

From Food-provider (annadaata) to Self-killer (aatma hatya):

The Indian Farmer through the Ages.

Paper for the Conference titled,

“Who is a farmer? Regional Identity and Rural Culture.”

Agricultural History Society, Humanities and Social Sciences Online

(<https://networks.h-net.org/>)

Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. June 8-10, 2017.

Abstract.

The paper titled, “**From Food-Provider to Self-killer: the Indian Farmer through the ages**” tracks the evolution and transformation of the farmers in India through the ages to contemporary times. The paper describes how his position from being an “anna-daata” (food provider), a position of prosperity and dignity, has declined to a beggar/receiver of food and farm subsidies, and how thousands of farmers have committed suicides due to chronic indebtedness in India. It is a truism to say that it is on the shoulders of farmers and indigenous tribes that the edifice of modern industrial society has been built all over the world. Modern economic theory sees the farmer/ peasant as basically unskilled worker, and does not appreciate the enormous knowledge and experience gathered over several centuries on the basis of which the farmers not only carried out their day-to-day work, tending the land and crops, but also built a viable economy/society and a civilization.

The paper particularly focuses on the policies of the British Colonial government which impoverished the farmer, and its continuation in the post-Independent India in the name of “progress”, “modernity”, and “development”. Due to these policies the local population suffered droughts and famines, while the British treasury chests were filled with so called land revenues in cash. Unfortunately the political elite and the theorists of development in the post-Independence India, having been educated in the Western universities, have continued with the same theories. This paradigm of development has summarily led to the impoverishment of the farmer and has robbed him of a decent livelihood and dignity. Several struggles and protests by the peasants against the government policies happened all over India during the British period and they were crushed with ruthless state power. In the post-Independence period, Government has been responding in a piece meal manner, making minor and major concessions, but these have not made the farmer’s situation better; in fact it has become worse. The inherently divisive nature of the caste system as well as a cultural bias against physical work and manual skill have also worked against farmers movements becoming a strong force to reckon with. How should he redeem his prosperity and dignity? How do we assert the primacy of the primary sector? This is the current challenge before the farmer and his/her friends in India. This essay is divided into two parts: the historical part

based on existing studies and scholarship; and the contemporary part based on my own farming experience in a village in South India.

----------*-----*-----*

From Food-provider (annadaata) to Self-killer (aatmahatya)

The Indian farmer through the ages.

Uma Shankari 2017.

“The men who till and live are the real leaders, all others, his respectful followers.”-
Thirukkural. (around 400 AD)

“Howmuchevery you may spin and look around the world, ultimately the world has to depend on agriculture for sustaining life, although it is hard work”. –Thirukkural.

“Uttam Kheti- Agriculture is the highest,
Madhyam Baan - trading is mediocre,
Adham Chaakri - employment is the lowest,
Bheekh Nidhaan - begging is wretched.”
(A popular saying in different languages all over India)

The farmer is the only man in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways. J.F.Kennedy. ⁱ

Farmers in my village introduce themselves apologetically, much like the women who introduce themselves as “just housewives.” The most common complaint of the farmers in India these days is that the young farmers residing in villages and taking care of their farms can’t get a bride; even fellow farmers are not willing to give their daughters to sons of farmers! In one case a farmer was telling the marriage broker (one who runs a marriage bureau and arranges marriages) that he has 30 acres of mango garden; to which the broker replied, swinging his hand to the shape of an apple, “you may even have apple gardens (apples do not grow and are an expensive fruit in South India) but the bride’s father wants only a bridegroom with a job, any job.”

Introduction

Contemporary problems often trigger historical investigations, just as a person looks inward in times of difficulties, to understand and seek solutions to the problems. Having been a

farmer and having seen the incomes and status of farmers declining rapidly first hand in the last thirty years made me think, “was the farmer always like this?”

I must say when I read the above speech and quote from J.F. Kennedy I felt that was the root of the problem. Squeezed between natural calamities and market failures with little support from the government, the farmers in India are struggling to survive and live a life of dignity, with many ending their lives in suicides.

As a young adult I sometimes used to think that history is mythology built on an edifice of papers, pottery, metals and stones (!)- Texts, inscriptions, remains of pottery and metal ware. Why take it seriously? The fact is history lives in the present in the form of traditions, cultural mores, habits of thinking, and ritually frozen practices-in fact in the deep psyche of the people. This is where history and social anthropology meet. Having been trained in social anthropology, I have dared to undertake this exercise, although I have no training in historical methodology. I have also long been out of academia, having been a farmer since 30 odd years, and my knowledge of history is surely inadequate. The shortcomings therefore are entirely mine.

I have chosen to focus the search light on Southern India for the following reasons: India is a large country with many agro-ecological zones. The Southern parts of Indian sub-continent have historically been different both in agriculture and culture; in agriculture the crop mix and eating habits are different; in culture it has been a mix of the Vedic-Aryan and the Dravidian and Non-Aryan practices. The medieval period in the Northern India saw a tumultuous history of violent power struggles and cultural re-alignments between the Muslim rulers and the Hindu population; Southern India witnessed relatively a greater stability under an over-arching Hindu framework, despite the power struggles between the ruling kings and dynasties, and pockets of Muslim rule. In the light of these differences in this paper we shall discuss the farmer in the Southern India, particularly in the Tamil and surrounding region.

I myself have been farming in the area just bordering the north of the Tamil region, 50 kilo metres from the Tirupati Hills housing the famous and one of the richest temples in India. In fact traditional and sacred literature puts Tirupati as the northern boundary of Tamil Nadu. Both agricultural practices as well as cultural practices are often similar to Tamil Nadu, and both Tamil and Telugu are the spoken languages.

PART I

Transition from hunting/gathering to agriculture:

The farmer plays a card game with climate and nature. These are completely out of his control; it is these which play the biggest part in agriculture production and productivity. He has but a limited knowledge about them, but an ever evolving knowledge; with these and his efforts he has developed packages of practices – in tools, soil building, seed selection, irrigation, plant protection, harvesting and storage technology, etc. etc. suitable to his land/region.

In spite of this limited knowledge about and intervention into nature, agriculture proved to be a blessing compared to hunting and food gathering, making it possible to sustain larger populations; spread of iron and other metals greatly helped in advancing agriculture.

No wonder spread of agriculture resulted in stone age hunting-gathering tribes getting assimilated not only into agricultural economy but also into their cultural mores. The tribes which resisted full-fledged agriculture remained in the forests, dependent on forest produce, with rudimentary agriculture, but in active exchange with neighbouring agricultural communities, exchanging forest produce with agricultural produce.

Studies of Neolithic Age (2400 to 900 B.C.) in Southern India indicate that the earliest crops were locally domesticated, such as, mungbean (*Vigna radiata*), horsegram (*Macrotyloma uniflorum*), and two millets (*Brachiaria ramosa* and *Setaria verticillata*- *thinai and samai in Tamil; korralu and samalu in Telugu*). The Zebu cattle are said to have enjoyed a pre-eminent status as reflected in huge ash mounds made entirely of cattle dung, and rock art images. By the mid-third millennium BC, Southern Neolithic sites are said to have a mixed economy of pastoralism and indigenous crop cultivation (V..Rami Reddy 1985. ⁱⁱ Nicole Boivin , et al. 2007ⁱⁱⁱ)

Rice is relatively a relatively late crop to South India but by 1st millennium B.C. Rice was introduced from NE India around 1st millennium B.C. From then on rice became the most preferred cereal and irrigation facilities to grow rice were being constructed with great passion throughout the medieval period (10-18th Century A.D.) and right upto the modern period.

A wide variety of crops were already being grown in Neolithic age: rice, barley, wheat, a variety of millets (brown top, bristley fox tail, sawa, yellow fox tail, finger , pearl , kodo), pulses (pigeon pea, mung, horsegram, cow pea), oilseeds (sesame, linseed), vegetables (pumpkin, gourd, pepper, mango, plantain ,okra, coconut), spices(black pepper, ginger, cumin), cotton, flax, palm trees, tamarind). Animals known to them were cow, dog, horse, swine, sheep, cat, ass, and poultry.

Extension of rice cultivation, irrigation from perennial rivers through inundation canals, construction of reservoirs (tanks, irrigation channels, ponds), bullock traction, development of new tools, introduction of new crops characterized the Neolithic age in South India. Agricultural lands were divided into separate patches for cereals (rice, millets), legumes

(mung, urad, pigeon pea, etc.), oil crops-safflower, sesame, linseed, mustard. (Krishna, K.R. and Kathleen D. Morrison 2009).^{iv}

Character of society during the Neolithic period is not known to us except that it was a complex mix of permanent settlements as well as allowing for extensive mobility, engaged in hunting-gathering, as well as agriculture and pastoralism. However it may be guessed that the **wielders of weapons** against animals and other human predators of the hunting-gathering stage had now a major competitor in the **wielder of the plough**, the settled farmer; the latter may have gained as much prestige as the skilled hunter. Indeed, as we will see below, the farmer, as an organizer of agricultural production, did enjoy a great deal of prestige in the *Sangam* age which followed, but his status got compromised as the wielders of weapons went about establishing large states and the wielders of the plough became humble tax payers, however indispensable they were to the society.

Agriculture in the ancient *Sangam* age (300 B.C. to 300 A.D.) :

Sangam age is the period spanning about 600 years when a corpus of poetry was written in the Tamil language by poets and bards called "*Paananar*". These poems, written on palm leaves, discovered, and compiled into various anthologies by scholars in the 19th and 20th century, is known as "*Sangam literature*". *Sangam* poems are classified into "inner" (*agam*) and "outer" (*puram*) sections. The "inner" topics refer to personal or human aspects, such as love and intimate relationships. The "outer" topics discuss heroism, courage, ethics, benevolence, philanthropy, social life, and customs. The quotes in the beginning of the essay are from *Thirukkural*, composed by *Thiruvalluvar*, also belong to this age. *Thirukkural* is a compact didactic work of 1330 couplets, 10 couplets on one theme, classified into three sections: *arattup paal* (morality/duty), *porut paal* (material/economy) and *kaamattup paal* (love/desire). The couplets deal with mandatory ethics for individuals in society- kings and commoners. They are general enough to apply to any age/time. The couplets are widely quoted even today in Tamil Nadu.

Sangam literature mentions farmers, shepherds, hunters, fishermen, blacksmiths, weavers, carpenters, merchants, shippers and priests, *Brahmins*. Vedic-Aryan penetration was under way during this period as known in the myth of Agasthya, the sage who crossed the Vindhya and went right down to Kanyakumari, the southernmost area of Tamilnadu. Waves of *Brahmin* groups followed and were settled by the kings and chiefs in villages among the agricultural communities. The *Brahmins* of *Sangam* age brought with them the Vedic-Aryan beliefs, rituals and spiritual texts, such as *Dharma Sastras*, acted as advisors to the kings as scholars and philosophers. They also worked as priests, astrologers, ascetics, judges and ambassadors. But there does not seem to have been any animosity between the immigrant Northerners and the local communities. Nor was hierarchy prominent. *Varnasrama-jati* system was just taking roots, but not quite replacing the older *Sangam* culture and society. During the period of the Mauryas, especially during Ashoka's rule, Buddhism and Jainism also spread to South India with many archaeological sites being discovered. Overseas trade in the coastal areas was flourishing and the traders seem to have been much influenced by Jainism and Buddhism.

Sangam literature classifies the geography of the region into 5 eco-zones: *Kurinji*, the hills, *Mullai*, the pastoral, *Marudham*, the fertile alluvial valley and the delta, *Neythal*, the coastal, *Paalai*, the dry and drought prone. Fields were classified according to their suitability for agriculture. They were *Vanpulam* (hardland), *Menpulam* (fertile land), *Pinpulam* (dry land) and *Kalarnilam* or *Uvarnilam* (salty land). *Vanpulam* in Mullai and Kurinji regions did not yield rich produce, whereas in *Menpulam* the yield was very good. Dry crops were cultivated on *Pinpulam*, because of the limited irrigation facilities. The *Kalarnilam* (saline) was unfit for cultivation. Each of these 5 regions are said to have a characteristic occupational activity: hunting and gathering in *Kurinji*, pastoralism in *Mullai*, agriculture in *Marutham*, fishing-salt making in *Neytal*. Since *Palai* is unsuitable for any viable economic activity, people lived by cattle-lifting and way laying.

The *Marutham* (agricultural) regions had prosperous villages called “*Ur*” with peasants called “*Ulavar*” (ploughmen) and “*Vellaalar*” (masters of the soil”) with “*Kilavar*” (who were peasant-warrior chiefs), patronised by the king/chief (“*Vendan*” or “*Arasan*”). The *Kilavar* supported the *Vendan* in wars, by fighting along with the *Ventar* against the enemy, for which they received a share in the booty and were given grants of villages. Grants of villages were also made to “*Paanars*” (bards), *Brahmins* and *Maravar*(war like tribal bands). The poems also mention “*vinaiyor*”(workers) and “*kalamar*” (field labourers). (M.G.S. Narayanan. 2004: 237-260) ^v

The poems talk about the three kingdoms of South India- Chera, Chola, and Pandya- the *Muvendar* (the Tamil kingly trinity). There were minor kings and chieftains too, each ruling over a specified territory, engaging in constant skirmishes with neighbouring tribes and chiefs. The *Muvendar* - the Chera, Chola and Pandya kings were the prominent ruling groups, followed by *Velir* and *Kilar*, Chiefs ruling over smaller territories, mostly independent, but sometimes subordinate to the *Muvendar*. A pre-state polity is said to be the characteristic feature of *Sangam* period with inadequate stratified relations, lack of proper territorial sense, and lack of evidence of taxation and minimal trade in prestige goods. (Karashima, N.ed.2014. P. 53.)^{vi}

Much of the *Sangam* literature talks of continuous warfare between marauding tribes from the dry and drought prone regions and the warriors from the agriculturally settled villages, a pattern very common in history. Agricultural villages in the fertile valleys of the rivers Kaveri, Periyar and Vaigai were the targets for these marauders. Plunder and pillage were the goals. The *Maravars* descended on these villages for cattle raids, feasted on the cattle with liquor, and distributed the cattle among themselves. The persons who defended their villages against such raids and got killed were deified and *hero-stones* were installed to worship them in the outskirts of the villages. In time temples were erected for them and these became guardian deities of the village. Hundreds of hero-stones have been found in South India. It is interesting that the *Sangam* poems speak mostly of heroic deeds of warriors in battles, but equally also praise the peaceful activities of the peasants who led a life of hard work, but who also spent happy times singing and romancing, both during and after work in the fields. This tension between the farmers and the warriors continue till the medieval period. “A much advertised part of the expedition was the devastation of harvesting fields and the conversion

of well tended gardens into waste. Setting fire to the peasant settlements and letting loose elephants into the field are often mentioned by the poets as acts of valour to be cherished with pride.” (M.G.S. Narayanan 2004.p. 237-260) In return for protection against the marauders, the peasants in course of time seem to have consented to pay land revenue and allowed themselves to be subordinated. (M.G.S. Narayanan 2004.p. 237-260)

Post-Sangam period: (400-600AD.)

Not much is known about this period, as literary and inscriptional evidences are far and few. Period following the Satavahana in the Deccan parts of South India and the *Sangam* age in the Southern parts of South India witnessed “a lot of migration of ruling new lineages seeking new pastures” (Karashima 2014 P. 60.) Competition to occupy and control the fertile river valleys and delta of Narmada and other rivers in the western India, and Krishna-Godavari-Pennar- Kaveri in the eastern India, seem to have been the aim of the tribes with their warrior-leaders. A period known as *Kalabhra* period followed the *Sangam* age between 5th and 7th century AD. Throughout the *Sangam* and the post-*Sangam* period Jainism and Buddhism seem to have spread and flourished in the Tamil region of Southern India, competing with Brahmanism. This is probably the period when the “five epics” in Tamil were written, extolling Jainism and Buddhism. Eventually however, Vedic-Aryan-Brahmanism spread, with rulers granting and settling *Brahmins* in the villages and constructing temples dedicated to Vedic-Aryan Gods.

The previous local gods and goddesses worshipped in the five geographical regions of the *Sangam* period were given names of Vedic-Aryan Gods and Goddesses, and were thus fused into a unique brand. The *Varnasrama-jati* caste system was being superimposed on the older society (of warriors and peasants), with farmers being classified as *Sudra*, and the kings and chiefs being portrayed as descendents of mythical *Kshatriya* rulers, the traders being placed in the *Vaisya* category. However, unlike in the Northern India, the four Varna hierarchy was never strictly applied or followed, the basic distinction was between *Brahmins* and *Sudras*. The other important difference between North and South India was that the Vedic-Aryan-sacrificial mode of worship (*yagna*) gave way to temple centred worship (*puja*), incorporating the previous worship of local deities and hero stones into the *varnasrama* framework.

Early Medieval period (600 to 1300 A.D.):

The period saw extensive growth in agriculture and village settlements by clearing of forests by burning or by felling and by settling *Brahmins* in tax free villages. The period also saw a great activity in construction of irrigation facilities, in fact right upto the British colonial period.) Construction of irrigation facilities for the growth of agriculture, particularly rice cultivation to “transform ‘*samai*’ (millet) growing lands to rice growing lands” was considered a meritorious act. Reservoirs (*eri, kulam*), complete with sluices, spillways and field channels, were constructed; and irrigation channels from rivers (*vaaykkaal*) were dug. Such construction was sponsored by all kinds of social groups – kings, queens, chiefs, traders, dominant families, even courtesans. Management arrangements of these irrigation

facilities were well established. Tank-Committees called “*eri vaariyam*” are frequently mentioned in the inscriptions and these were apportioned a definite share in the village produce. Rice cultivation was promoted in the valleys and delta areas but millets continued to be important in the drier areas. Sugarcane, coconuts, green gram, plantain, betel leaves, areca nuts, pepper, turmeric, cumin, mustard, etc. are all mentioned in the inscriptions.

Construction of elaborate temples with huge structures in stone and mortar, architectural marvels, was another activity undertaken with great passion. The kings and chiefs constructed these temples, donated lands, and waived taxes on them. Other assets like land, sheep and gold for the maintenance of the temples were also donated by various categories of people, including peasants, merchants, queens and courtesans. Thousands of temples came to be constructed throughout the region, particularly for Shiva and Vishnu in their various forms, complete with consorts, sons and daughters, servants and saints, with icons and idols for all of them, along daily/annual worship services for each of them, all within a definite hierarchical framework. These temples supported agriculture, constructed water bodies of various sizes for various purposes, aggregated and redistributed not only definite “shares” (*panku*) of grain and food but also conferred specific honours and status to various categories of donors, temple functionaries and devotees (Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge 1976^{vii}). Construction of grand temples and irrigation facilities went hand in hand with the growth of powerful states such as the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Rashtrakutas, and later, the Chera-Chola-Pandya dynasties (Karashima 2014. p. 92-97).

With the establishment of several *Brahmin* settled tax free villages, some tension between the *Brahmin* and the *Sudra* peasant communities were not unknown, especially over the amount of taxes to be paid. Both the grain and food as well as honors received in temples were often contested by new entrants to the scene- new donors and new temple functionaries. The temples made adjustments by accommodating them with newer rituals and newer honors. On the whole there were no grand protests against the *Brahmins*, as the *Brahmin* villages were far and few in number, and the population of *Brahmins* miniscule, as compared to the non-*Brahmin* villages and non-*Brahmin* population. Instead of paying land revenue to the state the peasants paid to the *Brahmins* and temples in these villages. These in turn were redistributed locally by the temples to the donors, temple functionaries and devotees -local population in the form of honors, grain and food. The non-*Brahmin* castes like the Vellalar were a powerful people in the Non-*Brahmin* villages and they organised themselves both within the villages as council of elders as well as into pan- regional organizations called the “*nadu* and “*nattar*”. Burton Stein (1980)^{viii} calls it, the “*Brahmin- Peasant alliance*”.

