how, depending on the count of the thread, the fabric can be made into top-wear and bottom-wear, or upholstery.

More farmers are now associated with the Kala Cotton initiative and more than 250 weavers are working as part of it. "The system is now in place," he said.

These efforts, said CICR's Waghmare, are in the right direction. CICR's Vision Cover 2050 report says, "By 2050 it is possible that desi cotton species *Gossypium arboreum* could replace a majority of the area that is currently under American cotton species *G. hirsutum*, in light of climate change-related weather vagaries and focused systematic breeding efforts for fiber quality improvement of desi cotton."

"This year we released one variety of desi cotton which yielded 40 quintals of cotton," Waghmare said. As for the farmers on the ground, the tide is slowly turning. "We have seen what too much pesticide has done to the land of our neighbors like Punjab," Mavjibhai said, "We don't want our soil, our land to die."

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**Source:** <http://vikalpsangam.org/article/kala-cotton-again/#.XljRpSEzbIU>



## International

### Between city and country: domestic workers building food sovereignty

Written by Karen Pomier, Tanya Kerssen

In Latin America and the Caribbean, domestic work takes up 18% of the female labor force. Migrating from rural areas to work in the city, many maintain both rural and urban identities. With strong connections to their family's farm on one hand, and playing a key role in buying and preparing food in urban households on the other, they occupy a strategic position within food systems. In Bolivia, increasingly well-organised unions of domestic workers are using this space to both empower their members and educate urban consumers about indigenous foods, healthy diets, agroecology, and the importance of supporting the small farm economy.



Photo: SITRAHO-SP

Like many countries of the global South, Bolivia has experienced large waves of internal migration in the past few decades – especially from rural farming areas to urban areas such as the capital, La Paz. They are keenly aware of the need for urban, worker and consumer solidarity with rural producers.

The causes of rural out migration include neo-liberal policies that undermine the price of peasant-produced crops, and climate change, which makes agricultural production increasingly uncertain. As a result, many Bolivian women from farming households find themselves forced to move to cities in search of work – often before the age of 15, with little formal education, and many from indigenous backgrounds. Indeed, while rural out migration is typically portrayed as male, the 'feminization' of migration is increasingly recognized. In the worst cases, these vulnerable young women become victims of human trafficking. Others end up working in private homes as domestic employees charged

with cleaning, preparing meals, and providing child and elder care. Working conditions for domestic workers vary widely, from near-slavery to relatively dignified jobs. But in general, this sector, which comprises an estimated 72,000 workers, 97% of whom are women, has languished in the shadows.

Despite the challenges of organising often fragmented and isolated domestic workers, remarkable progress has been made in forming unions to defend their rights. In 1993, the National Federation of Domestic Workers' Unions (FENATRAHOB) was founded, which now comprises 13 unions from Bolivia's nine departments. The unions work to defend domestic workers' and women's rights, and provide education and resources to their members. They also work to build the self-esteem and cultural identity of their members, most with roots in rural areas, by strengthening links between the countryside and the city.

### **Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty**

In 2009, the domestic workers' union of La Paz, SITRAHO (Sindicato de Trabajadoras del Hogar), launched the Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty project, with the goal of providing members a political education in food sovereignty, and increasing the direct marketing of healthy, ecologically produced food.

With support from the Inter church Cooperative for Development Cooperation (ICCO), SITRAHO opened its Practical School for Women Domestic Workers (Escuela Integral Práctica de Mujeres), which carries out programmes focused on leadership skills, financial management, and entrepreneurship. Among these, the Programme in Gastronomy and Food Sovereignty provides training to the union's 2000 members in culinary arts, food safety, and other practical food management skills, together with a political education in the principles of food sovereignty. The curriculum focuses on the use of local products, procuring ingredients from family farmers' organizations, and revaluing indigenous foods. These principles are then applied in the homes where SITRAHO members work, thus spreading the values of food sovereignty to middle and upper class families.

The programme also runs its own lunch counter selling healthy, ecological, locally sourced, and affordable dishes with a focus on consumer education. Most of the consumers are working people from the San Pedro neighborhood, where the restaurant is located, with the profits used to support unemployed or elderly union members.



