

MAKING AGRI-PRENEURS OUT OF FARMERS



Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh ranks second in terms of aridity, among all the districts in India, having an average annual rainfall of 526 mm. Its climate is characterised by prolonged dry spells, followed by few and irregular days of rainfall. Anantapur has been consistently facing drought conditions over the past many years, causing severe stress on the local economy, especially agriculture.

In the present decade, almost six years were rainfall deficient, resulting in severe drought conditions. These characteristics have forced the farmers in Anantapur to cultivate only those crops which can withstand drought conditions and can be sustained with limited water resources. The rich crop diversity in the district (particularly in millets and pulses that are naturally drought resistant) has eroded over time, giving way to monocropping of groundnut.

Not just Anantapur, farmers across the state continue to struggle to make their ends meet. The situation is even worse for women farmers. As per a survey conducted by Landesa in 2013, only 13 percent of women surveyed, whose parents own land, said they have inherited land or expect to inherit land from their parents. Women inheriting land is so uncommon that 69 percent of the women surveyed said they did not know of a single case where a woman had inherited land from her parents. On the other hand, proportion of women agricultural labour is more than male labour in all the districts of Andhra. Yet, they are at the receiving end of injustice and inequality.

One organisation is trying to change this. Started in 2001, Mahila Abhivruddhi Society (APMAS) by Mr CS Reddy aims to empower women, farmers, and other marginalised communities. It works towards strengthening Self Help Groups for holistic development of the

marginalised communities.

In Anantapur, APMAS started Bhulakshmi FPO which implemented a community based seed system to decentralise the seeds for rain fed agriculture. Seed producers were linked with seed consumers and high quality seeds of multiple crops, and not just groundnuts were produced and supplied. This is just one out of many examples of community-level change APMAS has brought.

What they do?

APMAS expertises in promoting, training and mentoring women SHGs and SHG federations. They also work closely with farmer groups to create agriculture-based livelihoods and promotion of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPO). The organisation has set a momentum for promoting farming as an enterprise.

“Farmers face several issues today, like lack of remunerative prices, unavailability of quality inputs, high cost of cultivation, lack of access to technology and information. Promotion of sustainable Farmer Producer Organisations has emerged as an effective solution to the farmers’ issues in the past decade,” Padmasri Nivedita, Project Coordinator at APMAS, said.

Ensuring the sustainability and business growth of these organisations is a major issue as agriculture is not perceived as a business.

They provide valuable knowledge and crucial information, build social capital and provide capacity building to the marginalised community. The organisation also offers advocacy, monitoring, research, and gender mainstreaming through its various programs. “We have also developed self-learning modules on collective marketing, primary processing and



secondary processing by FPOs,” said CS Reddy, Founder & CEO of APMAS.

The key idea is to make the marginalised community self-reliant and earn through dignity. APMAS has not only promoted over 47 FPOs in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana but is also a leading resource support agency (RSA) of NABARD in Andhra Pradesh & Telangana for training & providing business incubation support to FPOs and for capacity building across the country

The impact

APMAS through its various initiatives has brought the behavioural change in the community. The farmers now see farming as a viable and profitable business and themselves as agripreneurs. The people associated with the organisation have not just witnessed economic prosperity but also improved health, better nutrition, and gender equality in a thick patriarchal structure.

APMAS has trained over 4 lakh professionals and para professionals in SHG and agriculture sector. They have reached out to over 60,000 farm households through FPOs and conducted over 60 research studies and engaged in policy advocacy.

They are also directly promoting 73 FPOs in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana,

including 8 exclusive women FPOs. The FPOs are engaged in various business activities such as collective marketing of inputs and outputs, supply of vegetables to processing industries etc. Through the business taken up by the FPOs, the member farmers are able to avail quality inputs at competitive prices, Nivedita claims.

“Over the twenty years, APMAS has made a successful, yet a very challenging journey, in realising its vision for the empowerment of marginalised women and deprived communities and thereby contributing to poverty reduction initiatives,” said Nivedita.

Thanks to APMAS, several women farmers have found economic and social benefits. They have been able to not just become financially independent, but also enhance their social status in the community.

APMAS has direct presence in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Bihar states and indirectly works in other states through partnerships. The team consists of 105 dedicated staff members (including 15 consultants) who are highly qualified in the streams of agriculture, institution building, capacity building, gender, research etc.

The challenges and road ahead

The organisation receives funding from various national and international donors, including the state and central government and corporates. In spite of regular support from different agencies, the organisation continues to struggle to function smoothly. The legal framework and lack of availability of domain experts are their biggest challenges.

“In the future, APMAS plans to deepen its work in terms of promotion and strengthening of people’s institutions. It will further expand its work towards wealth creation and income increase in rural, urban and tribal areas,” shared Nivedita. Furthermore, it will also focus on creating livelihood options and improving quality of life of marginalized communities through an integrated development approach.

“Over the 20 years of journey we have learned the importance of partnerships and collaborations in implementing development activities at ground level. It is very important to bring synergies among different players who are working towards the empowerment of marginalized communities in order to maximise the benefit,” she said.

APMAS is also working with the government to combat COVID-19 and to provide relief to the communities in the time of pandemic at the state level.

If you want to support APMAS, you can do so by either volunteering with them or by providing them financial support for various activities. To know more, check out their website (www.apmas.org).

Shreya Pareek