Local skirmishes during the *Sangam* age gave place to a regular army and navy during the medieval period of Chola-Pandya rule. Army and Naval expeditions took place among the kings and chiefs and these expeditions were extolled in the inscriptions. But these expeditions did not so much result in annexation as in ritual recognition of the supremacy of the conqueror. Local rule and administration was largely left to the local rulers, except in the core areas.

A large state/kingdom with horizontal networks with many autonomous kings and rulers, the latter recognising supremacy of the conqueror in ritual terms was the norm. A vertically integrated feudal state, with officialdom with definite functions was found only in the core areas. Although an elaborate tax collection system with officialdom was created in the core areas, the exact amount of land revenue is not mentioned in the inscriptions. (Heitzman 1987^{ix}; Heesterman 1985^x). Trade flourished especially with overseas countries both in the western ocean as well as in the eastern ocean. How these military expeditions were financed is not very clear. Did the land revenue increase for the peasants? Did trade finance these expeditions? Booty through military expeditions and piracy is said to have played an important part in state finances.

The *Bhakti* (Devotion) movement led by the *Bhakti* saints-Nayanars and Alvars cemented the “*Brahmin- Peasant alliance*” by evolving a suitable version of Hinduism which integrated into it all the castes, even the untouchable castes to some extent. The *Bhakti* saints, who belonged to both higher and lower castes, emphasized equality of all in the eyes of God (transcendent-immanent God in various forms and manifestations) for the purpose of *Moksha* or final freedom (from cycles of re-births), while endorsing and keeping intact a *varnasrama-jati* structure not only in society but also within the temples. The *Bhakti* saints undertook pilgrimage tours of the whole of Tamil speaking region, visiting hundreds of temples and composing poems in praise of the specific deities localised in those temples, consciously spreading their version of *Bhakti*-Hinduism as against Jainism and Buddhism. They undertook to compose their poems in the Tamil language, as against Sanskrit language, and reached out to common people in these regions. Philosophical exercises came to be done in the Tamil language (Saiva Sidhdhantam) as well as in the Sanskrit language (Ramanuja, Madhavacharya) .

The picture one gets from inscriptions is one of expansion of agriculture and irrigation, and stability on the whole at the level of peasants and villages. Temple centred *Bhakti*-Hinduism, patronised by all sections of society rather than Vedic-Aryan- Sacrifice centred religion dominated by the *Brahmins* became popular in which all the castes and women participated on a day to day basis, each according to his/her position/status in the *varna-jati* hierarchy.

Later Medieval Period (1400 to 1700 AD)

This period in which the Vijayanagara kings and Bahmani Sultans competed with each other for control of South India in constant military expeditions saw tremendous increase in military expenditure. This period also witnesses much expansion of trade. Both military leaders as well as merchant leaders competed with the *Brahmins* and the agriculture based *Vellalars* for control of lands in the villages. Several land sales/transfers have been recorded in the inscriptions in which peasants sold their shares of village/agricultural lands to others, unlike the earlier period where such sales and transfers were rare. The Vijayanagara rulers, their chiefs and the merchants actively participated in building irrigation facilities, as much as they concentrated on trade, both internal and maritime. Maritime trade with the East Asian countries-Burma, Indonesia, Thailand, etc. and maritime trade with the West-Portuguese, Dutch, Middle East flourished. State revenue continued to come from agriculture but also

from trade. Temples continued to be patronised and the *Bhakti* version of *Varnasrama* hierarchy continued to be endorsed. An important feature of this period is the growth of right hand and left hand castes, the latter signifying merchant- artisan –urban caste conglomerations and the former signifying agriculture-village based caste conglomerations.

Both Vijayanagara and the Bahmani Sultans were defeated by Aurangzeb, but the Moguls could not establish their rule for long in the Southern India and the whole region splintered into smaller states- the Nayaks, Marathas, Travancore, the Nizams, etc. and in time went under the control of the British Colonialists. Unlike Northern India the Muslims did not rule decisively over South India and their influence on society and culture was limited.

- Historians are not agreed about the condition of the peasantry under the Vijayanagar rule, because most of the travellers had little knowledge about village life and, thus, spoke of it in very general terms. In general, it may be presumed that the economic life of the people remained more or less the same; their houses were mostly thatched with a small door; they generally went about barefooted and wore little above the waist.
- People of the upper classes sometimes wore costly shoes and a silk turban on their heads, but did not cover themselves above the waist. All classes of people were fond of ornaments, and wore them “in their ears, on their necks, on their arms, etc.”
- We have very little idea about the share of the produce the peasants were required to pay. According to an inscription, the rates of taxes were as follows:
 1. One-third of the produce of kuruvai (a type of rice) during winter.
 2. One-fourth of sesame, ragi, horsegram, etc.
 3. One-sixth of millet and other crops cultivated on dry land.

- Thus, the rate varied according to the type of crops, soil, method of irrigation, etc.
- In addition to the land-tax, there were various other taxes, such as property tax, tax on sale of produce, profession taxes, military contribution (in times of distress), tax on marriage, etc.
- The sixteenth century traveller, **Nikitin**, says: “The land is overstocked with people, but those in the country are very miserable while the nobles are extremely affluent and delight in luxury.” (Satish Chandra 2004.^{xi})

It is not clear whether peasants suffered higher taxation during the Chola-Pandya – Vijayanagara rule. The kings were expected to be generous and waive taxes, especially during drought periods. The elite were expected to encourage growth of agriculture by building irrigation facilities. This picture is very different from the picture of the peasants in North India as painted by scholars like Irfan Habib (2000, 2004.^{xii}) The peasants under the Mughal rule were said to be a miserable lot reeling under a heavy taxation of upto 50% percent of their produce. Mughals established a big officialdom with several levels of hierarchy, for taking care of military as well as administrative matters. These intermediaries are said to have squeezed the peasants dry through heavy taxation and extortion. In fact such

a misery fell on the peasants during the British rule in the Southern India. Northern Indian society and culture also went through far more turbulence than Southern India due to constant civil and military struggles as well as cultural re-alignments under the Mughals. An over-arching temple- centred *Bhakti*-Hinduism seems to have provided the socio-economic –political framework for the South Indian society.

Salient Features of Pre-British period: Before we go on to describing the changes brought about by the British, we need to consider a few important questions relating to agriculture and farmers here.

Who owned the territory? There has been an active debate in the historical literature on this question. Did the king own the land he conquered and ruled over? There is considerable ambivalence on this question. The Vedic-Aryan literature seems to suggest land, including agricultural land, pastures, forests and rivers and water bodies, belongs to no one; and different sections of society have limited ownership if not only usufructs rights over the land. The *Isavasya Upanishad* states, “God pervades the Universe; enjoy whatever is given to you; do not crave for others’ wealth.” The four *Varnas* were expected to play their roles, the *Brahmin* to recite the Veda and conduct Vedic sacrifices to gods, the *Kshatriya* to protect his subjects from harm, the *Vaisya* to create wealth by agriculture and other activities, the *Sudra* to work for the above three. The *Purusha Suktha* verse which says the *Brahmin* came from the mouth/head, the *Kshatriya* came from the shoulders/arms, the *Vaisya* came from the thighs/legs and the *Sudra* came from the legs/feet, did not say that the four *Varnas* were superior and inferior; but the hierarchy is implied.

The hierarchy not only got to be frozen into a hereditary system of status and material benefits over time, but all the ethnic groups which later joined or were conquered got fitted into the hierarchy as *jatis* (castes) according to their occupations. The *Varnasrama-jati* scheme did not end there; there was always, since the beginning of history, a class of people, called “*Panchama*” (the “fifth” people, as opposed to the four *Varnas*, mentioned above) who were treated as “untouchable” ; these came from some of the outlying tribal groups which were conquered and were made into bonded labour to work in the agricultural fields; they were forbidden to own lands and suffered various caste oppressions throughout history till the modern period, when untouchability has been legally abolished. They too got integrated into the caste system as mediators with the underworld- demons , ghosts and spirits; they perform ritual functions like grave digging, preparing the body for cremation, act as messengers at times of death, beat the drums during funerals, and so on. Throughout India they formed the bulk of agricultural workers, more so in the paddy growing areas, as paddy cultivation needs a large reserve of labour.

So the king de-jure did not own the land he ruled over, he only had the right over a certain share of the produce from the territory; he could not evict the users of the land as long as they worked the land and paid his share. *Artha Sastra* makes a distinction between state land and king’s personal estate. The crown land was cultivated by an official appointed by the king with labour of wage workers, slaves and convicts. The rest of the land was cultivated on 50% or 25% share basis. (Bhattacharya, Sibesh 2004^{xiii}.) . **De-facto however,**

he enjoyed tremendous power-- to settle people in waste/forest lands and to let them clear them for agriculture, grant lands within settled villages, to punish by eviction people who did not pay the taxes, and to punish people who defied the royal orders. But his actions could not be whimsical; they were to be according to the dharma, as defined in the *Sastras*, composed and interpreted by the *Brahmins*, and accepted in general by different sections of the society. According to the *Sastras* (scriptures), people could dethrone, abandon, and even murder a bad king, who was cruel, did not fulfil his duty of protecting his subjects and who was given to vices. (A.V. Balasubramaniam, etal.1988^{xiv}). In fact in Buddhism the *gahapati*, or the householder-tax payer was specifically recognised to be one of the seven “treasures” or “jewels” of sovereignty. ^{xv}

Different ethnic groups had their own local customs and the king had no right to impose his own law over customary law. Whimsical or cruel/ exploitative actions were resisted by the peasantry and other sections- they sought justice by appealing to the king and if they did not get justice to their satisfaction they could run away to the forests and live by clearing virgin lands; or escape to an enemy kingdom and seek refuge under the ruler of another kingdom. The king could not afford to lose such peasants as the main stay of the state was land revenue, trade being quite limited till the medieval period. This ambivalence imparted considerable dynamics and constant fluctuations in the status of both the rulers and the peasants. The latter could negotiate the taxes in times of distress, and the king was expected to be generous and kind.

Who owned the land within the village? Was it communally owned or individually owned? Typically, when the village community first comes into being, the first group of settlers divided the cleared land into definite “shares” among consanguine families for the purposes of land revenue/tax payment as well as for cultivation. A body of elders organized the allocation as well production. As early as the *Sangam* age in South India and the Buddhist age in North India an upper layer among the peasant families had come into being; they organized agriculture production through tenants, workers, and other service providers. They were answerable to the state for tax purposes. Under the control of these dominant families were the peasant families, each enjoying a share of the land for cultivation as well as were liable for the taxes to be paid. The families could transmit hereditarily the lands to their patrilineal/consanguinal successors. Initially the dominant families could re-allot the agricultural lands among the share holders once in few years according to the fertility of the soil and other considerations, but this practice in time froze into hereditary shares. In later times these shares were bought and sold, along with both lower tax and upper tax obligations. Till today the consanguinal families upto three generations are called (in Tamil) “*pangali*”, meaning shareholders.

The village always had a class of landless agricultural labourers from the untouchable castes, who were attached to the peasant families to provide labour on subsistence wages and food. A system of bonded labour with caste oppression characterised the relation between the owner- cultivators and the untouchable caste - agricultural workers. As the untouchable castes handled removal of dead cows and ate beef, (a forbidden food for the higher caste Hindus), they also skinned and cured leather for various purposes, especially for leather

buckets used for irrigation from wells, drums played during funerals, and foot wear. The village was also serviced by artisan castes and the service castes, whether they stayed physically within the village or not. Artisan castes as well as service castes were attached to the peasant families and they provided the services required – agricultural tools and implements, pots and pans, washing and laundry, toiletry, leather buckets, etc. in return for payments in grain. They enjoyed different degrees of freedom, according to their position in the caste hierarchy. Artisans as well as service providers, including untouchables also sometimes owned small pieces of land in return for their services.

Land Revenue/ Taxes were of two kinds: the “upper tax/share” (*mel varam*) and the “lower tax/share” (*kil varam*) . The upper tax/share was the share in the total village produce to be paid to the state through its agents; the lower tax/share is the share to be paid to the village servants – like iron smiths, carpenters, stone workers, potters, barber, washermen, water regulators, agricultural workers, grave diggers, priests, doctors, teachers, etc. The lower shares amounted to around 25% to 40% of the village produce. (Dharampal, 2015: p. 52-54^{xvi}) Each family had a defined share to pay to the upper as well as lower shares from their family produce. Thus there was co-existence of both communal and individual property; for tax purposes the village as a whole was assessed, and each shareholder paid his dues according to the land he cultivated; however, it was individual family’s responsibility to carry out cultivation, and land could be inherited by/among the patrilineal consanguines. This arrangement largely continued even during the Mughal period in North India and in the pre-British India in the Southern India.

In the later medieval period the rulers established a huge standing army as well as a big officialdom for tax collection. Military leaders were given grants of villages just as the *Brahmins* were during the earlier period. The exact share of the state in the village produce was not known, but it is estimated to be generally varying between one sixth to one fourth of the village produce after deducting the lower shares. The surname, “chowdhary” is a very common surname throughout India, which was actually a title for the tax collector, and the word literally meant “one fourth-er”. While the upper share came to be collected in cash during the later medieval period, the lower share to the village servants continued to be paid in kind.

Medieval states, particularly the Vijayanagara state expanded their taxation base by including a “protection tax” (*padikaval*) for the police, grazing tax, house tax, and taxes on commodities traded. Broad heads of taxes were: 1. Land tax 2. Tax on property 3. Commercial taxes 4. Profession taxes 5. Taxes on industries 6. Military contributions 7. Social and communal taxes 8. Judicial fines and such other income, and 9. Miscellaneous items of income. (Sanjeev Kumar Tandle, 2013^{xvii}) However relief was given to the cultivators in case of failure of monsoon, drought or certain other unforeseeable calamities. In spite of this, the taxes were quite heavy and there were cases where the people made representation or offered civil resistance which led to the reduction of the amount. Major portion of the state expenditure was on the maintenance of a large standing army. The next charge on the state exchequer was public endowments and charities. Large amounts were given for the maintenance of temples. The Vijayanagar rulers undertook the construction of

large irrigation and public works to increase the yield. It involved expenditure of considerable amount. Much money was spent on the up-keep of the king's household. ^{xviii}

Since the upper share was collected in cash, traders and trade routes became very important (Heesterman 1985) ; but the local economy probably remained largely untouched and at least 25% to 40% of the village produce was left to the local economy to be shared among the peasants and other service providers.

To summarise and conclude the Pre- British period, historically almost right from the beginning of agriculture, there has always been an upper caste/class of big well endowed farmers who did not work in the farm but organized the production in their farms through workers. eg. *gahapati* in the time of the Buddha (Uma Chakravarti: 2008^{xix}) or the *kilavar* in the *Sangam* age (M.G.S.Narayanan 2004). As states expanded there has also been a class of rentier-farmers who provided military and administrative services to the state who neither worked nor even organized production on the farm, but who were allotted land or/and a portion of land revenue by the state , and these people lived purely on rent from the land. But the majority of farmers seem to have been either owner-cultivators or/and workers in others farms.

The rural community was roughly divided into 5 categories: 1. Elite farmers, who owned definite “shares” in the village land (including forests, wastelands and water bodies) but did not themselves cultivate, but worked their land through tenants and workers; some of them doubled as tax collectors or assumed other governance functions on behalf of the state or assigned some duties towards military arm of the state. They were influential as they were close to the political power circles. 2. owner-cultivators who also owned “shares” in the village land, like the 1st category, but worked their land with family labour; 3. Tenants for the first category, who may or may not have owned “shares” in the village land, who had to pay rent to the first category; 4. Service castes-artisans, barbers, and others, who may have also owned some small pieces of land granted to them by the state, but whose main source of income was their professional services; these were attached to families from the above three categories and received definite shares in the village produce (different from shares in the land). 5. Landless agricultural workers who worked for wages, but some of whom may have also owned small pieces of land for their duties as village functionaries; they too received definite shares of the village produce for their work as village functionaries.

These categories were not mutually exclusive but over-lapping eg. an owner cultivator may take some land on lease from the elite farmers in addition to working on his own land and may also hire workers on wages. Tenants could be from either the second, fourth and fifth category. Service castes may have received donations of land for their services, and may lease them out to tenants. The 5th category may have owned a small piece of land as payment for their village duties eg. water regulator in paddy fields.

The first two categories had inheritable “shares” not only in the village arable lands but also on land kept for housing, forests, waste lands and water bodies; and they paid “upper” taxes to the state and “lower” taxes to an array of people who served them, including temples and

priests. The third category, the tenants paid a fixed amount (mutually agreed upon) to the first category of owners as well as to the service people, retaining the rest for himself/ family. The fourth and fifth categories received payments from the village produce in the form of definite “shares” in the “lower” taxes. Thus all the 5 categories had definite stakes in the form of “shares” in the village produce; the first two had “shares” in the land for which they had to pay upper and lower taxes to the state and the service families respectively, while the others had shares in the produce.

The five categories roughly corresponded to the *varna-jati* hierarchy; the elite farmers belonged to the upper castes; the tenants to the middle castes; the service people to the middle and lower castes; and the agricultural workers to the untouchable castes.

The British changed all this.

The British Period (1700 to 1947):

The British who came as traders who then became rulers changed the terms of discourse of Indian society in radical ways. Relationship between the state and the subjects, concepts of land ownership, and structure of village community, all underwent a radical change from what it was during the pre-British period, including the Mughal period. Let us take the changes one by one.

Impoverishment of India by colonial exploitation and oppression by the British from 1750 to 1947 is too well known to be repeated here. Excessive levels of taxation, huge tributes levelled on the native rulers euphemistically called Home Charges, forced cash crop cultivation, dumping of cheap imports, export of raw materials at cheap prices, expenditure on wars paid for from Indian money, development projects like railways paid for by Indian money, etc. marked colonial exploitation. Here we select a few important features which affected agriculture and the farmers in direct and indirect ways.

The most important change was that the British established exclusive land ownership. Individual property ownership did exist previously and land was mortgaged, sold and bought, but there was a crucial difference: “what was transacted was, however, not the exclusive, monopolistic land ownership but the exclusive right to one of the shares embedded in the transferred land. Many other shares were attached to the transferred land and assigned to people like washermen, carpenters, barbers, and others, and these continued to be distributed even after the land was transferred.” (Karashima ,N. 2014 P. 268)

Secondly there were many *inams/manyams* which were gifts of land by the state with reduced tax or without any tax, given to temples, priests, service castes, and others. “These lands did not seem to exclude the right of distribution of shares to others. The land ownership established under the colonial rule, however, was quite different from the ones described here. It was exclusive in the sense that it shut off all the shares previously distributed to others. In other words it removed all the layers of ownership except that of the landholder” ...“Though the units for taxation differed , both the *raiayatwari* and the *zamindari* settlements fell within the same category in the sense that both selected a single layer of ownership by

excluding others.” Every holding was surveyed and recorded and the landholder was issued a patta in which the survey numbers, their extents, and tax assessments and their totals were recorded. (Karashima, N. 2014. P. 268)

The peasantry was already suffering from exploitation and oppression by the intermediaries (tax collectors, money lenders) and the state; this continued and even became worse as the colonial state tightened tax collections and made the single layer of ownership (as mentioned above) responsible for tax payments.

The unoccupied lands in the village were now understood to be the property of the state/government - wastelands, grazing lands, village forests, water bodies, etc. The concept of “pre-eminent domain” of the state was firmly established, where previously there was considerable ambivalence on the question of who owned the land. Previously the whole of the village land was under the control of a class of people assumed to be dependents of the original ancestors. Even when the lands changed hands through transfers through sale or mortgages, the new owners belonged to the class of village- owners with definite shares in the whole of the village lands. These shares were called “*kani*” , “*panku*” and the persons who held them were called “*kaniatchikaaran*” , “*pangali*”. The British chose the term “*mirasi*” , a Persian word and the persons came to be called “*mirasidar*”. These people actually controlled the activities of the local producers. Non-*mirasidars* called “*payakaris*” were granted lands in the villages by the British government to increase land revenue for the government. Thus the *kil varam* or the lower shares which amounted from 25 to 40% of the village produce became non-obligatory. The government now directly took the revenue from the whole of the village produce. The British assumed that the Moguls were assessing land tax at 50% and went about collecting it ruthlessly. If the land holder did not pay the tax, his land was taken away by the government, and another person was assigned the land. (Karashima, N. 2014. P. 266-273.).