Photo: SITRAHO-SP

*The practical school for domestic workers is transformed into a restaurant during lunch hours.*

### **Rural and indigenous identity**

Many domestic workers remain closely connected to their rural villages, with family members still engaged in farming activities. They are keenly aware of the difficulties farmers face, and of the need for urban, worker, and consumer solidarity with rural producers. Rosalía Lazo, who came to La Paz from the rural province of Omasuyos at the age of 14, comments, "since we started in 2009 I've heard from a lot of peasants and indigenous farmers and this makes me remember my childhood and think of my parents who still work in the fields."

Many domestic workers are from Quechua or Aymara indigenous cultures and are familiar with native indigenous foods such as quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa*), cañahua (*Chenopodium pallidicaule*), açai (*Euterpe oleracea*) and muña (*Minthostachys mollis*). These foods are often unknown to urban residents, and are not found in supermarkets that primarily sell imported products and processed foods with homogeneous tastes and textures. Through the Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty project, not only do domestic workers value foods from their own food culture, they also introduce these foods to their employers.

Domestic workers are generally responsible for making all household food purchases and for preparing three meals per day. This gives them tremendous influence over families' food choices, what kind of food system

they support, and whether they promote corporate value-chains or the peasant economy. Rosalía comments, "I know farming is hard work and that people in the countryside need support. My mother still wakes up very early each morning to look after her sheep, and frost or hail sometimes damage her crops. Consumers don't value ecologically produced products, preferring instead to buy imported produce. But in my last job, I would buy cañahua for the kids. It was hard because they preferred to eat junk food, but I would say to them, don't you want to grow up to be big and strong? And they then would eat it! Nothing is impossible when you believe in what you do."

### **Alliances with family farmers**

Over the past few years, SITRAHO has formed partnerships with important food advocacy groups, small businesses, and producers' organizations including the Association of Organic Producers of Bolivia (AOPEB); the Coordination of Peasant Economic Organizations (CIOEC); Fundación Sartawi which promotes sustainable agriculture in the municipality of Calamarca (south of La Paz); Madre Tierra, a chain of organic food stores in La Paz; and Slow Food Bolivia. SITRAHO has made a commitment to source food from these small farmer organizations and local businesses to strengthen the local food economy and support small scale farmers.

In October 2014, SITRAHO co-organised La Paz's first Ethical Food Fair (Festival de Comida Consciente). The women of SITRAHO were in charge of preparing all of the dishes offered at the fair, with an explicit commitment to educating people about non-GMO and ecologically produced ingredients sourced from local farmers' organizations. Piero Meda, a farmer from Calamarca said, "We work closely with the union of domestic workers to bring healthy food directly to consumers."

SITRAHO's partnerships go well beyond food sourcing, consumer education, and helping to create local markets for small farmers. They also translate into political alliances with farmers on important issues of agricultural policy. For instance, SITRAHO is an active member of the Bolivian Consumers' Collective, a broad-based coalition of workers, activists, and consumer groups, which recently issued a declaration condemning the government's support of transgenic crops and industrial agriculture.

### **Looking ahead**

SITRAHO's Domestic Workers in Search of Dignity and Food Sovereignty project is a powerful example of collective efforts to repair the social, economic, and ecological damage caused by rural outmigration. Such rural-urban alliances are critical to supporting declining

peasant economies and to building food sovereignty in the city and the countryside.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges faced by the union so far is the history of trauma of many of its members. Many domestic workers have been victims of trafficking, child labor, and abuse, experiences that often manifest as internalized oppression. Whereas many domestic workers feel a strong connection to their rural roots, others aspire to the urban, consumerist values of their employers. They have often been subjected to intense racism and may reject indigenous foods as shopping at the supermarket or buying imported food can symbolize status and acceptance.

Thus, building food sovereignty requires tireless, ongoing work to dismantle racism, sexism, and classism; recover rural identities; and construct class-based alliances that link workers and peasants, producers and consumers, in a collective struggle. These lessons from Bolivian domestic workers can be applied much more broadly, to efforts around the world, to create community-based food systems rooted in justice, sustainability, health, and culture.

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