The village economy suffered as village servants had no rights over the village produce, and land owners had no obligations to village servants, except to pay for their services on a contract basis by the individual land holder families. The village community also stopped honoring the maintenance obligations towards irrigation facilities and other village commons. Irrigation tanks suffered severely due to lack of maintenance. Those who lost their customary rights became landless labourers. They had to take to reclamation of virgin lands.

Cash crops, like cotton, jute, indigo, opium- were not only introduced but peasants were forced to grow them, often just to pay the high levels of land revenue which had to be paid in cash. Cash crops put the peasants into a vortex of national and global economy with its fluctuations. The railways helped a market economy to grow within the country and to reach the produce to ports from where they were shipped outside. Apart from land revenue, there were other numerous taxes which crushed and impoverished the farmers and resulted in major man- made famines (Great Bengal Famine of 1770, Chalisa Famine 1783; Orissa Famine of 1866; Rajputana famine 1869; Bihar Famine 1873; Indian famine 1899; Bengal famine 1943) when millions of peasants died. These led the British to go slow on taxes and to take up irrigation works in the later part of the colonial period.

Peasant rebellions were common throughout history, especially over land revenue; in the early and the late medieval period the Chola and Vijayanagara rulers were perceived to be benevolent despots, who responded promptly to peasants' concerns. The Vijayanagara empire also broadened and diversified the tax base and land revenue was only one of the sources of revenue for the state. Peasant rebellions became a regular feature during the British colonial period and they were often dubbed as communal and caste clashes, seen as law and order problems and crushed ruthlessly. (David Hardiman, 1992^{xx}; Sumit Sarkar, 2014^{xxi}).

Some sections of society did benefit from colonial rule, especially the upper castes and upper classes who took to English education and manned the bureaucracy. Industrialization and spread of modern education spread slowly but steadily, providing fresh avenues for investment and employment. Slowly a capitalist class developed which was able to take on the British colonial trader-industrialist class on equal terms. Untouchable castes of landless agricultural workers who provided a reserve of labour, especially in paddy growing areas, also perhaps saw better days during the British period- they emigrated to urban areas, and as indentured labour to African countries, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Many of them converted to Christianity en masse which gave them a semblance of dignity and freedom from the oppressive Hindu caste system. They also returned to buy lands in the villages. The erstwhile tenants and agricultural laborers also bought some lands, however small in scale. The *Brahmins* after acquiring education also emigrated to towns and were ready to sell their lands to non-*Brahmin* tenants and Untouchable agricultural workers.

Although there were a few beneficiaries of colonial rule, people by and large were impoverished due to high land revenue, and various other taxes. The Nationalist struggle for Independence led by Gandhi and Congress (who emphasized the non-violence but militancy in their struggles) on the one hand and the Communists of various shades (who endorsed acts of violence) soon enveloped all sections of the peasantry, and they rose against the British and participated in the struggle for Independence as well as a Democratic government.

Post-independence period (1947 to the present):

The India inherited from the British was an impoverished country, with food shortages and terrible poverty. The good news is that it has remained a democratic country in spite of failures at many fronts. Reforms and good policies have inevitably faced resistance from vested interests and lack of political will, and therefore progress has been slow. Agriculture and culture of agriculture have both changed over the years. I will track the specific changes in the area where I have been farming in Part II of this essay. Here I will mention very briefly the major changes in the big picture brought about by government policy as well as some social trends.

Land reforms (for which a social consensus had already emerged and ground prepared during the Independence movement) followed immediately after Independence.

Land reforms in India consisted of three pieces of legislations and programs: 1. abolition of *Zamindars* and Estates, parasitic class of rentier farmers, erstwhile intermediaries between the state and the actual tiller who indulged in rack-renting and other forms of oppression against the tenants and labourers. 2. Although *Zamindari* was abolished tenancy continued to be practised in both *Raiyatwari* and *zamindari* areas. Tenancy reforms were supposed to be enacted in tandem with the abolition of *Zamindars*; they tried to give the tenants a better deal in the short term and ownership of the land in the long term. 3. Ceiling on agricultural land ownership and holdings. Those landowners who held more than the acreage allowed were supposed to surrender the lands which the government redistributed to landless poor.

Except for the abolition of *Zamindars*, the other two programs met with a stiff resistance from not only the landed sections, but also from the bureaucracy and even the judiciary. Poor implementation was the normal and these legislations brought little benefits to the tenants or agricultural workers. Abolition of *Zamindars* however, made the erstwhile tenants into owners, but tenants-at-will continued to be without any legal protection and the same position continues till today. (Appu, P.S. 1996^{xxii})

Seeing the failure of these programs, the Andhra Pradesh government launched in the 70s a program of granting government land to landless persons from *Dalit* and other castes for cultivation ; they are eligible to pass the land in inheritance to their children but not sell them. The government retained the right to take back the lands when it wanted. These are called Assigned Lands.

From 2004 the Andhra Pradesh government once again undertook land distribution under in 6 instalments. Most of these lands were already in possession of the cultivators, the government simply legalised them by issuing certificates of ownership (pattas). Meanwhile inheritance laws have resulted in partition of agricultural land into miniscule unviable holdings, and land consolidation efforts have not succeeded. In spite of all the failures as above, land ownership has passed from rentier class of big land owners to self-cultivating small owners, resulting in far reaching changes in the rural economy, society and polity.

An important change in the last few years has been that the asset value and the real estate value of the land has increased so much in comparison to the productive income from cultivation, that land owners are extremely reluctant to part with the land hoping for windfall gains from the sale of the land for real estate, in the present or in future. In fact a kind of “land grab” is happening in the country, wherein anyone with money is investing on land and buying out land from the farmers who are in no financial position to buy them. The governments have started talking about loosening land ceiling legislation to allow bigger land holdings in rural and urban areas. The recent years have seen a lot of alienation of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes, particularly for real estate. State governments are also actively acquiring agricultural lands for non-agricultural “public interest” projects.

At present there are three sections of farmers who live out of agriculture in India: a. the organizer/manager of agricultural production in his farm, who resides in the village, invests capital and manages cultivation and trade through family and hired labor, b. The rentier-

farmers who lease out their land either on a fixed payment or on share cropping basis, and live on rent from the land. They may or may not reside in the village. c. landless agricultural workers, who often belong to the *Dalit* (untouchable) castes. They are a critical element in agricultural production for, farming needs a big reserve of workers in different seasons and they provide the labor.

Majority of the farmers in India have holdings less than 5 acres - 85% of holdings are under 5 acres accounting for 45% of the area operated; 95% of holdings are below 10 acres accounting for 70% of the area operated.^{xxiii} The rentier-farmers, often absentee landlords, holding larger holdings of 10 hectares and more are also present. They are in smaller number but are an influential section, as they have other sources of income and they often call the shots within their communities and larger society.

Green Revolution, WTO, GM:

Agriculture in the country has gone through a great technological change called, Green Revolution. A package of high yielding seeds grown under assured irrigation, chemical fertilisers, and chemical pesticides/herbicides is what came to be known as Green Revolution (GR). Introduced in mid-60s, it began in rice and wheat; it has now spread to cover many other crops, particularly cotton, ground nut, pulses, vegetables, etc.

In the initial years it was carried out entirely by the government through its public sector research institutions. Irrigation facilities were developed to facilitate GR, including the borewell technology and today almost 70% of the area under irrigated cultivation is under ground water irrigation. Subsidies were introduced in the inputs in order to incentivize the farmer into growing green revolution seeds- subsidies in irrigation, fertiliser, seeds, electricity, machinery, and pesticides.

Soon the private sector entered in a big way and it now develops, produces and releases hybrid seeds in various crops, particularly in vegetables. Even more recently Genetically Modified (GM) seeds were introduced in cotton, called BTCotton and efforts are on by MNCs to introduce GM varieties in food crops as well. Mechanization has also increased in tandem with GR, and it is being led mostly by the private industry. Private industry also produces most of the pesticides.

Due to GR, productivity and production increased to a high level in areas where assured irrigation was available. From a grain importing country India has become a self-sufficient and an exporting country, in spite of the continuous increase in population. But GR has lagged in areas where assured irrigation has not been possible. In order to avail the high yields farmers have also been mining ground water indiscriminately, resulting in a veritable water crisis in many parts of the country.

GR is an inherently expensive technology based on fossil fuel, making huge government subsidies necessary and inevitable. These subsidies result in fiscal deficits beyond permissible limits. For the farmers the cost of cultivation inevitably increases over the years as fossil fuel becomes scarce and expensive.

In order to attain self-sufficiency in food production and to promote GR package, both the Central and state governments have launched several subsidy schemes, in fact numbering in hundreds, if one takes into account all the States as well as the Central government schemes. These can be classified into major and minor schemes: the major subsidies go to major irrigation, minor and micro irrigation- drips and sprinklers, fertilizers, electricity, agricultural equipment (tractors, tillers), seed, export, credit, infrastructure, etc. Apart from these major subsidies there are several subsidies for specific items: animal husbandry- cattle, sheep, goats, poultry, fish, piggery; ware houses, cold storages, slaughter houses, agricultural marketing and infrastructure, etc.etc.

There is also a major food subsidy i.e. grain (rice and wheat) supplied at highly subsidized rates to the BPL (Below Poverty Level) population, which amounts to 30% of the population, around 300 million people. In fact consumer food prices have been kept deliberately low, so that poor people can access cheap food. This has in fact proved to be a bane for the farmers, for whom, while costs of production have increased, prices have not been compensatory- this in spite of all the input subsidies. Farmers have been going into chronic losses, leading chronic indebtedness, leading to thousands of suicides every year.

All these subsidies have no doubt helped increase agriculture production, including food production which stands today around 250 million tons. But millions of people in India are not able to access the required quantity of food as they do not have the purchasing power, due to low wages and salaries. The bottom 5% of the rural population (ranked by per capita expenditure level) consumes only 1,633 kcal per person per day while the minimum requirement is 1760 kcal per person per day. The average Indian has access to 2,455 kcal per day with protein and fat availability at 60gm and 52.1gm, respectively. This is far lower than the at least 3,000 kcal per day availability for OECD nations. ^{xxiv}.

From 1995 Indian agriculture has got more and more drawn into global market with the signing and becoming part of World Trade Organization (WTO), which advocates free trade across countries, and replaces physical import/export restrictions with tariff barriers. Globalization of agricultural trade has increased volatility in prices even more. Government has been ineffective in protecting the farmers against this volatility. Subsequent to WTO, more and more bilateral Free Trade Agreements have also been made with different countries, their benefits for the farmers being highly dubious. Under the WTO/Free Trade regimes devastating price crashes at different times due to cheap imports in edible oils, pulses, cotton, sugar, silk, etc. have been witnessed. At other times the country was forced to import agricultural products at higher prices than domestic prices, while it denied price supports to farmers; at yet other times it was forced to export at prices cheaper than domestic prices. On the whole small farmers who form the overwhelming majority of farmers in India have faced more difficulties than benefits under the WTO regime. Food security provisions to the poor by the government has also been challenged in the WTO consultations. The WTO regime places itself above National Governments to undertake appropriate actions on behalf of its people. All these have resulted in the demand from some sections of people to withdraw from WTO. (Afsar Jafri 2015^{xxv}).

The plight of the farmers as well as the rural people continues to be miserable, due to low prices and wages as well as lack of new avenues for employment. The average income of agricultural households of all sizes of land holdings from various sources together - cultivation, animal husbandry, non-farm business, wages/salary- was merely Rs. 6426 per month (roughly 100\$), while the consumption expenditure was Rs. 6223 per month. See table below. Note that the majority of households belong to 1 acre to 2.5 acre class of holdings and their income (Rs. 5247) is less than their expenditure (Rs. 6027), resulting in chronic indebtedness.

Statement 12: Average monthly income (Rs.) from different sources, consumption expenditure and net investment in productive assets (Rs.) per agricultural household during July 2012- June 2013 for each size class of land possessed								
size class of land possessed (ha)	income from wages/salary (Rs.)	net receipt from cultivation (Rs.)	net receipt from farming of animals (Rs.)	net receipt from non-farm business (Rs.)	total income (Rs.)	total consumption expenditure (Rs.)	net investment in productive assets (Rs.)	estd. no. of agri. households* (00)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
< 0.01	2902	30	1181	447	4561	5108	55	23857
0.01 - 0.40	2386	687	621	459	4152	5401	251	287381
0.41 - 1.00	2011	2145	629	462	5247	6020	540	315008
1.01 - 2.00	1728	4209	818	593	7348	6457	422	154810
2.01 - 4.00	1657	7359	1161	554	10730	7786	746	83964
4.01 -10.00	2031	15243	1501	861	19637	10104	1975	33519
10.00 +	1311	35685	2622	1770	41388	14447	6987	3499
all sizes	2071	3081	763	512	6426	6223	513	902039

*estimated number of households based on the common households of visit 1 and visit 2 differs from the estimate based only on visit 1 households due to effect of multiplier

Source: NSSO (National Sample Survey Office): 70th round, 2013^{xxvi}

The government has been arguing that the agricultural prices have to be kept low so that consumers can have access to cheap food. The Minimum Support Prices (MSP) declared by the government have often been far lower than the cost of production by its own admission! In 2016-17, the MSP recommended for 8 out of 14 crops was less than the cost of cultivation! A comprehensive study of farm profitability (at 7 points of time from years 1975-76 to 2006-07) reports that out of 7 years of study the farmers incurred losses for 5 years in paddy and 3 years in wheat, and in the years when they did make a profit, the profit level was below 30%. (Narayana Moorthy 2013^{xxvii})

Groups like ASHA and Jai Kisan Andolan have been emphasizing that the producers should not be punished for the sake of consumers. They have been demanding that 1. a minimum income for the farmers' families must be legally guaranteed and implemented and enforced; 2. the MSPs should be ensured for the farmers by a system of "price deficiency payments", through direct transfers if necessary; 3. A crop insurance system must be put in place which covers all kinds of natural calamities. These three measures would go a long way to protect the farmers from natural calamities and market failures and ensure a dignified income to him/her. ^{xxviii}

All these measures would need a big increase in the outlays in the government budgets. As of today the share of agriculture in GDP has steadily fallen from 70% to 14% while population directly dependent on agriculture continues to be over 50% (500 million). Allocations for agriculture in the annual budgets are absurdly low. Budgetary allocation/expenditure for agriculture out of total budget amounts to 2.10% in 2012-13 to 2.38% in 2017-18. If one adds budgetary allocation for Rural Development it amounts to 5 to 8% during the same years as above. The outlay for Defense expenditure during these years is double that of agriculture and it employs 1.3 million people! ^{xxix}

To sum up, while production and productivity under GR has increased and kept up with the increase in population, the farmer's income has not kept up with either the increase in production or the incomes in other sectors. **Cost of production has steadily increased while prices and incomes have not kept up.** This has led to chronic indebtedness and farmers' suicides which started in the late 90s are not showing any let up. Every day one wakes up to the news of farmers suicides. Over 300000 farmers have committed suicides in the country since 1995. For every suicide there are thousands of farmers in the brink of suicide, suffering as they are from chronic indebtedness due to continued losses in agriculture. Squeezed between natural calamities and market failures with little government support, the farmers are fleeing from agriculture.

There are other important flipside effects of GR. GR has done a lot of damage to the natural resources; organic matter in soil has declined to very low levels, soil and water pollution due to chemical fertilisers and pesticides has increased to very high levels, farmers have become dependent on seed companies for the so called improved seeds, often not suitable to their soil or climatic conditions. Loss of agri-bio-diversity has been irreversible in some crops, for, if the crop is not grown year after year, we lose the seed variety itself.

It seems to me that the most important effect of GR has been that the farmer has been made literally an illiterate person. The damage was started by the British colonialists. Traditional knowledge in many sectors was seen by the British and later by the educated Indian uppercastes/classes as "primitive" or at least "outdated" to be "modernized". Manual work was always looked down upon by the upper castes/classes in Indian society led by Brahmanical values, and this got reinforced by the British system of education. Except for a few discerning agricultural scientists/experts, farmers' centuries of experience was treated as "primitive" and "outdated".

For the first time in history he has been made literally illiterate. He has no control over the new seed technology; the modern agricultural science system does not include him/her as partners in developing new seeds; he is given new varieties and asked to grow, without any participation. The scientists treat the farmer as an illiterate person to be educated in modern seed technology and believe they have nothing to learn from him. Private agri-business has taken over the seed industry and the farmers are left to simply buy and use them. He is now the consumer of seeds rather than inventor/developer/producer/preserver of seeds.

He has no control over his tools and machines which are now manufactured in factories instead of in the local smithies. He has no control over water resources as government builds big and small dams and releases water according to its own schedules, and the farmers are seldom consulted. Chemical fertilisers and chemical pesticides are actively encouraged and in due course the soils have lost organic content to a great extent in many parts of India.

Modern economic theory further reinforced this attitude by seeing farm work as “unskilled work” done by illiterate, uneducated workers; in calculating the MSP, the imputed family labor is calculated as equal to unskilled labour, without any value for his managerial inputs or risk ; nor does the MSP leave a profit for the farmer! ^{xxx}The theory of “opportunity cost” justifies low incomes for the farmers, as it is believed the farmer has no other avenues of employment, and it is alright if his income from self-employment is equal to that of the daily wage of an unskilled worker; the theory of “surplus labour” was and continues to take into account only direct employment in agriculture, which is seasonal, and advocates moving the workers to the cities, into non-agricultural avenues of work. The theory goes in tandem with mechanization of farm work to avoid “excess” labor from being employed in agriculture. All these theories together have kept the incomes of farmers inadmissibly low.

Scores of protests have been recorded in every state of the country. Protests by farmers have been responded with a scheme here or a scheme there but a comprehensive change to ensure better incomes for the farmers is not happening. Political will is obviously lacking. The Government of India appointed with much fanfare “A National Commission on Farmers” under the chairmanship of Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, which undertook a massive comprehensive investigation of all aspects of agriculture and it submitted five reports through 2004-2006. ^{xxx} The most important recommendation of the Commission was that the farmers should get an income which is 50% above the cost of cultivation, that there should be a Price Stabilization Fund for ensuring the same. Government has formally declined this recommendation as not-doable and has, instead, recently appointed a Committee for Doubling the Incomes of Farmers in 2016. ^{xxxii}

A reaction to all this has been the growing organic movement which asks the farmers to grow crops with traditional seeds, drought resistant crops, including millets, water saving practices, with least external inputs(LEISA), with locally available organic manures and bio-pesticides. Lowering the cost of production, organising the producers into production and marketing collectives, awareness creation and motivating the consumers to consume safe food and to save the farmers and support low cost organic agriculture, working with farmers organizations and political parties and advocating with the government to formulate farmer-friendly policy and programs, have been the main thrust of this movement. Several civil society organizations have come up enlisting the support of all kinds of sections of people who are participating in the organic agriculture movement in a big way. Hope there will be some good news for farmers in the near future.

End Notes.

ⁱ J.F. Kennedy. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=74149>

ⁱⁱ V. Rami Reddy, "South Indian Neolithic Culture Seen in Retrospect", *East and West* Vol. 35, No. 1/3 (September 1985), pp. 43-65.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/29756713?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

ⁱⁱⁱ Boivin Nicole, et al. "First farmers in South India."
<http://pubman.mpdl.mpg.de/pubman/item/escidoc:2248630/component/escidoc:2248629/shh335.pdf>

^{iv} Krishna, K.R. and Morrison, Kathleen D. "History of South Indian Agriculture and Agroecosystems"
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258874444_History_of_South_Indian_Agriculture_and_Agroecosystems January 2009.

^v M.G.S.Narayanan, "The Role of Peasants in the Early History of South India" in B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Land System and Rural Society in Early India*, Manohar, Delhi, 2004.

^{vi} Karashima, N. *A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations*. Oxford University Press. 2014.

^{vii} Arjun Appadurai and Carol Appadurai Breckenridge, "The south Indian temple: authority, honour and redistribution" *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 1976 10:187.
http://www.uio.no/studier/emner/hf/iakh/HIS2172/h11/undervisningsmateriale/HIS2172_Appadurai.pdf

^{viii} Stein, Burton, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*. Oxford University Press, USA. 1980

^{ix} Heitzman, J. "State Formation in South India 850-1280." *The Indian Economic Social History Review*, 24, 1. 1987. SAGE.

^x Heesterman, J.C. *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society*. University of Chicago Press, p.159-179, 180-193. 1985

^{xi} SatishChandra2004. Quoted from Selfstudyhistory.
<https://selfstudyhistory.com/2015/01/26/politics-state-society-and-the-economy-in-south-india-under-vijayanagar-and-bahmanid-rule-c-1350-1565/>

-
- ^{xii} Habib, Irfan, 2000. The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556- 1707;
---2004. “The Peasant in Indian History” in B.D. Chattopadhyaya, ed. Land System and Rural Society in Early India, Manohar, Delhi, 2004.
- ^{xiii} Sibesh Bhattacharya, 2004 . “Land System as Reflected in Kautilya’s Arthashastra.” in Land System and Rural Society in Early India, Manohar, Delhi, 2004.
- ^{xiv} A.V. Balasubrahmanyam, et al. “Indigenous Institutions for Rural Development” Institute of Public Enterprise. Study sponsored by Indian Council of Social Science Research. 1988.
^{xv} <http://kalindi.du.ac.in/uploads/polsc/Buddhist%20theory%20of%20Kingship.pdf>)
- ^{xvi} Dharampal, 2015. Essential Writings of Dharampal. Publication Division. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. Delhi.
- ^{xvii} Sanjiv Kumar Tandle, 2013.
<http://www.socialresearchfoundation.com/periodicresearch/45.SANJEEV%20KUMAR%20ANDLE.pdf>)
- ^{xviii} <http://www.preservearticles.com/2011102115942/brief-notes-on-the-revenue-system-of-vijayanagar-kingdom.html>)
- ^{xix} Uma Chakravarti, The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi. 2015.
- ^{xx} Hardiman, David. Peasant Resistance in India. 1858-1914. Oxford University Press 1992.
- ^{xxi} Sarkar, Sumit. Modern India: 1885-1947. Pearson, Delhi. 2014.
- ^{xxii} Appu, P.S. Land Reforms in India. 1996. Vikas Publishing House, Delhi.
- ^{xxiii} “Highlights of Agriculture Census 2010-11” Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture, 09-December-2015 15:57 IST.
(<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=132799>)

^{xxiv} <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/GzUIDPQXzktVDBEiE2ZPfi/Per-capita-nutrition-supply-in-India-among-the-lowest-in-the.html>)

^{xxv} Afsar Jafri 2015. “Trade Liberalization and WTO”, Focus on the Global South, Delhi.

^{xxvi} NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) 70th Round. 2013. **Report No. 569 (70/33/1)**. <http://www.mospi.gov.in/>

^{xxvii} Narayanamoorthy, A. “Profitability in Crops Cultivation in India: some evidence from Cost of Cultivation Survey data” Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics, Vol.68, No.1, Jan-March 2013.

^{xxviii} <http://www.kisanswaraj.in/2017/02/25/kharif-2017-price-policy-formulation-presentation-to-cacp/>

<http://www.kisanswaraj.in/2016/10/10/assured-incomes-for-all-farm-households/>

^{xxix} “What do the Numbers tell? An analysis of Union Budget 2017-18.”, Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, 2017.p.7,8; p.30; 32,33..

^{xxx} Pitale, R.L. India . Rich Agriculture: Poor Farmers. Daya Publishing House, Delhi. 2007.

^{xxxi} National Commission on Farmers. <http://kisanayog.gov.in/section1.asp?secnm=S69>, <http://krishakayog.gov.in/5threp1.pdf>

^{xxxii} Press Information Bureau ,Government of India,Ministry of Agriculture,22-July-2016 18:18 IST. Doubling the Income of Farmers .

<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=147558>

Part II

Thirty years of farming, a ringside view of agrarian crisis.

Abstract: In the last thirty years, not only our village but many villages in the district have transformed from a viable agricultural region, which grew a variety of crops, to a semi-arid region, with food crops being replaced by mango trees and malnourished cows for milk for sale. Neither the income from mangoes or milk is sufficient to run a family. Impoverishment of the farmers is official now: NSSO 70th round estimates the average income from all sources (cultivation, animal husbandry, wages/salaries) as Rs. 6426 per month. This has resulted in farmers and wage workers moving out of the village to urban areas for better pastures, and the village community is diminished, frustrated and dragging and limping with old people. I remember a German lady visited our village probably twenty five, thirty years ago, and the first thing she uttered was “your village looks like Kerala!” I wistfully remember her words now and then and think, “those were the days!” How this situation came to be is explained below. This essay has two sections” Section A deals with farmers and the situation in crop farming in the village, including livestock farming. Section B deals with the agricultural workers and the issues confronting them.

Prologue

My husband, Naren, and I moved to the village around 1985 with bag and baggage. We were in our early thirties then. Naren was interested in grassroot mobilization of poor people for their rights, and we were both interested in doing environment-friendly work in the village, including organic farming in our farm. He did a lot of the street-activist work on human rights, land rights for Dalit agricultural workers, and farmers’ issues; and I managed at the home front, did research and consultancy projects and supplemented to the farm income. Ten years later around 1995 Nagesh and Aparna, another city born-bred couple, joined us in our village –living- community- work. They moved to Chennai around 2005, but continue to be in active touch with the village.

We decided to first build an extension to our ancestral house which was being shared by four cousins already. We realised if we want to build a house we had to first make the bricks! (Cement was available but bricks had to be burnt locally). For making bricks we had to wait for the right season, for bricks are best made in summer. We drilled a borewell to the depth of 100 feet to supply us water for the construction. There was only one handpump and a drinking water well in the village at that time, and it was being used by the villagers for their drinking water needs. It would have also been tiresome to draw water from them. The borewell technology had just come and we took advantage of it. Little did we realise then that the borewell technology was a “Saturn” for us (the planet Saturn in Indian astrology can bestow both a lot of material wealth as well as a lot of misfortune)!

Our 32 acre farm was the joint property of three brothers. Two brothers were residing in Hyderabad; we managed the farm and the profits and losses were to be shared equally; we got a small allowance per year for management and agricultural expenses at the household level,

such as feeding the farm workers, processing of crops at the homestead, maintaining cattle, etc. The farm was scattered into 5 different plots, totalling about 32 acres, in two sides of the village. Plot. 1 was a mango garden of 22 acres in one side of the village; all other plots were in the other side of the village. Plot. 2 was a 2.5 acres of mixed coconut-mango garden. Plot.3 was also a mango garden. Altogether mango trees numbered about 800, mostly of Totapuri and Neelam varieties, but also Alfonso, Malgoiva and other special varieties, not always well known outside the district. We had 25 varieties of mango, each with its own taste and flavor. Inside the mango gardens we had 600 coconut trees.

Plot 4 and 5 were about 5 acres of land under the irrigation tank which has good open and bore wells for water sources in which paddy and sugarcane were grown. Plot 5 has now been converted into a mango garden. We drilled borewells in 5 different places the last 30 years to supplement 4 open wells. Our fellow farmers were also drilling and installing borewells with much enthusiasm, and turning dry lands into irrigated lands. Assured irrigation and sugar cane gave a good cash income compared to rainfed crops like ground nut and millets, upto the nineties.

It is important to state that we were only managers of the farm; we managed the workers; we did not actually work in the farm. Of course there were a lot of things to do even as a manager; Naren ran around not only supervising the daily operations but also saw to the repairs and maintenance; put in the capital, negotiated with the traders, kept accounts and earned a reputation of being a prompt wage payer and a kind employer; I supervised all the homestead level operations with hired women workers, for, practically all the post-harvest operations were done at the homestead. All this kept our minds and hands full throughout the year. I used to describe myself “I am a very hard(ly) working farmer”.

Things were going pretty well for us till 2000, profits in one plot being ploughed into another loss making one, and supplemented by income from my earnings and our reserves. We already noticed that the ground water had started declining very soon after we moved. We feared that there may be a secular decline in the ground water levels and our fears came true.

By 2000, not only due to a drought (1998-2004) but due to various reasons - farm experiments, social work expenses, and crash in bank interest rates, cost of cultivation ever increasing and prices stagnating, etc.etc. our savings and incomes evaporated and we had a debt of Rs.200,000 (2 lakh). We had a car which was used sparingly. We sold it because we could not afford it. I had always supplemented the family income by working on research and consultancy projects, by which we did managed to educate our daughters in good residential schools and then on in good colleges and they are well settled. They are however not in a position to take care of the farm.

In 2009 Naren passed away and we partitioned the land among the three brothers and I got 10 acres as my share. This was followed by another severe drought from 2012- 2015. I lost over three hundred coconut and mango trees. Even drinking water was carted in tankers to the village from borewells from nearby villages. There was literally a hunt for drinking water, the

tankers going around the villages throughout the day requesting the owner of the borewells to allow them to fill their tankers, for a fee of course. The reluctant owners of borewells had to comply as the district government had issued an order not to deny drinking water from their wells, even as they needed to water their own crops/trees. As there was no drinking water, the question of doing any farming did not arise; in fact mutely the farmers witnessed the death of the trees they had planted. In 2015 December when Chennai had a disastrous deluge, we had copious rains and our tanks and wells filled up. With that water I have resumed to do some minimal farming, growing a little rice (negligible amount) and some ground nut. Most of my resources since the last few years have been spent on saving the existing trees from dying. There is no income from the land; instead I am spending the income from other sources on the land trying to keep the trees going and to regenerate the soil and the land. The rains continue to evade us!

To anticipate the conclusion, in the last thirty years, not only our village but many villages in the district have transformed from a viable agricultural region, which grew a variety of crops, to a semi-arid region, with food crops being replaced by mango trees and malnourished cows for milk for sale. Neither the income from mangoes or milk is sufficient to run a family. This has resulted in farmers and wage workers moving out of the village to urban areas for better pastures, and the village community is diminished, frustrated and dragging and limping with old people. I remember a German lady visited our village probably twenty five, thirty years ago, and the first thing she uttered was “your village looks like Kerala!” I wistfully remember her words now and then and think, “those were the days!”

Section A

Crops and farmers.

Parts of Chittoor district have been inhabited since time immemorial, right from Paleolithic age. Most of the district was of hills and forests. Cultivation was done in hill slopes and small valleys between the hills, with the help of man-made reservoirs, called “tanks”, constructed on hill streams. Vijayanagara kings built a fort at Chandragiri near the Tirupati hills, promoted construction of several tanks and patronized the Tirupati temple at the Tirumala hills in a big way. After the Vijayanagara kingdom fell, it was ruled by Polegar chiefs, who had military-administrative- police functions under the Vijayanagara kings. Parts of the district also came under Nawabs of Arcot till the British took over the whole area in the 19th century. The Polegars, who carved out small territories among themselves, however, held sway right till the abolition of Zamindars and Estates. The Polegars ruled by terrorizing the people with thugs and musclemen, and collecting taxes. One of the elderly relatives of our family told us how they used to be so afraid of the Polegar that from two miles distance they would bend their bodies and bow their heads in obeisance before going to their residence. Once the Zamindari abolition happened the Polegars disappeared from the scene, as they had no other livelihood skills. They sold away their properties one by one just to survive and the families scattered and disappeared.

As a part of the Eastern Ghats, most of the Chittoor district is studded with hills. The region has no major rivers, or canal projects. However, it enjoys the benefit of both South West and North East monsoons, gets about 800 millimeters of annual average rainfall and is drained by hundreds of rivulets and streams. (In the last few years however, climate change seems to have stolen into our village too (!), with scanty and unseasonal rains, failing monsoons and high temperatures.)

Traditionally, several chains of small tanks had been built on these monsoonal streams and rivulets, especially during the reign of the Vijayanagara kings; and these form the backbone of irrigated agriculture in the district in the absence of any major river or canal projects. The salubrious climate and easy drainage of water in most areas enables the farmers to raise a variety of crops from pan and banana to sugarcane, paddy, groundnut and flowers and vegetables.

The district has three eco-agricultural zones: the eastern zone, the middle zone and the western zone. We are in the middle zone. If they had wells, the farmers in our area used to grow paddy for one season and follow it up with two years of sugarcane in irrigated lands. This was the cycle. There are seven sugar factories in the district but most of the sugar cane is made into jaggery and much of the jaggery goes for country liquor production, and some for direct consumption for making sweet dishes. Several varieties of paddy were grown and most of them got consumed within the village for food was part of the daily wage payments apart from cash. The sugarcane and jaggery was the main source of cash income.

In the dry unirrigated lands they grow a crop of ground nut inter-cropped with pulses and millets. Finger millet, sorghum and pearl millets were grown for food as well as for fodder. Pulses included pigeon pea, cow pea, field bean, black gram, and horse gram. Ground nut and sesame were the main oil seed crops grown. Apart from the main crops as above several vegetables, spices like chillies, turmeric and coriander, betel leaves, and even tobacco were grown for home consumption. Tamarind trees provided tamarind used a great deal in cooking; gongura provided leaves for cooking as well as fibre for ropes; various kinds of trees were grown to provide green leaf manure used in paddy cultivation. Indian traditional geography of a village settlement always included grazing lands for cows, sheep and goats; and forests in the neighbourhood which provided valuable wood for various purposes-agricultural tools, house building, carts for transportation, etc. As mentioned above, the village was very green with trees and crops, did look like a piece of Kerala!

Animal husbandry has always been an important allied activity in Indian farming, which are cattle based. Bullocks were used for ploughing, water lifting and transport; cows for milk, and both for their most valuable things: dung and urine. Since 1983 a district level milk cooperative was set up by the government and it led to introduction of cross bred cows for increased milk production. Sheep manure was considered very valuable and sheep meat very much relished. Goats were also kept for meat and milk, as well as poultry. Fish was available in plenty in both the water bodies like tanks and wells as well as in the paddy fields. Our

elders used to say that nothing except salt used to be bought; everything needed were grown or gathered from the neighbourhood forests, or bought from villages around.

Even within these thirty plus years we have spent in the village, there have been major changes in crops and allied activities, which we will document as we go further.

Water is life:

Indian farmers looking at the skies for rains are not just images in photographs and films; they indeed are a ground reality, a fact of life. Timely, adequate and regular rains at different stages of growth and fruition of the crops make all the difference – a single spell at times could be the difference between prosperity and desperation. The dry land farmer knows this better and more bitterly than anybody else. This is the reason why farmers, wherever they may be, are desperate to get an assured water supply for their lands.

I used to find it amusing that my father-in-law, when we were in Hyderabad, would now and then make a trunk call to the village and the first question he would ask was whether there was any rain! Now I myself ask the same question!

In upland areas, where there is little scope for river water through dams and canals, man made

reservoirs called “tanks” by the British, supplemented by wells, have been the backbone of irrigation i.e. assured water supply to crops. In Andhra Pradesh the traditional rulers over the centuries have constructed over 80,000 tanks some of them irrigating hundreds of acres. We have already mentioned that in Chittoor district there are about 8,000 tanks today, mostly built during the rule of the Vijayanagara kings. Due to the hilly terrain most of them are chains of tanks with the surplus of one tank flowing into the one below and they are generally small in size irrigating between 5 to 30; the larger tanks irrigated up to 100 acres.

These tanks were sponsored by kings, nobles and rich people, but were constructed by a community called *Velama dora*, who are said to have been specialists in tank construction; they came from the Krishna river region; they have practically disappeared, except in legends. The farmers who had lands in the command area (*ayacutdars*) operated and maintained them and they were encouraged to do so by the rulers offering tax concessions. It was also thought of as an act of spiritual merit, deriving *punyam* for those constructing the tanks. An elaborate system of rules of maintenance and sharing of water was evolved – a part of the land and / or produce was set apart separately for the maintenance of the tank, all the *ayacutdars* at the beginning of the rainy season had to collectively clear the supply and feeder channels of weeds, etc. There was always a headman (“*Pinapedda*”) who was usually the one who owned most land under the tank. It was he who would give specific instructions for the actual activities to the *Neerugatti*, who was invariably from the untouchable caste. The *Neerugatti*, or water – irrigator was the critical person in the whole structure. It was he who irrigated all the fields, called the farmers for work, and repaired, especially at times of rains, when the bund gave way, etc. When the water is less in the tank, he would intimate the

ayacutdars. All the *ayacutdars* assembled and decided what crops to grow, etc. It was the job of the *Neerugatti* to see that the tank water was distributed equally between those who were tail-enders and those who had lands just below the bund. The *Neerugatti* family was maintained by all the *ayacutdars*. He was entitled to a share of the produce and was also to be fed by the *ayacutdars* when irrigating their fields. There were many tax concessions for the *ayacutdars* and much of the tax collected from the tank irrigated lands often went back to the village for maintenance of the temple, tank, village functionaries, etc. The king / ruler was supposed to collect a sixth of the produce, but this was increased to one-fourth during medieval times and to almost half during British rule.

During the British period, as we mentioned in Part I, the tanks were declared to be government property, the government took away a major share of the produce. The *ayacutdars* were left with little surplus or incentive to maintain the tanks. This led to gross neglect of tanks and fall in revenues. And lands were even left fallow at times. The British set up various committees and realized their mistakes. But they were not willing to part with their overall claim to the ownership of the tank and share in the produce as taxes, although they reduced them a little. They took up maintenance of the tanks and found it to be a costly affair. They abandoned the smaller tanks and concentrated only on the bigger ones (above 100 acres command area). So the decline of tanks began during the British rule although the tanks were the heart of irrigation in these dry regions. People did try to maintain them as best as they could under the circumstances, as there was no other means of irrigation except wells, which often supplemented the tanks during the rabi season. As the maintenance of tanks declined, well irrigation increased.

The first thing I did after going to the village was to undertake a survey of tanks in the district (Uma Shankari 1991). The main problems thirty years ago were lack of government budget for regular maintenance, neglect of feeder channels, so that water went away here and there instead of flowing into the tanks, indiscipline in water distribution, mainly not closing the sluices for storing water in the tank, so that whatever water flowed in got emptied out within a few days. Early on we did a lot of work on tank restoration in our own village. Subsequently in the Nineties tank restoration became a component of a major government program called Neeru-Meeru and our panchayat took full advantage of it. It continues under the MNREGA (rural employment guarantee) program, and today most tanks in the district have been deepened and feeder channels have been cleared of vegetation. Hundreds of check dams and percolation tanks have also been constructed.

But the old system has changed beyond recognition; the *Neerugattis* are no more important, their functions having become redundant. The farmers are not growing only paddy, they are growing different crops in the tank commands – paddy, ground nut, ragi, sugarcane, vegetables, mango – and their watering schedules are varying, and they have dispensed with the services of the *Neerugattis*. The sluices of several tanks are also closed, the tanks serving percolation purposes than irrigation. Most farmers have switched to borewell irrigation.

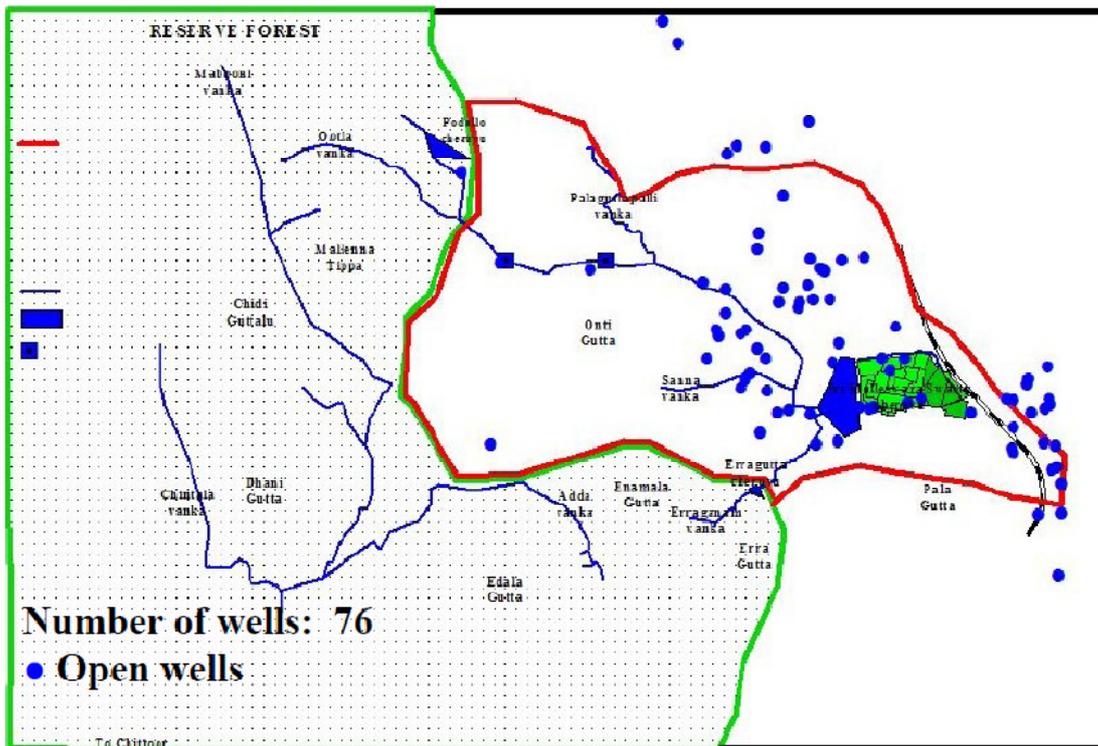
Borewell technology and the electricity tangle:

The advent of Independence saw no perceptible change in the attitude of the authorities. The government was still considered the owner of the tank system (and other common property resources) and therefore the onus was on the government to repair and maintain or not. Small water bodies continued to be neglected. Introduction of diesel engines in the early sixties meant that more water could be pumped out with less physical effort. The problem was further accentuated with the introduction of electric pumpsets and supply of cheap subsidized electric power during the 70s and 80s. With the earlier bullock drawn moats, recharge of the wells kept pace with the water drawn out. But with the diesel and the cheaper electric motors, the water in the wells was depleted faster than their capacity to recharge. This necessitated deepening of wells and use of rigs to blast the rocks. But very soon the water table went beyond the reach of the rigs and the farmers were forced to go for borewells. If one struck good water in the borewell, it only meant that the neighbour's well would go dry and he would have to bore deeper. This kind of one upmanship has meant that water table which was around 40 to 50 feet went down to 200 feet by the early 1980s. Today it has gone down to 1000 feet, necessitating use of more powerful motors 7.5 to 10 horsepower and pumpsets of 7 to 12 stages to suck the water from deep down –also resulting in greater use of electric power.

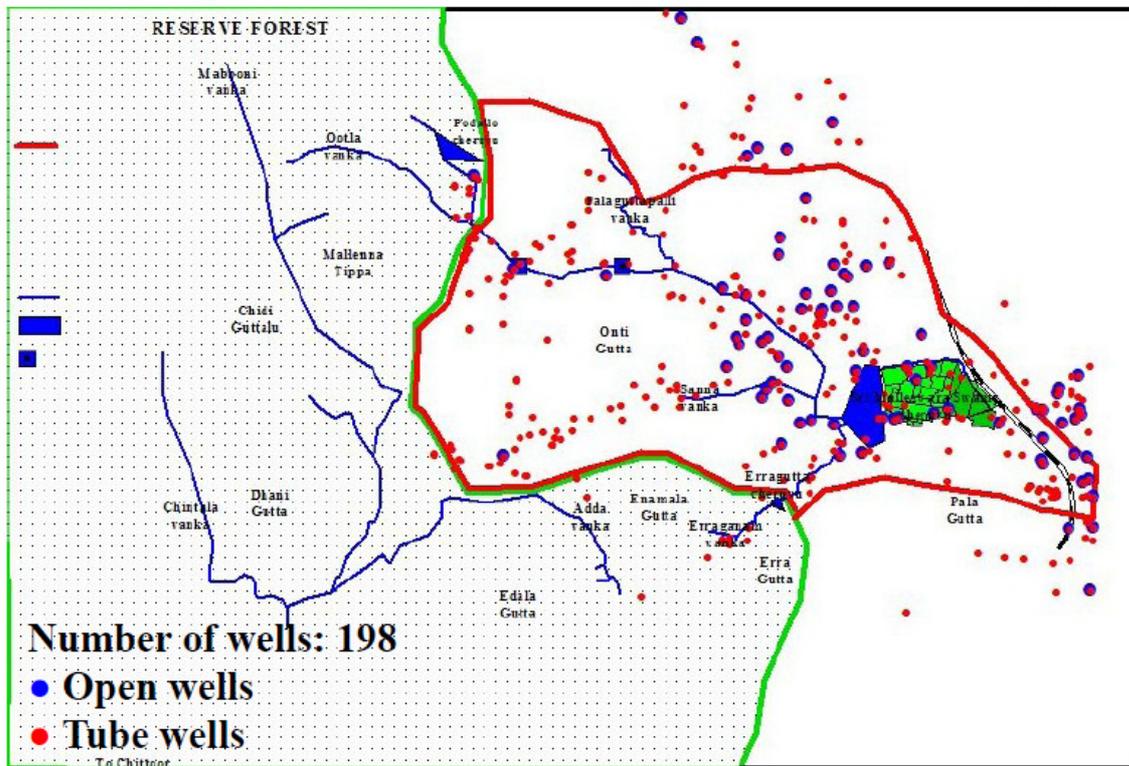
The current scenario is that all landholders below a tank who were earlier irrigating their fields with surface water from the tanks (supplemented by wells towards the end of the season) now irrigate the same lands with deep bore wells pumping water from 200 to 500 feet and more below the surface. In this process many bore wells have gone dry and water has not been struck in new bores where drilling was done. The lucky few who did strike water also survive for an average period of five years. Those bore wells under tanks would get recharged when there is water in the tank. But many go dry after a few years, necessitating drilling a new bore again.

By 1997-1998 we faced a severe drought which lasted for seven years, till 2004-2005! Copious rains followed but our happiness was short lived. By end of 2011 our borewells went dry. Another severe drought followed and even drinking water came to be supplied through tankers fitted on trucks. Thousands of trees – mango and coconut trees died irreversibly. Farmers lost heavily and most able bodied men have migrated from the village, leaving only older people, women and children at homes. Borewells had sucked the moisture in the soils dry. Meanwhile rains were becoming very erratic and there have been abnormally long dry spells. These led to more borewells and more expenses, more borewell failures and more crop failures! We got caught in a cycle of borewell failures and crop failures. The area got transformed from a viable agricultural area to an area bereft of water, uncertainty of crop yields. Many farmers prefer to even leave the land fallow than cultivate under rainfed conditions. .

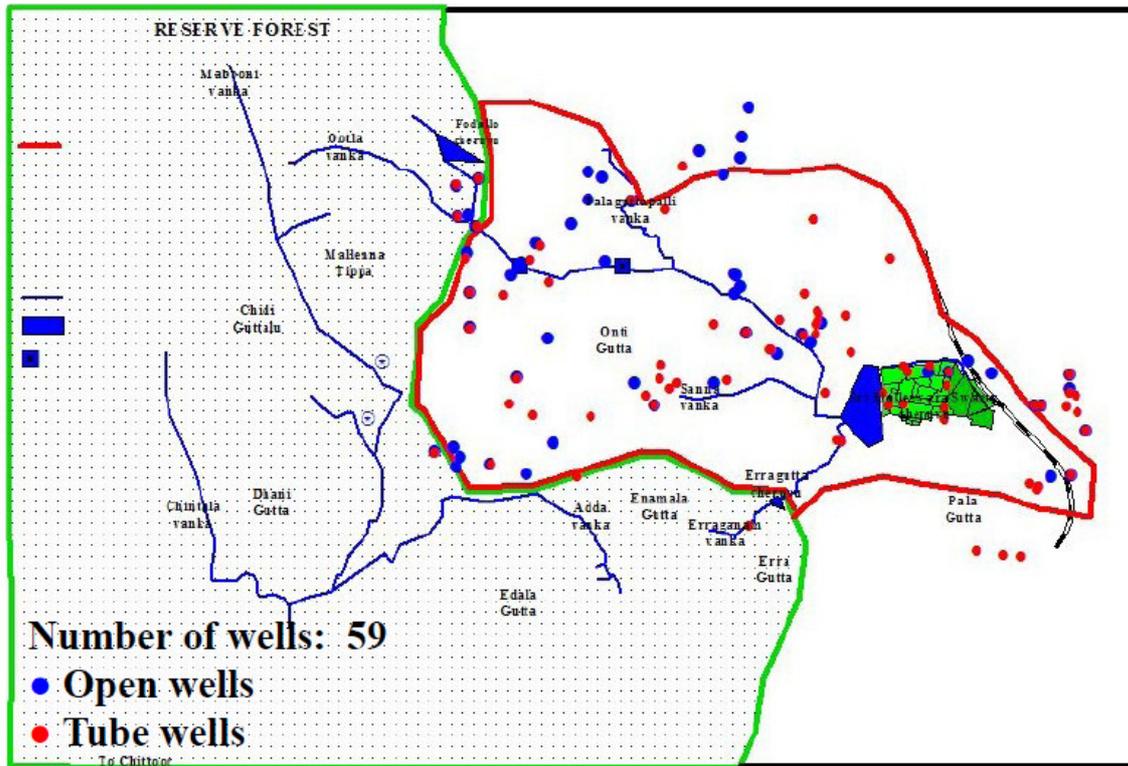
Up to 1970's: Sustainable Water Usage



During 1980's and 1990's: Excessive Water Usage



Since 2002: Water Crisis



We made a small calculation: During 1980s-1990s the rainfall was around 800 mm per year, the recharge @10% was 80 crore (800 million) litres per year, whereas the total discharge was around 290 crore (2900 million) litres per year, 4 times the recharge! During the drought years between 2011- 2015 the rainfall had declined to around 350 mm per year, the recharge had declined to 35 crore (350million) litres per year, and the discharge had declined to 25 crore (250million) litres per year, as by then most of the borewells had irreversibly dried up!

On an average, a farmer would have spent Rs.2, 00,000 per well (in current days rates). This is a modest estimate taking into consideration the cost of digging an open well, lining with stones, going in for electric motor, then deepening the well, blasting with rigs and sinking a bore well, installing a compressor or more powerful electric pumpset and then abandoning the whole thing and going in for a fresh surface borewell, which may or may not strike water. Very little of this investment has come from the banks or other state agencies. Most of the credit (80 to 90%) availed of by farmers came from private sources at heavy interest, ranging from 24 to 36%. But the farmer still prefers to go in for bore-wells at such huge expenditure and risk because he hopes to grow a cash crop like sugarcane, and clear his loan within two or three years. However, he does not want to recognize that in the next two or three years the bore well may go dry or flow deplete forcing him to go in for another bore well, much deeper this time! He keeps hoping his individual luck would be better and his borewell would serve him longer! When the borewell does go dry, he curses his bad luck and drills another. And another. Till whatever income he gets evaporates and chronic indebtedness steps in.

Today, in most villages of Chittoor district there is no question of even drinking water if there is no electric supply. Drinking water wells have disappeared or have gone irreversibly dry. Thanks to the way the bore well technology has been used or allowed to be used today, the farmers in Chittoor district are completely dependent upon electric supply for their water needs. This is more or less the case in all the upland areas of the state as well as the country.

The farmers have been finding the going difficult with the prices of agriculture produce not commensurate with the costs of cultivation. Besides, with the floodgates of imports being opened under WTO conditionalities and the prices of various agricultural commodities crashing and subject to the whimsical nature of the international market, the situation got only worse. With unremunerative prices for practically all agricultural products as compared to the costs, the prospects are indeed bleak for farmers of our country.

It is in this context that the farmers felt highly resistant to withdrawal of any subsidy – of power or of fertilizer. In 1995 a new government under Chandra Babu Naidu came to power in the state. In six months Loksabha elections were declared. The chief ministerial candidate promised rice at Rs. 2 per kilogram and power at Rs. 50 per horsepower and prohibition (of liquor). He did well in the elections and became the Chief Minister. But within six months he went back on all his promises.

Under the influence of the World Bank the electricity administration changed considerably and the tariffs raised. The Electricity Board of Andhra Pradesh released a white paper. In that it was stated that farmers were paying only 3 paise per unit whereas state was spending Rs. 2 per unit for agriculture. Their consumption has increased to 45% of power utilized. On the other hand industrial consumption has gone down from 48% to 28%, so there was no other option except to increase power tariffs for agriculture. It was increased eight to ten times – that is 800 to 1000% at one go! The farmers were really surprised, after all did not the Chief Minister know all this just six months ago?

We had no clue about electricity matters but we decided this was unjust and resolved not to pay the charges till the government rolled back the hike in tariffs. We formed a group called Rashtriya Raithu Seva Samithi and started studying electricity matters. In the meantime the new Electricity Act was brought in, in spite of boycott by the opposition. It appointed Andhra Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission (APERC). The APERC conducted public hearings on power sector matters. With the help of a retired engineer of Electricity Department we made our own calculations. We argued with the APERC that since power consumption in agriculture was not metered, the government, not being able to curtail the thefts, was showing thefts as agriculture consumption. While APERC appreciated our presentation, it actually ordered for further increase in tariffs by another 60%! With this farmers in the whole state became agitated and started wide spread protests. (G.Narendranath, et al. 2005)

In Tirupati we started a Committee with all the farmers' organizations to protest against the increase in power tariffs. We undertook a tour of the district and spoke in public meetings to

farmers about how we were being made scapegoats for their inability to curtail power thefts. We asked the farmers not to pay such unjust power tariffs till government rolled back the increase. We participated every year in public hearings on accounts submitted by DISCOMS(Distribution Companies) and TRANSCO (Transmission Company). We also conducted trainings for farmers on electricity matters. In due course Rashtriya Raithu Seva Samithi was asked to be a member of the Advisory Council of APERC on behalf of farmers. Naren raised many thorny issues in the Council. After two years he was dropped from the Council without even being informed!

In the meantime elections came again, and although we only demanded roll back of the increased tariffs, the opposition leader promised free power for agriculture and won the elections on that slogan. And we also thought if someone wants to give, why not support him. Today we are enjoying the so called free power; actually they are charging a minimal amount of Rs. 130 per connection per year as fixed charges and giving us only 7 hours of power per day as against 9 hours during the previous regime. Power breakdowns are very common, mainly because of overload, illegal drawing of power, and so on.

When we shifted to the village we found that nobody had installed any meter in their homes except our family! Everyone was using power, mainly for bulbs and fans, but soon also for electric stoves, TV and even to heat water for bathing, drawn directly with wires hooked to the power lines, a practice which was theft, pure and simple, and dangerous too. Agriculture power was not metered but one had to pay a fixed charge of Rs. 50 per horsepower, which was rarely collected by the electricity department! When Chandrababu Naidu government came to power in 1995 it not only raised the tariffs on agriculture to some unreasonable levels but also tried to install meters for domestic consumption of electricity on a campaign mode. Surprisingly people did not object to installing of meters for domestic consumption; in fact they cooperated. But power for agriculture was a different matter; it was a matter of livelihood. Had the government simply collected the scheduled tariff of Rs.50 per horsepower, or had it even doubled the power tariffs, people would have thought it reasonable. But the tariffs were raised in one go by eight to ten times and the electricity department was instructed to collect them too! This was the time the whole state was facing a drought and farmers were not even running their pumps! Their incomes were at an all time low and the burden was felt to be too much. We refused to pay the hiked power tariffs on principle. The electricity department personnel came often to collect, and sometimes forced some farmers to pay, but we politely told them that we are not against them, that we are not paying because we are protesting. Often they were in sympathy with us, being themselves owning a few acres of land. They would request us to pay some small amount so that they can show it in their records, so that they would not lose their jobs. In sympathy we paid a small amount and sent them away. Now of course the situation is different. Lines for agriculture have been separated from lines for domestic consumption. More transformers have been installed. A service charge of Rs.130 per pumpset is being collected for agriculture power; meters have been installed in homes and people do pay power charges quite promptly.

Free power, however, does not solve the ground water problem. Farming does not need power, it needs water. Ground water is being used because surface water resources like tanks are mismanaged. Government did try to address this through schemes like Neeru-Meeru (Water and You), watershed development programs and MNREGA. It has also started a water transfer project from the Krishna river, called Handri-Neeva project. One of the canals of the project runs through our village as well. Now the farmers are hoping this project would get completed soon and our water problem would be solved. But actually the problem needs a multipronged approach. Rainfed crops should be encouraged with better marketing facilities and better prices and incomes. Rainwater harvesting, watershed development programs and afforestation programs must be taken with the sincerity it deserves. Water intensive crops such as paddy and sugarcane should be prohibited. Tree crops which don't need watering should be encouraged with backward and forward linkages.

Crops for cash or food?

The biggest dilemma farmers have been facing is to whether to grow food crops or the so called cash crops. In heavily irrigated areas paddy has been traditionally the preferred crop. But in areas such as my village water sources have always been limited and most of the areas were under rainfed conditions where millets like ragi, jowar, and bajra used to be widely grown and consumed as food, along with pulses and oil seeds. These cereals contained valuable nutrition, provided fodder and fibre and protected the farmers from malnutrition. But rice was traditionally considered an elite crop and people generally longed to become paddy farmers with assured irrigation.

In the eighties one of the chief ministers of the state brought down the price of rice distributed through the Public Distribution System (PDS) which led to poor people consuming more rice and farmers going for more rice cultivation. Millets simply disappeared from the field and the plate. Or they became animal feed instead of food. In our village also the same trend has continued. People have lost touch with cultivation and processing and consuming millets. Since rice comes dirt cheap at the PDS, people have taken to eating rice and little else. It is only in the recent years that civil society groups are actively reviving millet cultivation and consumption, especially in drought prone areas under rainfed conditions. The government has also at last woken up to the crisis and is now trying to promote millets in various ways.

Paddy: SRI vari

In our area farmers usually grow paddy for self-consumption. It is followed by sugarcane or groundnut depending upon water availability. Chittoor district sugarcane goes mostly for country liquor making, and since I was advocating prohibition, I was in a dilemma – whether to grow sugarcane or not. Under the “wise” suggestion of Nagesh, we decided to stop growing sugarcane and instead grow rice. We used high yielding varieties of the Government, as well as some traditional varieties of other nearby regions (Tamilnadu, Kerala and Telangana). Again for ethical/ideological reasons, we refused to give our land for tenancy farming and tried to cultivate using hired labour. We ended up paying enormous

amounts for labour for two acres. We had heavily invested in organic and leaf manure and groundnut cake which are labour intensive operations and we ended up spending too much. Our paddy crop was an average yielder, meaning as much as anybody else. Most of the farmers are easy going. They do not select their seed carefully. They do not nurse the nursery (treat the seed etc.). They often plant late but try to make up with application of urea and/or NPK. While the crop of paddy we produced was almost equal to what most of the other farmers were producing (20 to 22 bags of 75 kgs each per acre, only very few produced 30 to 40 bags), our costs were twice or thrice of others, mainly on labour and organic manures.

Ultimately, the rice we grew was rather expensive and very exhausting as we had to take care of so many vagaries like truant labour, diseases, timely application of various organic inputs (searching for them), timely weeding, proper harvesting and drying and finally storing. We could avoid all this if only we had given our land on share cropping! Besides, if we hired labour we would have to cook the afternoon meal for them and also hear complaints about how badly the meal was cooked! No wonder most small farmers, including those owning one or two acres of wet land, give their land on tenancy. We hardly sold any of the paddy we produced. Most of it was consumed by us and our workers hired for various works. After three years of such expensive experiments we decided enough is enough, and opted for share cropping like the others!

We have been growing organic paddy since 1993, but the yields were low, whatever seed we sowed, however much organic manures we used, whatever plant protection methods we tried. It was then the SRI (System of Rice Intensification), called “srivari” in Telugu, (can be translated as “auspicious paddy”) came like a boon. Developed in Madagascar in Africa by a French Christian priest, it is not a different variety of paddy but just a different way of cultivating it. We grew paddy in the SRI method in three seasons, from 1996-1998. The first time we got 20 bags for one third acre, which means 60 bags per acre! Second time we got caught in drought and our fellow farmers did not give us water, and we left the crop halfway. The third time tillering was very good but yield was medium - 30 bags per acre. We analysed and came to the conclusion that we should have weeded earlier, we didn't because there was not much weed growth. But we were told that regardless of weed growth, early weeding is a must in SRI, since weeding promotes aeration and sunlight.

There are many such lessons we learn in farming but there is no perfect way to grow any crop, for we are dealing with far too many variables which are out of our control, the weather being the most important factor. We are now growing a modified SRI paddy. Of late we have been experimenting with Subhash Palekar's methods (<http://www.palekarzerobudgetspiritualfarming.org/>) which is showing very good results.

Sugarcane and jaggery

The district is known for its jaggery (sugarcane juice boiled with a little lime into a solid hard balls, used in sweets). The jaggery comes in two categories, the white or golden yellow colored, mostly from Aragonda or western region is for consumption and fetches a better price. Farmers have increasingly taken to adding bleaching agents such as sodium

thiosulphate, (Hydros) which is prohibited for human consumption! Farmers know it is not meant for consumption, but do not stop using it, saying “we are not consuming it.” The colour lasts for a couple of months, by which time the jaggery changes several hands and is also probably consumed. The second variety is of darker colour due to the nature of the soil. Generally, soils which are alkaline will give rise to paler jaggery, which though attractive to look, but is not as sweet as the darker one. The latter fetches a slightly lower price than the yellow variety (by about Rs.100/- to Rs.200/- per quintal). Mostly meant for brewing country liquor, it goes to Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamilnadu. It is in high demand and prices soar before elections. But often prices also dip terribly to very low levels.

We have been growing organic sugarcane, and as usual our costs are high, and the local prices do not give us any margin. After much trial and error we have been making it into powder jaggery and selling it directly to consumers for a slightly higher price. And that is how we managed to overcome our losses. The dilemma in jaggery is that while sugar is unhealthy (glucose and minerals are lost in the making of factory-sugar, which consists of only sucrose), demand for jaggery is decreasing because of the smell and colour. Sugarcane cultivation, however, has declined with back-to-back droughts in the last twenty years. It has been widely replaced by mango, as we will see below.

Groundnut

It was the mainstay of the dry land rainfed farmers, and most marginal farmers double up as agricultural workers. Unfortunately, the crop is very much dependent upon the mercy of timely and frequent rains in the kharif. For every one season of good crops there will be two bad years of heavy loss and two years of bare sustenance. Of late, the cost of raising groundnut crop has also been rising, pushing the farmers into greater debt. The brunt of the price crash due to import of cheap palm oil from Malaysia was borne by these farmers. The yields are also very low – depending on timely rains, from 5 to 15 bags an acre. But the economics are very different in the flat sandy soils of the Eastern taluks of the district where it is raised as an irrigated dry crop in the rabi season with heavy doses of chemical fertilizers, the yield going up to 30 to 40 bags per acre, if not more. Considering all this, most rainfed lands are being planted with mango. Price of ground nut oil has been recently soaring, but farmers can't grow ground nut, because once you plant the fields with mango, there is no going back to field crops!

Coconut

We have about 600 coconut trees in two different plots in the midst of mango trees. They were planted more than 50 years ago when water was no problem. With advent of borewells water shortage has become all too common. Added to this was the disease attack, which started about ten years ago, and is still not gone. But the new and latest bad news are the monkeys! Half a dozen of them have settled in our garden since the last two years. They break the tender coconuts and drink up the juice before they develop into coconuts! It is against the wild life law to kill them; it is also against tradition to kill them, for they are connected to Hanuman! The only way is to catch them and leave them in the forest. The only people who have the skill and are officially allowed to catch them are the gypsy tribe called

Guvvalavaallu (Nari kuravar in Tamil, a tribe whose men specialize in hunting and the women live by making bead necklaces). It is very difficult to deal with them since they live by petty crime and are notorious for not keeping to any agreement and somehow extort money much beyond the agreement. We got them once to set up the traps, they came and spent three days in the garden and got us to spend almost Rs.2000, but no monkey got into the trap! Recently again I went and fixed up a deal with them, but they did not even turn up! I was almost giving up, when I told myself I will try a last time, and I went with an officer from the Forest department, to the same persons whom I had given advance money, and this time they did oblige me, came and captured all the nine monkeys! The Forest department connection worked! (The Guvvalvaallu set up big cages to trap them, lure them into them by putting bananas, ground nut, etc., and after trapping them set them free in a far-off forest.) We just hope they would not find their way back to our garden!

With all this our income from the coconut garden has got reduced to absurd levels. Many farmers have cut down the coconut trees and going for other crops. But we were very reluctant to do that; our coconut garden was such a beautiful place with two huge wells like swimming pools. But the recent drought dealt a fatal blow to the coconut trees and out of the six hundred trees hardly 40 odd trees have survived, and these also may have to be cut down, as they need a lot of watering to survive.

Mango: learn to renounce the fruit of action

Climatically the area is suited for mango. Mango yields well every alternate year. Once a mango garden is raised (in about 7 years) it requires little maintenance and fetches fairly good income. While the income from mango for the last three decades has been steadily rising, the costs have also been rising, especially for spraying pesticides, plowing and irrigation. Of late, since two decades, the returns are not as much as they used to be earlier. Although the price of mango is highly volatile from year to year depending on the production in the district and elsewhere, farmers in our district have gone for it as it tends to give a steady income in a lump sum annually to the farmer with least labour and maintenance problems. Most farmers sell their mango crops to merchants for one or two years at a time and use the money for some urgent needs such as marriages, house construction or sinking bore wells or for medical bills. A number of juice making factories have sprung up in the district which are seasonal in operation. Their fortunes also fluctuate with the mango market.

Till 1960s nobody sprayed any pesticides on mango, or for that matter on any other crop. It started in late 1960s with the advent of DDT and Endrin. One spray was enough to take care of all the pests. Soon it stopped working and farmers started spraying Endosulfan, Chloropyrifos, followed by Monocrotophos and Synthetic pyrethroids. Minimum two sprays, one preventive spray before the flowering and one after, are the norm nowadays. Sometimes if the pest attack is severe three sprays are done. All these pesticides are deadly and countries in Europe would not consent to import these fruits. But in our country the fruits are freely eaten, there is no testing, no regulation. We were afraid we would lose all income if

we switched all the mango gardens to organic farming. Therefore we kept aside two mango gardens in another side of the village, totalling about 5 acres, for our organic experiments.

We consulted books, “experts” from various parts of the country and did several experiments, spread over several seasons: neem cake soaked in water solution sprayed on the flowers; when it didn’t work we mixed neem oil, 5ml to 25ml per litre of water in water with soap and sprayed. Once when we sprayed 25ml/litre, the leaves got “burnt” and withered. Another time we soaked neem seeds, ground them into paste, filtered and sprayed. After that we sprayed cow urine with water solution in the ratio of 1:6. Once we bought factory made azadirachtin solution and sprayed according to their instructions. Another time we sprayed chilly-garlic solution. All these trials had only limited effect in a few seasons; the pest attacks continued. I was a witness to all these trials and I persuaded Naren to stop all such sprays and leave the trees to take care of themselves. For a few years this worked. The yields were almost as good as the chemical gardens. But the last few years have seen very low yields. And we don’t know why. Was there too much watering? Or too less? Was manuring not adequate? Is it due to climate change? For we find rains arrive late by a month in the last few years and there is often unseasonal flowering. In the last few years I am concentrating on enriching the soil around the trees and not on pests.

Let me explain the yearly operations of mango crop. Flowering starts from December, goes on till January, and happens in one or two spells. Farmers usually spray a preventive spray of pesticides, followed by another spray after the flowering is completed; and a third one if pests continue. If the weather is dry, and if there is no fog in the mornings, pests are less. Cloudy, moist weather breeds pests. When the fruits start forming amidst the flowers, watering is done, around once a week or ten days, for the next two months. There should be at least two spells of rains, one around Shivaratri, in late February-beginning of March, and another around Ugadi, late March-beginning of April. These rains will make the mangoes grow in size. From May there are summer showers, which may bring wind storms or hail storms and there may be heavy loss because of fruit drop. From the beginning of June the South west monsoon starts, and fruits may ripen fast. If there are good rains, then worms get into the mangoes!

Climate change is now for real, this year mango trees bloomed in 4 instalments, right from November to now in February end! South West Monsoon rains come a month later and North East monsoon often fails; or vice-versa. There are long dry spells, and the temperatures are unusually hot with little breeze.

Fruits have to be harvested carefully; there are special plucking nets with sticks attached, for if they drop on the ground, they spoil fast. They should be harvested early in the morning and by evening they should reach the market; ideally by next day they should be sold. After harvesting, ideally, the garden should be ploughed, organic manures should be added, trees should be pruned to weed out dead twigs and branches, and if there is no rain, watering should be done once a week or so. If all

these steps are done, the trees will come to life and there will be good foliage. The main lesson we learned is that climate is the most important factor, the biggest doctor! Climate can make or mar the crop, and we are utterly helpless when the weather is unfavorable. Our efforts in the form of irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides have had but limited effects.

There is also no point in blindly copying organic methods followed by another person in another area. For instance Bhaskar Save , the veteran organic farmer in Maharashtra, grows mangoes, and *sapota*. He does not plough, he does not water around the trees, and he has made two feet deep trenches running criss-cross between the trees, with mulch material, and he waters these trenches selectively. We wanted to try it in our garden, but we realized ground water is just eight feet deep in Bhaskar Save's area, whereas in our area it is very deep, and selective watering during the fruiting season is essential for getting a good crop. However I stopped ploughing the whole garden except around the canopy of the trees, made shallow trenches, and fed them with manure, mulch and water. By not ploughing, I brought down the expenditure from 20,000 rupees to 5000 rupees, but the garden became infested with parthenium weeds, and I spent another Rs. 2 to 3000 to pull them out. Our organic mango garden has another nuisance. Red ants are plenty and workers find it very difficult to climb on the trees and harvest the fruits! These are almost entirely absent in chemical gardens. Thus every garden, every field has its special problems and one has to tailor our interventions according to specific needs of the trees/crops. The other thing to remember is: every season is a surprise, for whatever we may do or not do, the results are unpredictable. I often feel the Bhagavat Gita message, "do your duty and renounce the fruit of your action" has emerged from the uncertainties in agriculture.

Mango trade is another gamble. Prices fluctuate a lot. Merchants, however, enter into agreements of various kinds, invariably falter, ask for concessions, or delay the payments, depending on the price situation in the external markets. Price falls due to various reasons – excess production, lorry strike, rains in Bombay, Iraq war leading to diesel shortage, Rajiv Gandhi's death, and so on.

Why have I described mango cultivation in such detail? To show that although it is considered a relatively easy crop, it has its own travails- chemical or organic. Secondly organic farming is easier for small farms with annual crops, rather than big farms and horticulture crops. Imagine how much neem seeds one would need for 600 trees! And who will soak and grind all that?! Whereas a small farm of one or two acres would need just a drum or two of such mixtures. But in the recent years I have been practising Palekar methods and I have had good yields.

Even as the farmers themselves were choosing mango cultivation, the government started promoting mango cultivation on a huge scale under the MNREGA program. The MNREGA pays for the fixed costs of digging pits and planting; with some begging and borrowing from the neighbors, the farmers manage to water the saplings for the first few years. Once they are established they don't need much watering to survive. The second motivation is that since the introduction of MNREGA, hiring workers has become an expensive proposition, as well as a

vexing frustrating exercise, with workers becoming truant and undisciplined. The third motivation is that agriculture does not pay whatever crop one may go for; therefore farmers are in search of other occupations to give an additional income; since mango does not need close supervision the farmers can take up other additional occupations more easily, such as a regular job, trading, etc. Thousands of trees have been planted under MNREGA since 2006 in private gardens, with little forward linkages. Whether the farmers would realise a good income or not is anybody's guess.

Every year Naren sent mangoes to several of his friends and relatives. It used to be a major operation. You have to bring the mangoes home immediately after plucking, pack them in baskets with straw, write the addresses, take them to Pakala, 20 kms away, in the tractor-trailer, book them in the railways, take the receipts and send them by post to the addressees, so that they can claim them at the railway station. All this also cost quite a sum. His friends would often complain that it is a nuisance to go and collect the basket from the railway station and that he need not send the mangoes. But Naren would not listen. I used to call it Naren's mango diplomacy as I realized that although his friends cribbed about the job of collecting the mangoes, once they arrived, they loved them, for the mangoes were harvested at the right time and ripened properly and tasted much better than the market mangoes. Of course they also greatly appreciated Naren's affectionate gesture and the trouble he took to send them. Within the village he gave mangoes to all the poorer people who had no mango tree s/gardens of their own- the washerman, barber, potter, smiths, carpenters, mechanics, school teachers, etc. Some of the officials and functionaries at the revenue department, electricity department, etc. also received our mangoes. But this situation has changed completely. Almost all farmers who have lands have converted their food growing fields into mango gardens.

Vegetables

Vegetables used to be grown earlier for domestic consumption, whatever was surplus used to be sold. Today it has become a specialized crop, with new hybrid seeds, demanding a heavy dose of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. After a few trials we stopped growing vegetables because growing vegetables is very labour and capital intensive. Since they are highly perishable, prices fluctuate a lot. Farmers prefer to grow them in small plots of one or two acres generally. As there aren't enough cold storage plants, farmers are often put to heavy losses in vegetables, when the prices crash due to glut in the market. In 2016 a farmer who grew a plentiful crop of brinjal (egg plant) left it half way unharvested as the prices were not meeting even the harvesting costs.

Choice of crop

Price or profit is the basic motivating factor for the farmer to grow any crop. But he will make the choice of crop depending upon a variety of factors apart from the price, like cost and easy availability of labour in season, ability of the crop to withstand shortages of water supply and easy marketability, disease- proneness of the crop. It is for the same reasons that crops like sugarcane are preferred to the rest; sugarcane can withstand shortage of water for

over a month. Even if one or two wettings are missed or even more, it will still give some crop unlike say paddy or vegetables which will be wiped out; besides it is least disease prone and jaggery making can be managed with family labour with one or two hired labourers, so that even at current low prices, (not counting family labour) one can earn up to Rs.20,000 to 30,000 per acre (gross income). If dairying can take care of the running costs of labour, etc. then one can end the season with a lump sum. This is the main attraction of sugarcane, although it demands more water.

Government is all the time trying to promote horticulture crops in good crop lands instead of food field crops in a foolish manner. Farmers are also taking to them because of labour shortage and high cost of inputs and low prices for the produce. But once horticulture perennials are planted, regular annuals can't be grown. It saddens me to see the lands in our villages which once grew food crops, from bund to bund, without leaving an inch, have all been converted into mango gardens. With food crops even if the crop fails there is something to eat through the year; only a few mangoes can be eaten in a year for about two months. Food crops also provided valuable fodder for the livestock on which the village economy critically depends; and these fodder – residues of food crops came entirely free! Now they have to buy all the fodder from outside the village at very high prices, and they do so as there is no other go; the farmers depend on sale of milk for day-to-day cash flows. But government policy has failed to make food crops remunerative and has been promoting cash crops, often resulting in neither food nor cash with farmers. Although the farmers understand all this, there is ever increasing need for cash- for all kinds of purposes, and they are forced to grow cash crops instead of food crops.

The first thing one heard as soon as one entered any house was, “come and eat”. The visitor would be served a meal (however simple) if it was mealtime or a snack of roasted groundnut if nothing else. Nowadays as everything has to be purchased, people are cooking just enough for the family, no extra food for the visitor or the beggar.

The milk economy: Who milks whom?

Cattle are an important link in our farming . As already mentioned, bullocks have almost disappeared from the scene making way for milch cows. The functions which the bullocks performed are being done by tractors, electric pumpsets and automobiles. And we too tried our hand at dairying. We employed one person to look after the cows at a modest salary (which he would make up through the hearty meals three times a day at our house and other perks). We raised grass and bought groundnut cake every month along with rice bran. We often ran out of rice straw which sometimes we had to buy at great cost. Initially, we were thinking of raising some local breeds – the famous Punganur breed, which are now not traceable thanks to the extensive cross breeding. But they were not available easily and we settled for cross-bred cows with a greater percentage of the local/natural blood.

We raised grass and during the first couple of years, we did not incur any loss as we were using some of the milk for our home consumption and selling the rest. But gradually, the price of oil cake began to rise. Initially it was the same price as the milk. But now milk sells

at Rs.25 per liter while groundnut cake costs nearly twice and more! And then we started making losses. This was unsustainable. So we retired our cow man (who anyway had to be retired as we had given him the job of looking after the cows as a stop gap arrangement) with a pension. A farmer has to feed at least one kilogram of oil cake to the cow every day. It is too costly. So most farmers don't go by the rules...they feed their cows on the grass that they gather from the fields and what they grow, during the 6 months from July to December. From January they feed them on sugarcane leaf, which is freely available when farmers are making jaggery, till April; and in lean summer months, from April to June on groundnut dry residues and horse gram dry residues and so on... keeping buying oil cake and rice bran to the minimum, giving them only to lactating cows.

Nowadays after they have converted the lands into mango gardens, crop residues from field crops such as millets-pulses-oilseeds, which used to provide most of the fodder, have become scarce. Farmers are having to buy factory made cattle feed, which is slightly cheaper, instead of the traditional mix of bran-oilcake- crop residues. There is much shortage of green grass during summer, farmers are buying dry paddy straw and supplementing with factory made feed during summer season. During the monsoon season there is some grass in the mango gardens which the cows are happy to graze. The cows are taken out for grazing everyday even when there is not much grass available, for it is believed they need exercise. They are also bathed and reasonably kept clean, although water shortage makes that too difficult.

As for our cows, we decided the better thing would be to lease them out for half the share of milk, dung and urine, but it did not work out for long. I still have one cow, I have given up on milk money, instead I have told my worker to keep the cow and the milk money in exchange for dung and urine for making organic manure. I find many farmers have given up on keeping cows, preferring to buy milk than go into all this trouble.

In Chittoor district dairying is as important as farming since the region suffers from frequent droughts and farming is not always profitable. The Operation Flood brought a lot of relief to farmers in the district who earned a steady income from dairying. Today most farmers depend on milk for daily cash flows and mango for yearly cash flow. But as I explained above that too is becoming more and more difficult and farmers are leaving it just as they are leaving farming.

Most of the dairying work is done by the women. Whenever I think of women farmers, the image that comes to my mind is that of an undernourished/ emaciated woman holding the strings of a fat, well-fed cow, walking in front of her, returning after a good grazing in the evening. The women milk the cows, clean the cowshed, stall- feed the cows, bathe them and take them out for grazing. Men also pitch in all the works, especially grazing, if they are free. With the breakdown of joint families, and all the children going to school and colleges, the women have to do both house work and help in agricultural – dairying operations, without any help from either family members or workers. I find slowly they are giving up dairying, although that gives them ready cash flow for their household expenses.

Murder of milk cooperatives

In the meantime, what is saddening is the way the government has killed the milk cooperative movement initially promoted by it. When the cooperative movement was at its peak, milk sales were high and did a lot for improving the farmers' lot. Traditionally milk was never an essential item in the diet of people in this region. Cows were kept to breed bullocks and the little milk they gave was used for children, and buttermilk was consumed. When milk cooperatives were started farmers took to keeping hybrid cows with much enthusiasm, since they were paid every week or fifteen days. The money took care of all the minor routine expenses.

Elections to the cooperatives right from the village to the district level were a big political affair and even the secretary of the cooperative at the village used to make a lot of money, taking a little extra milk officially for testing and asking people to pour over the brim of the liter measured, etc. The milk for testing would never be tested. The government promoted dairy was soon reeking of corruption and they were unable to pay bills to farmers for milk supplied to them for over a year! After much agitation, the bills were paid, but the cycle repeated. At this juncture the Government allowed private dairies to operate, with our Chief Minister Chandra Babu Naidu (in opposition then) taking a lead by starting a big dairy (Heritage Foods) in the name of his wife. The private dairies have mushroomed and formed a cartel and they do not raise the price of milk, despite there being several buyers (so much for the multi buyer model of the World Bank). Now one cannot see big dairies of milk producers anywhere in our area because they are simply not economical. Selling milk as middlemen is more profitable! So farmers manage their cows by grazing them and feeding them as little as possible. This implies a decrease in milk yield but then the costs work out. Often the milk is also diluted.

As far as diseases were concerned, local breeds were much more resistant to diseases than cross breeds. People treated their cattle with traditional remedies. It was only when these failed that they resorted to the government veterinary care which, just like allopathic treatment, is prohibitively expensive. But with cross breed cows it is a different story. They have become very expensive and farmers can not take risks with their health; so modern veterinary care has become necessary. And it costs more! Of course, there were outbreaks of dangerous diseases like anthrax and there are foot and mouth disease advertisements at every veterinary hospital. But nobody panics the way they react in Britain and the West. The main problem is that they are undernourished as feeds and fodder have become prohibitively expensive; this in a country where cows are revered. Bullocks have almost become extinct, with tractors and motors taking their place. Organic farming may give a new lease of life to cattle, since FYM demand would increase. India is a number one milk producer in the world, but the milk farmer is struggling to make ends meet.

Sheep, goats and poultry were also very much priced for their meat and dung, but they have now become specialised professions and very few farmers are maintaining them. Backyard poultry still exists on a small scale as the local chicken meat is preferred over the broiler

chicken meat. People also fear that the broilers are fed with all kinds of chemicals harmful to human beings.

How are the farmers surviving in such adverse circumstances? They are betting on their children! Farmers have been educating their children feverishly, hoping to get them placed in jobs in government, or the private sector. Most young men and women of all castes have migrated to towns for education and employment; even the children are being sent to expensive residential schools. The village looks deserted, except during vacations when the young return for a holiday.

Section B

Agricultural workers

Four to five decades ago, Naren's grandfather and later his son had around 10 to 15 families of farm servants (and three to four families of poorer, dependent relatives) working throughout the year to farm around 100 acres - One to look after the hundred odd sheep, one for the 20- 40 buffaloes- one for the 40 to 60 cows, one for four pairs of bullocks, one or two workers to help in the kitchen. This went on till the 1970s. There was hardly any tenancy. All agriculture work would be done with farm servants and hired labour. Unless a severe drought struck (once in 30 to 40 years- people remember two droughts, one around 1943 and another around 1967) there was always work and always food. No one needed to go hungry.

The food consisted of rice cooked with ragi (finger millet), made into balls, called "sankatti," with some pickle or hot curry to gulp it down, with buttermilk- all home grown. Agricultural workers also caught wild pigs, collected fish in tanks and streams, ate field rats (supposed to be a very tasty meat as they eat paddy grains); atleast a dozen edible greens (leaves) were available through different seasons. There was also jowar and other millets which were more cumbersome to cook. Even smaller farmers had paid servants working on yearly basis. The children would start as cattle – grazers or goat/shepherds and graduate finally to ploughing with bullocks and preparing the paddy fields – the toughest jobs. The forest was in plenty and lot of things could be obtained "free" – fire wood, bamboo and wood for the housing and implements. 70 to 80% of the agriculture workers in our area are from the Dalit Castes (mostly Malas) and live in separate hamlets some distance away from the main village.

By the time we started farming in the late-1980s, share cropping had become common as wages in cash was increasing and farmers had little cash to pay. Share cropping was a way of avoiding high cash payments and the share cropper relied on his family for labor. We used to employ three workers on a monthly salary at home, one for cooking, one for the cows, and one for cleaning and other miscellaneous chores. Another three workers were employed on the farm on a monthly salary basis and yet another three on a share cropping basis. Altogether our farm of 32 acres supported 6 workers on a monthly salary basis and three on

sharecropping basis. In addition, farm workers were engaged on a daily wage basis as and when there was need. On an average we had five to 10 workers working on daily wage basis throughout the year.

Feeding the workers was part of the wage payments and therefore we had to cook for the workers as well, everyday there was an average of 4 to 5 workers apart from the three workers at home. We grew paddy, sugarcane made into jaggery, ground nut, millets, pulses, vegetables, including chillies, onions and coriander. All these over time got reduced to one worker at home, and two in the farms. From 2012 the borewells went dry and I had to stop paying a monthly salary to the single worker I had to look after my 10 acre farm, and employ the same person as casual daily wage worker, as there was no regular work. I also found that he worked better on daily wage than as a salaried employee!

Earlier, 40-50 years ago, the workers were paid in kind, there was hardly any cash payment-five “padis” of paddy, i.e. 2 1/2 kg per day for men and same for women. The young boys tending the cattle were hardly paid any cash except food – 5 to 6 rupees per year. The older farm servants worked for around Rs.50/- to 60/- per year but fed thrice a day. Nowadays thanks to MNREGA, the real wages have risen for agricultural workers.

MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was legislated in 2005, after much struggle for bringing a semblance of guarantee for employment in rural areas and preventing rural to urban migration. Theoretically it guarantees employment for 150 days on demand for the registered workers at liberal piece rates. There are lots of problems in the implementation of the program. Far from 150 days it gives employment for hardly 40 days in the state of Andhra Pradesh, and that too not for everyone. It has not also stopped migration to towns. But what it has achieved is to give an initial push for raising the rural wages, after which rural wages have remained high. Women are paid Rs.120 to 150 plus a meal per day, and for men it is Rs.250 without food and Rs.200 with food per day. And for tough work like fencing, cutting trees the wages are more. The closer one is to the town, the costlier is the labour and more difficult to get. The wages in cities and towns are much higher and wage workers are continuing to migrate out of the villages. Another factor is education; as most young men have got educated and completed school, they are reluctant to take up farm work, prefer to migrate to towns and cities for a white collar employment. All this has resulted in an acute shortage of workers in the rural areas. Farmers have responded to this by switching to less labor crops and mechanization. Therefore although real wages for the agricultural workers have indeed risen, the uncertainty of getting work remains, pushing them to towns.

The agricultural workers are able to afford a better standard of life than before. Government has done quite a lot in improving their standard of life. Specific schemes for housing, reservations in education and government employment have greatly helped them. Their housing, clothing, have improved. So also their toiletry has become expensive. There is electricity in every house. Almost every house has a TV set. And almost everyone sports a mobile phone. Motorcycles are becoming common. Pukka houses have come up for almost every family with government assistance. Invariably people spend much more than the

subsidy amount and build a reasonably bigger house, “for one builds a house just once in a life time.” Some families have shifted to Tirupati, working in hospitals, restaurants and in construction work. One lady managed to become a doctor in government service, two have joined the police and one became a librarian in the university and even installed a telephone for his parents in the village, so that he can keep in touch with them. These people send money to their aged parents and dependents back home.

The women agricultural workers have been greatly benefited by the DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) self-help group movement. Almost every woman from across all castes in the village is a member of a DWCRA self-help group. They have become the major customers of banks in rural areas. They attend the meetings regularly and enthusiastically, and they have been able to avail loans for various purposes- cows, house construction, children’s education, marriage, etc. Their horizons have broadened, and confidence much higher. Nowadays they find it demeaning to work as domestic workers in high caste homes. They dress colorfully, move about a lot, often outside the village, either singly or in groups, speak to officials quite confidently.

The haves and the have-nots

If one were to make a class analysis, to compare the situation prevailing about 60 years ago, (in the 1960s) there were quite a few big landlords. My uncle (and father combined) controlled around 90 to 100 acres. The Reddy landlord (B) in the neighbouring village controlled some 400 and odd acres. A third Reddy landlord in a village, let’s say C, controlled something like 200 acres. A Reddy in village D further down controlled about 1000 acres. A couple of kilometers down the line a Komati Setty family also controlled over a 1000 acres. They used to lend money even to the then Palegar Zamindar and acquired substantial land through money lending and over-due interest payments. The Palegar-zamindar of the area declined soon after the abolition of the zamindar estates in the 1950s itself, thanks to their bad habits of wine, and women and little education. The Reddy from village C used to work as a sort of accountant to the Palegar and acquired a lot of wasteland and other lands misusing his position. But his sons got into drink and squandered the entire property within one generation. Many of the members of this family have shifted out of the village, one of them even to the USA. The Settys, thanks to the Land Ceiling Act and the growing political weight of the Reddys after independence, also disposed off most of their lands and many of their family members have migrated to urban areas.

The 1000-acre owning Reddy family (D) is well established and prospered through handloom business in the earlier days and acquired a lot of land in the area. They have large tracts of coconut and mango gardens. The younger generation (after the initial founder) started a confectionery factory (Nutrine) in Chittoor and has done very well, apart from a small ground nut oil crushing unit. Thanks to the Land Ceiling Act they too divided their land into apparently several bits. They have surrendered over 100 acres of dry lands to the government on paper which was redistributed to the poor. The title deeds continue to be with these landlords although the local poor know that they are the technical owners. But no one dares to question.

Our neighbour, the Landlord B still controls about 100 acres. After distributing his 400+ acres (much of it acquired through liquor business in the British period) in the names of his 6 children and himself, shifting categories of land to accommodate the maximum, he ultimately surrendered some 5 acres to the government which was distributed among some Dalits who happen to be his farm servants. The lands continue to be in his possession and enjoyment (surrounded by lands of the Reddy landlord). If any enquiry is done officially, the title holders will reply that they are the owners and enjoying the land! This particular family has enjoyed some political clout, having been aggressive. But the son of the landlord has since shifted to Bangalore and another to Chennai much earlier. They have businesses in Chennai and even Singapore and Bangalore. They have also set up a juice factory based on mango pulp right at the village. One grandson of the landlord has returned from the city and has taken charge and seems to be doing reasonably well. They still continue on a small scale, holding “durbars” (court) and settling disputes between villagers belonging to some 15 villages around.

Due to the traditional rivalry between the Kammas and Reddys (both Sudra peasant castes) the Kammas of the surrounding villages resent the suzerainty of the Reddy landlord. The Reddys of our neighboring hamlets resent the weight of my uncle and proclaim loyalty to the Reddy landlord of the neighboring village! In our family, while my grandfather built up the assets through his aggressive buying and converting into mango gardens and doing mango business (initiating it in the area), my uncle lacked the initiative and hardly added another 20 acres. My father was in government service at Hyderabad and the property was divided between the two, with a little extra going to my uncle. Except for one, the children of my uncle have not been very enterprising and they have more or less managed to keep their share of property of around 12 acres each. One son (who studied up to M.Phil in Economics) runs a mango business in the neighbouring market in season and is doing fairly well for himself, but has not done well enough to acquire more land.

Many of the disputes continue to be at the level of the village first at informal sittings presided over by the elders agreed upon by both the disputing parties. These are called madhyasthams, roughly translatable as arbitration. When madhyasthams fail people go to the police and courts. These arbitrations happened regularly over a wide range of issues: boundary disputes, partition dissatisfactions, marital matters, skirmishes among brothers, inter-caste disputes, etc. These were held usually at the temple, and often started late at night, after dinner. The madhyasthams are a very interesting affair. The elders are masters at the game of bringing out the truth from the horses' mouth. They start with a free for all by the disputing parties, with a lot of din and noise, shouting and posturing, a kind of letting off the steam. After a round of this, the elders calm them down and start the proceedings and deftly make the parties themselves to confess their wrongs. At the end even the punishment would look as if the wrong doers themselves decided upon it!

The new rich

A Kamma family from our neighbouring village closely related to us, is typical of the rise of the new class of landlord- political leader. During my grandfather's time, they had about half the size of our property (around 50 acres). The eldest among them was hard working, tight fisted and enterprising. He used to run a small tin shed cinema theatre, locally partnered a rice mill and a tractor along with my uncle and kept buying a lot of dry rainfed lands cheaply and converting them into mango gardens. Even after dividing with his brothers he has managed to hold on to 100 acres for his four sons, mostly in mango gardens. His eldest son is active in the ruling political party and aspiring to be an M.L.A. in the near future; he has landed several contracts for road works, made a neat profit of around Rs.10 lakhs in just one such contract two years ago and has not looked back. Most of the political leaders in the area are typically contractors cum wine shop dealers cum owners of big mango gardens (100 to 200 acres sometimes more). The bigger ones have businesses in cities as well. They have together succeeded in making elections a very expensive affair with liquor and cash flowing freely.

Most of the farmers on the other hand in our area have very small holdings. A farmer having 100 guntas (7 acres) of wet land is considered rich, and by village standards, he is indeed rich. However, due to the depressing agriculture scenario, almost everybody is trying to get out of agriculture! Everyone wants his children to study and get a good job in the city or do some business.

Elections have however been a positive turning point in class and caste relations. Earlier, the local landlord's word was law. Since the time of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister in the Seventies, there has been a dramatic change especially with regard to the Dalits. Distribution of government lands to the Dalits, housing schemes, special laws to protect them, and her efforts at an alliance of castes against the landed castes, her constant refrain of garibi hatao ("remove poverty") and saving the Dalits, and the landed class's abuses hurled against her, endeared her to Dalits so much so that she soon became an "amma," a "mother" for them. At many places fierce struggles took place to allow the Dalits to cast their vote freely for the Congress party. The landed gentry of Reddys and Kammas (mostly in this area) fiercely opposed them, themselves supporting the Janata party. With the rise of the Telugu Desam of NTR (backed by Kammas and Backward Castes) followed by Chandra Babu Naidu, the Congress has resumed its role as a Reddy party (much more emphatically than ever). But the Dalits who supported the Congress are nowhere near political power. One is reminded of Victor Hugo's comment about "the ruling class willing to do everything for the poor/downtrodden except get off their back" that aptly sums up the situation.

Talking about elections, unlike in urban India, people take a lot of trouble to come and vote. People living outside the village take the trouble to reach the village by trains and buses just to vote. People say, "If I don't vote, isn't it like I am dead?" Booth capturing has become a thing of the past, at least in our village. And there is a story behind it. The first election we encountered, that was about twenty five odd years ago, was a big turning point for the

election process in our village. The voting booth was in the neighbouring panchayat dominated by the Reddys. By the time people from our village reached the booth, all our votes had already been cast by the youth of the Reddy community! And we were shooed back. Naren petitioned the government for a separate booth to be located in our own panchayat. When the next elections came around we had a separate booth in our panchayat. Naren actively campaigned within the panchayat urging everyone to vote freely without fear, and to desist from proxy voting. On the day of the elections, voting was already on its way, when suddenly a group of youth from same the neighboring village, drunk, carrying sticks, cycle chains, shouting abuses, descended on the booth and started beating up some of the voters lined up in the queue. I was watching this scene and was mortally afraid that they would rain some blows on Naren's bald head. But for some reason they didn't target Naren or me; we both started to calm them down and managed to send them away, but only after a lot of scuffle.

Naren now petitioned for re-poll with police protection. A re-poll was permitted and was conducted peacefully. That gave confidence to the people both in the system and Naren. Since then every election has been conducted in our village without any trouble and without any proxy voting. However we have not been able to stop the heinous practice of distributing money and liquor before elections. Candidates from all the major parties distribute money and liquor the night or two before elections. Elections have become a festival time for the Dalits. They accept money from all the parties and vote for whoever they want. They say, we didn't ask for either money or liquor, but if they come on their own, why not accept? Meanwhile political consciousness has increased and booth capturing has become much less throughout the state, at least much less strident.

Castes and Untouchability: Between Gandhi and Ambedkar

Despite our background in sociology the first shock in the village was the practice of untouchability. We knew that Dalits were not allowed inside the houses of other caste people. But being part of a household in which you could not take your Dalit friends /acquaintances inside, gave us a queasy feeling to say the least. It prompted us to build a separate house for my family as quickly as possible. (It was also required for reasons of other conveniences as well). But the extent of the practice was really appalling and we realized this only when we started living in the village. At the tea shops in the central village, Dalits were allotted separate glasses which would be hanging by a wire loop or kept aside at a corner visible for all those who should know. An Dalit wanting tea/coffee had to take the glass and hold it while the tea shop owner would pour the tea from a height. The Dalit gentleman after drinking the tea has to hold the glass again for the owner to pour some water so that the Dalit customer can wash the glass and keep it back in its pristine position. This in the 1980s! Dalits were not allowed into the eating places. They had to stand or sit outside or on special benches inside especially allotted for them. They would not be served in plates but in leaves which after they finish eating they would have to pick up and throw outside.

There are stone slabs outside or in the centre of each village or raised platforms under a tree on which people squat and chit chat, read newspapers, or settle disputes. But Dalits dare not sit on them... especially at bus stops in the village. These are unwritten rules. If there are temples in the caste village with closed walls, Dalits cannot enter them. There were still a few villages where the Dalits cannot pass through the caste Hindu streets wearing footwear. If a Dalit person was riding a cycle and another caste person happens to be walking along the road, in whichever direction, he must get down from the bicycle and wait for the other caste person to walk across, after wishing him and taking his approval to cross him, he could ride again, as a mark of respect. If the cycle rider rang his bell to warn of his coming he was considered haughty. If another caste person, even of a younger age passed through the street of an Dalit hamlet, all the Dalits, irrespective of age, had to stand up, as a mark of respect. (The Dalit women also do the same for Dalit men). The village barber or washerman does not serve them as they are below his status and besides the other caste people will no longer use his services. This resulted in the Dalits appointing one of their own caste persons as their washerman and behave towards him and his family exactly as the caste Hindus do to their washerman! They consider the washer family slightly lower and do not intermarry or eat with them. But in most villages these

days all the Dalit boys know to cut their hair and each family usually washes its own clothes, meaning the womenfolk do the job. The younger boys often patronize the washerman at the central village who will iron their clothes, if necessary. But in quite a few villages this is still not possible. The owners of tea shops, barber shops etc. also do not object if the customer is “reasonably dressed” like the students wearing shirt and trousers. The same way Dalit officials are nowadays allowed to enter the houses and sit on chairs if they are on official visit. In quite a few villages, Dalits have never voted at all or only voted according to the wishes of the local bigwigs as they are dependent on them for their daily survival. Passage to most Dalit villages is only through the caste village which can be barred for erring members. Even the houses where the Dalit live and the burial grounds are often technically owned by people of other castes – it helps to keep them on tender hooks.

Much of the tension between Dalits and upper castes has occurred on such issues – at eating places, tea shops, sitting on benches, not showing due respect by getting up, demanding their right to vote or inter-caste marriage often involving physical assault and abuse. Most of those who lead such struggles are those who are going to colleges or having some land, jobs (mostly government, railways, military) or some independent source of income. At times factions between the other castes or even within a caste help in assertion of their rights by Dalits. Of late, a lot of tension has been generated in struggles to recover land assigned in the name of Dalits or tamarind trees which ought to be assigned to the poor.

Naren did a small satyagraha at home! When we started living in the village, we found that while the non-Dalit workers were freely allowed to enter inside the homes and eat in the kitchen, Dalits were invariably served food outside in leaves or in separate plates and glasses. Naren wanted this to be stopped. He wanted them to enter our house freely and eat

in the kitchen just as the non-Dalit workers did. My father-in-law, a freedom fighter in his younger days, however, chose to be conventional, although in principle he agreed with Naren. Be a Roman in Rome, he used to say. After a few days of discussions, Naren declared that he would not eat at the dining table with father-in-law, that he would eat on the floor in kitchen along with both Dalit and non-Dalit workers. And started doing so. When I was faced with the question of where I should eat, I naturally followed Naren. Father-in-law could not stop him. Nor did he want to give in to Naren. But Naren would still sit with him at the dining table in the dining room and wait till he finished his meal and then eat in the kitchen. This went on for a few years, till father-in-law died, after which of course the Dalits had free entry into our house and ate wherever it was convenient, sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes at the table, and sometimes outside under the pandal in the courtyard if there were too many people and there was not enough room inside.

Despite their intense rivalries when a situation of Dalit versus upper caste develops, the upper caste members close ranks. There are several voluntary organizations like the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha which had just come into existence, working among Dalits in Chittoor district and all of them, including us, rallied together and campaigned against the practice of untouchability. The campaigns reached a peak during the Ambedkar Centenary celebrations in 1991, and we documented systematically the widespread variety of practices of untouchability with the help of co-operative district officials. We managed to control, if not put an end to such practices as separate tea glasses in tea shops and hotels in the main centre villages where we were working. Slowly such practices are being discontinued.

“The ‘untouchable’ to me, is compared to us, really a Harijan—a man of God and we are ‘Durjan’ (men of evil). For whilst the ‘untouchable’ has toiled and soiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him. We are solely responsible for all the shortcomings and faults that we lay at the door of these ‘untouchables.’ It is still open to us to be Harijan ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting our sins against them.”

Mahatma Gandhi.

“You must abolish your slavery yourselves. Do not depend for its abolition upon God or a superman. Your salvation lies in political power and not in making pilgrimages and observance of fasts.”

B.R. Ambedkar

Where the Dalits have been well organized under some sangam or the other (mostly sponsored by NGOs) they have been able to exercise their vote somewhat freely and also stand up to the other caste people. Such clashes nowadays result in filing of cases under SC, ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act under which no bail can be granted to the accused, who in turn has to prove his/her innocence. Moreover, the complainant when the case is registered

will be paid some money by the Department of Social Welfare, and more if the case is actually proved. So the other castes do not as readily beat or abuse the Dalits as they used to earlier. But to counter this Act, they also have a weapon – a case of attempt to rape is foisted on the Dalit, which is also equally powerful, as the accused has to prove his innocence and no bail is granted when the case is registered! Of course, it all depends upon how strongly or how well the rival parties are organized. A lot of hard bargaining goes on and usually some settlement is reached (an apology and/or some monetary consideration).

Change and adaptation

We were quite surprised at how quickly people adapt to the change. Even in villages where untouchability is severely practiced, a government official who happens to be a Dalit is treated with respect, especially if he is a police officer! Not so much the Dalit school teacher, so power begets respect! One finds the very same people who bitterly opposed or were hesitant to changing the practices of untouchability are nowadays chatting freely with Dalits. In our house the cook is a Dalit from the local hamlet. What is surprising is how people (other caste persons) fairly quickly (within two to three years) adjusted to the new situation. They now not only eat in our house, food cooked by her but she also visits some of their houses. But most other Dalits do not try and are not invited into the houses of upper castes. But there are signs of growing leniency and adjustment though it would need several powerful social, political and economic campaigns before untouchability practices disappear altogether. Untouchability feelings continue underground.

The caste system and the politics of numbers

Dalits constitute 18% of the population in the district (according to a voter survey conducted by the Telugu Desam Party). 60 to 70% of the Dalit households are primarily agricultural workers. The rest are partly marginal farmers doing odd jobs in towns like masonry work or in hotels or factories or government jobs (mostly teachers). The upper castes in our area are either Reddys (12%) or Naidus (6.4%) who mainly own the best cultivable lands in the area. Both of them belong to the Sudra Varna in the caste hierarchy. The Reddys were the traditionally dominant feudal community whose monopoly was shaken by the rise of the Telugu Desam with which the Kamma Naidus identify themselves. They are closely followed by the Balija community who although constituting 9.2% of the population but are not a dominant economic force, and have been struggling across the state for a BC (Backward Caste) status and adequate political representation. The other sizable community is that of Muslims (7.6%) who tend to concentrate in the small towns of the district. They are generally poor and live by doing petty business. Some of them have prospered in fruit business and other such enterprises. They are present throughout the district and are generally perceived by other communities as just one more caste --- somewhat like the BCs and interestingly, their behaviour towards the Dalits is more or less the same as that of other castes. In our campaigns against untouchability we often had to fight with Muslim tea stall owners for maintaining separate tea glasses for Dalits.

Thanks to the politicization and democratization through elections, in bus transport, hotels, school and colleges, cinemas, things are moving; albeit slowly towards a more egalitarian

inter- caste relations. But it is clear from past experience with untouchability and apartheid that these practices do not simply wither away with development. Remember the practice of “bussing” in Southern USA where blacks had to sit in the rear seats of a bus; a practice in vogue till the early sixties, till Martin Luther King led the campaign, as well as our own experiences in putting an end to the practices of untouchability.

But one thing has become clear to us, through our stay in the village that while untouchability can be put to an end, caste will not go away. Caste is a reality of Indian society. It is now clear to me why caste has survived for over five thousand years and why it still continues to do so. It is an identity – a positive identity. It is the predominant social identity in villages. It gives a sense of security – with relatives, kith and kin, in times of need, for employment, sickness, death, marriage, etc. reinforced each time the community gathers for such occasions and functions. People may adjust to inter-caste marriages (except in case of marriages by upper caste Hindus with Dalits or with Muslims), with the caste identity of the male predominating.

The Dalits also are as “casteist” as others. The Malas and Madigas are at loggerheads with each other. The mobilization of Madigas as a separate community wronged at the hands of Malas who are supposed to have cornered most of the benefits in the name of reservations (partly true) and the competing calls of the political parties have badly splintered the Dalits into several groups and the community lies dissipated feeling betrayed by its leadership. The practice of untouchability sustaining down the years into the 21st century, is basically due to its function of reinforcement of relations of dominance and dependence. Unless these relationships are shaken to make people of different castes (who are mutually dependent) interact on a more equitable footing and make them reasonably independent of each other in economic terms, untouchability will not go.

Therefore economic reforms are a necessary condition of Dalit liberation but are not sufficient. By themselves economic reforms cannot change the relationships of the traditional caste culture. They have to go hand in hand with social reform campaigns for removal of untouchability – both by Dalit assertion campaigns a la Ambedkar and by caste Hindu campaigning among other castes – a la Gandhi. Both are complementary. Both are needed however much the Ambedkarites might revile Gandhi and vice versa. In fact Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism (and not Islam or Christianity) heralds the possible confluence of these two streams of struggle towards a new flowering, submerging untouchability in the annals of history.

Today, there are no major social campaigns against untouchability at the village level nor is there any movement of significance demanding redistribution of economic resources, especially land, to Dalits. The National campaign for Dalit Human Rights has been fairly successful in making the voice of Dalits heard at the U.N. and the National level equating untouchability with apartheid. While its efforts at the international and national level are commendable it is sad to see the campaign at the local level against untouchability is hardly noticeable. It is a welcome sign that the Communist Party Marxist (CPM) of late has woken

up (better late than never) to the evil practice of untouchability and has been launching campaigns against such practices for the last three years in the name of *Kula Vivakshata Vyatireka Porata Committee* i.e. struggle committee against caste discrimination. It may be noticed that the committee of the CPM is campaigning not for abolition of caste but only against caste discrimination, that is, they seem to have realized that the fight against caste and against caste discrimination are two different things. Interestingly, the removal of untouchability, although an important demand, is not at the top of the agenda of any of the Dalit political parties. They are more interested in forming caste alliances with other backward castes to oust the upper and middle castes from power – Bahujan Samaj theory. Capturing political power through the ballot with their numbers seems to be their strategy and once in power they expect social and economic justice to flow. They do not spell out any specific economic agenda for Dalit liberation unlike the communists who emphasize the economic liberation of Dalits as primary.

From the point of view of upper castes, Sharad Joshi, a noted farmers' leader, made an interesting observation. He said that when the farmer's economic status is improving he will not bother much about the practices of untouchability and caste hierarchy. It is only when the position of farmers is not improving or on the contrary is declining, while certain sections/families of Dalits are improving, through jobs, lands etc. with the consequent claims to equality by the latter that the other caste people tend to be very particular about maintaining their status. For, after all, it is only the social status (by birth) that is still left with them, having been deprived of any economic improvement and getting deeper and deeper into debt. And all the anger and frustration of their situation gets concentrated into focusing on the maintenance of practices of untouchability and caste discrimination. This situation is particularly noticeable in the case of many backward communities who are only a little above the Dalits in caste hierarchy such as the Wadders (stone cutters), Yadavs, Ekira Dora, Balijas etc, as also among the poor or middle farmer Kammas and Reddys. A similar situation prevails between the Vanniar and the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. We thus have a funny situation, with the big land owners, and rich urbanites professing caste liberalism and against the practice or at least willing to stop practicing untouchability, while the lower peasant castes insist on maintenance of untouchability and associated practices which would in turn reinforce his status and dominance in all spheres.

Land reforms for Dalits

Around 75% of the Dalits in the rural areas are agricultural workers. To any one observing their situation, it is quite clear that a little land with water supply will make a tremendous difference to these Dalit families, in terms of survival, standard of living and most importantly as a launching pad for improving their status and economic position. The freedom that even ½ an acre of wet land can bestow on a family, the dignity it enjoins is to be seen to be believed. Despite all the theories about land fragmentation and their unproductive nature and therefore the need for land consolidation (although there is a lot of truth in this contention), it makes a lot of economic, social and political sense to ensure that each landless poor Dalit family across the country is in control of at least ½ an acre of wet land. As P.S.

Appu (1996) pointed out, distribution of ten cents of wet land to each Dalit family in Kerala and land distribution accompanied by other inputs had tremendous difference in the lives of Dalits in some areas of Bihar. Similar has been the experience in Andhra Pradesh wherever Dalits have gained control over some wet land.

The question is as to whether there is enough of such wet land to go around? Let us make a simple calculation. For the 1 crore Dalits meaning 20 lakh families, 14 lakhs would be living in villages (70%). Of them 75% are dependent on agriculture as workers i.e. around 10.5 lakh families. Which means the Government would have to acquire around 6 lakh acres of wet land for redistribution to Dalit families across the state. Out of some 1 crore acres of wet land in the state is it too much to ask for just 6%?

So there is land, enough for every one's need but not for any one's greed, as Mahatma Gandhi would put it!

Realizing the importance of land reforms as revealed by the few surveys carried out and our own experience in the field, most of the NGOs working for Dalit empowerment in Chittoor district, as well as the mass organizations of the left parties, especially Communist Party of India and the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha decided to work together in 1996. A body called, "Movement for Implementation of Land Reforms" (Bhoosamskarana Kaaryaacharana Udhayamam or BSKU) was formed with the sole purpose of getting the various land reforms laws implemented, to assist the poor to take possession of the lands that ought to be in their possession even according to the existing legislation. This was a single point agenda and any one group/individual could be part of this effort irrespective of their other activities. The only rule was that political parties could not participate directly but only through their mass organizations, as otherwise the whole exercise could get easily branded as a front of some party or the other and the struggle as a show to build up strength for the party. Naren was made the Convener of this movement and till now we did succeed in getting about 12,000 acres of land into the possession of the poor. This was possible as a local organization of the poor existed in the form of a union and with the confidence that a district level association of unions was backing up the effort. We were helped a great deal by some progressive Collectors, Joint Collectors and Assistant Collectors (IAS Officials) who shared a lot of information on land issues with us. We had periodical reviews on the demands and issues we had put forth to them in our public rallies.

The BSKU has had a three pronged strategy to carry on with their work.

1. To gather detailed information through NGOs/peoples organizations, supported by government records on specific cases, complete with survey numbers, in whose possession the land is at present, what is expected of the government, etc. The 40 odd organizations got active collecting the details and submitted a huge document to the Collector. They collected information under the following categories in their respective areas in the Chittoor district:

- Government Land in possession of poor people but has no legal title (patta).*
- Assigned Land with patta but not in possession.*

- Land under dispute between Revenue and Forest Depts.
- Ceiling surplus lands
- Estate/Inam lands in possession of ineligible persons
- Temple, Mutt, Waqf Lands
- Co-operative Joint Farming Societies(CJFS) Lands
- Bhoodan lands
- Others
- Tamarind trees in Government lands.

2. To submit formal petitions to the district government at all levels- Mandal Revenue Office (MRO), Revenue Division Office (RDO), and District Collector, taking specific cases for judgments and remedies. This is how Naren landed up at the Collectorate on every Monday with specific cases and the affected persons. Once he presented the cases to the Collector, he would follow up with their rulings/ instructions the rest of the time.

The Collectors and Joint Collectors were usually very cooperative, but the lower level officers were often procrastinating, delaying, dodging, etc. Therefore scores of visits had to be made to these offices, to persuade and to point out the legalities. Almost every MRO knew Naren and his colleagues.

3. When the cases were not getting resolved, the BSKU would decide to enter the land forcibly and take possession – clear the bushes, plough and sow the land. The Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vrtthidarula Union (AP Agricultural Workers Union or APVVU) had a tractor which was used for such purposes. The local people with tractors would not want to get entangled in such activities. The people on whose behalf such actions were undertaken were often afraid of violence, police, arrests, etc. but Naren would coax them with courage, would often put himself as the first respondent/accused, etc. Several such actions were done in the last 15 years, for example, Moravapalle in Chandragiri mandal, Avulapalli in Somala mandal, Vidhyut Sadasivapuram in Puttur mandal, Pulicherla in Pulicherla mandal, etc.

It is well known land reforms bring a great deal of change for the better in the life of the beneficiaries. For instance, one of the beneficiaries who got 2 acres allotted to him with some mango trees, has harvested mango for three seasons now, planted another 100 mango saplings under the NREG scheme which supports him for another three years for watering, fencing, etc. He has taken a loan of Rs. 20, 000 from the bank for land improvement; his sons are going to school. He is hopeful that his lot would improve even more in about seven years when the mango trees would start yielding.!

The serious involvement of the top officials in the district did make the local revenue officials from the Mandal Revenue Officer to the Village Accounts Officer squirm a little in their seats. When the senior officer beckons, they are at their colonial best serving their senior masters full of “yes sir” and “no sir.” Definite deadlines are fixed and sometimes even reviewed. But very little actually moves! There is always some good excuse. Of late, they are full of campaigns and programmes ordered from Hyderabad by the Honourable Chief Minister, like Janma Bhoomi, Neeru-Meeru (Water and You), clean and green, micro level

planning etc. By the time they finish running around under one programme the Chief Minister is ready with an another programme with immediate collection of data and reviews...the breakneck speed for a machinery not used to moving around has resulted in gross fudging of figures and routine administration turning to a standstill. The revenue officials are so busy they simply don't seem to have the time to attend to our land issues. In the meantime, the top revenue officials are frequently transferred and one has to begin all over again. The lower level revenue officials know this game. The most powerful official in the revenue department is not the District Collector but the Village Accounts Officer. He is the main mischief maker. He is a powerful man. He can produce any record, change any record. And the courts are always ready to oblige with a "stay" which can then drag on for years endlessly from one court to another and generations will pass – no law will be implemented, no justice will be done. For those poor who take the law seriously, to get the land reform laws implemented would mean spending lakhs of rupees (not just thousands) and running behind those fleecing lawyers and lethargic courts. This is no way to get justice.

We had submitted a list of issues involving some 40,000 acres to the state government. While some issues in which there was no strong adversary were solved by the administration, most of the rest remain unresolved. A strong and vibrant people's movement is the only answer. But those who should be organizing it seem to want to run away from the responsibility! It is much easier to work on issues which do not involve conflicting class interests. Especially for funded NGOs this is a major problem. The thin cadres of the political parties have to double or triple as spokespersons for so many of their front organizations that they have little time to spare for such activities and are unable to do much especially in terms of follow up action. The non-parliamentary left, meaning various Marxist / Leninist groups are non-existent in our area. But even if they enter, as it happened in the past in the eastern taluks, the main issues are side-tracked by their murder politics into law and order problems inviting severe repression against even the smallest of activities.

The BSKU (land rights movement) in Chittoor district has a signature song, which is sung with appropriate dance movement. It is in the form of a conversation between a woman and a man.

Tell me, Where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Woman : Uncle, the government distributed some land to us recently and gave us pattas (title deed papers). I want to know where my land is. How do I go about it?

Man : Oh, it is very simple, you go to the Sarpanch and he will tell you.

Woman : So I went with the patta papers to the Sarpanch. He saw the patta papers and laughed loudly, "such a land is not there in our panchayat at all!" he said.

Tell me, Where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Woman : Uncle, as you advised I took the papers to the Sarpanch and he said there is no such land in the whole of our panchayat! Uncle, what should I do now? I so very much want to get my land.

Man : Oh, is it? Then you should go to the MRO, the man who sits like a king in the Mandal office.

Woman : So I went to the MRO. He saw the patta papers, called the RI (Revenue Inspector), and turned the file. Then he called the guard and asked him to throw me out!

Tell me, Where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Woman : Uncle, now what should I do uncle, I went to the MRO and he threw me out.

Man : Oh, did he do that? Then you better go to the Collector who sits in Chittoor.

Woman : So I did go to the Collector and showed him my patta papers. He called the RDO (Revenue Division Officer), saw the paper and turned the file, and said, "I am afraid the land in your patta does not exist in the whole of our district!"

Oh, Tell me where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Woman : Now what should I do? Surely the government won't tell lies!

Man : Don't lose heart! Go straight to Hyderabad and meet the Chief Minister, the man who smiles and wears a red turban in the hoardings,

he is the one who gave you all the pattas, isn't it, go meet him, your job will be done!

Woman : So I went to Hyderabad and met the CM. He saw the patta, pressed the Buttons on his computer, turned the file and said, after a long time, "Go keep these papers safely in a box." Uncle, what does he mean by that?

Oh, Please Tell me, where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Man : What he means is when you have kids, and your kids have kids, the land will still be yours, which is why he has asked you to keep it safely.

Woman : Uncle, I have had enough, listening to you I have gone around all the offices. Now I have decided to make a sangam of all the people like me.

Oh, my worker-brothers-sisters, come let us organize,

let us make a sangam, and let us see to the end of this matter.

This is a sangam of the workers; this is a sangam of the hungry

This is a sangam of the poor, but this is a sangam worth its name!

Oh, my worker-brothers-sisters, come let us organize, let us make the sangam!

Epilogue

In 2013 I moved out of the village due to acute drinking water shortage, as described before. Since then I visit the village once in a month or in two months, take care of the farm by giving instructions to my worker on the phone (we have some water now). Earlier I was a very hardly-working farmer, now a phone-y farmer! I continue to be a computer-activist in the farmers' movements. The organic movement is picking up; and some groups are also putting a great deal of pressure on the governments to formulate farmer-friendly policies and programs. Although this seems to be a "heads you lose-tails I win" kind of a world for farmers I am putting my faith and hope in people's wisdom and common sense; not without a pinch of pessimism as somebody said, "common sense is anything but common!"

References:

1. Uma Shankari 1991: “Major Problems in Minor Irrigation”
<http://www.epw.in/journal/1991/39/review-agriculture-uncategorised/tanks-major-problems-minor-irrigation.html>
2. Narendranath,G. et al.<http://www.epw.in/journal/2005/53/review-agriculture-review-issues-specials/free-or-not-free-power.html>
3. <http://www.epw.in/journal/1989/21/special-articles/what-happening-cows-and-bulls-sundarapalle.html>
4. 2010: G. Narendranath ed. Uma Shankari. Dilemmas in Agriculture: A Personal Story. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, Delhi.
<http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/dilemma-naren.pdf>
5. Uma Shankari: 2015. “Cow and Bull Story of Venkatramapuram” in Knowledge for Change: In memory of Dr. N.K. Sanghi. WASSAN Foundation and Permanent Green. Hyderabad.
6. Appu, P.S. Land Reforms in India. 1996. Vikas Publishing House, Delhi.