

# From Computers to Bullock Carts ...and Back

## The Unviability of Life in Rural India

○ Asha Kachru

*In MANUSHI No. 121 Asha Kachru had written an account of why and how she chose to go and live in an impoverished village of Andhra Pradesh so that she could make common cause with poor farmers and help them move out of their poverty trap. (see article **From Computers to Bullock Carts**) After nine long years of experimentation, Asha has decided to quit village life and farming. In this article, she shares her insights as to why people dependent on farming remain poverty ridden, how agriculture is essentially a loss making enterprise. Urban intellectuals and economists never tire of decrying state subsidies given to farmers. There is a growing demand that farm sector should also be taxed. However, Asha Kachru's account illustrates how the farmers have no income worth taxing. Despite all her education, knowledge of 'modern' methods of farming and financial resources, Asha could not even recover the costs of production of her farm produce. Year after year, she lost money and eroded her savings. She began as a 'rich farmer' and ended up eroding whatever savings she had made from her job in Germany. If a person with her resources found agriculture and rural life unviable, one can well imagine why there is a continuing exodus of people from our villages and why agriculture remains so depressed and crisis ridden in India.*

*-Editor*

I have been nine years since I came to live and work in a rural environment with backward-caste villagers. It has been a very insightful experience for me and I have learnt a lot. I have also enjoyed the challenge of rural simplicity, as well as the clean and peaceful environment of the village. In spite of all this, I have decided to shift my residence from my farmhouse—which has five-and-a-half acres of land, three oxen, a cow, two calves, two goats and two dogs, as well as a bullock-cart which is necessary for organic agriculture.

I have decided to move to a semi-urban environment because I hope to be able to make better use of my recently acquired PC for emailing and word processing, so that I can communicate more conveniently with friends and like-minded people.

All I am doing is surrendering to overall development, primarily because I am growing old and my health does not permit an

adventurous lifestyle any longer.

I am no longer in a position to:

☐ bear further losses from organic agriculture;

☐ live without a proper electricity supply and other infrastructural facilities;

☐ live a life devoid of cultural and intellectual stimulation and resources; and

☐ accommodate the constant financial needs and demands of the rural poor I was involved with, especially because I have had to carry the whole responsibility all by myself.

Before I go into my own reasons for all this, I want to share with you the fact that two of my women friends of the same age as me (50's) have also decided to shift from their respective

rural/countryside retreats to big city life. One of them is a German citizen living in Canada, and my other woman friend is based in Spain.

Is this a coincidence, or is there some common reason behind these similar decisions, made after living in very different rural environments? The situation in rural India is worlds apart from that prevailing in the western countryside. But I firmly believe that this change in attitude is also due to the fact that the very few women who try out alternative ways of living and working, have no support from the dominant society, both in the "developed" and the "under-developed" countries.

At this point I must make it clear that though living with the poor has imposed a heavy burden on me financially, I would not like to blame this factor for my decision to move out of the village. Instead, the fault lies with our urban-centric policies, which give no priority to rural areas.

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The present situation in India's villages is hopelessly adverse for farmers as well as for other villagers — mostly agricultural workers. They have no alternative occupational choices either. My own personal experiences make it clear that if even a person economically and educationally privileged like myself has had such difficulties in making a viable living from agriculture, the predicament of an average villager can well be imagined.

### Unremunerative Farming

Consider, for instance, this last year. I had a guava orchard of 200 trees on two acres of my land. I used to give it on contract to a poor rural family for approximately Rs. 6,000 a year. Generally, they would pay me half the sum in the beginning, and promise to pay the rest in instalments, as and when they could sell the produce. But they would always complain that the market price was very low or that the quantity of produce varied depending on rain and other weather conditions, as a result of which they could not pay the balance. I had to supply them with irrigation water which, due to fluctuations in electricity supply and corresponding burning out of well and bore-well motors, bulbs and other electrical equipment, meant that I lost approximately Rs. 10,000 per year.

Over the last six months, my motor burnt out at least five times; each time it cost me around Rs. 2,000 for repairs. After eight years of such a loss-making enterprise, I felt compelled to uproot the trees. The wood was sold at just Rs. 4,000 to a timber merchant. I decided to plant cash crops instead. I put in 12 truckloads of organic manure and had the land tilled to sow half an acre of ginger and half of turmeric, with chickpeas, green chillies, tomatoes and corn in between. On the rest of the land I sowed rice (both irrigated as well as rain fed), and green and black gram (rain fed). I also planted an acre of



sugarcane (seeds of an earlier term) and an acre of fodder, plus manure grass for potato sowing. The rest holds eucalyptus trees and my own hutment.

I invested approximately Rs. 80,000 in all this — Rs. 20,000 on three bags of ginger seeds, Rs. 20,000 on twelve truckloads of organic manure, Rs. 6,000 on ten bags of potato seeds, and the rest on labour, transport, etc. Though I had earlier run a big loss with ginger, I did not want to give up and tried again. I also used some pesticides, organic as well as half a kilo of chemicals (suggested earlier by agricultural experts associated with a nearby NGO involved in permaculture) on ginger, to avoid decay of the roots. I sowed three

quintals of ginger seeds, but got just one quintal of produce which fetched me approximately Rs. 1,000. This happened due to heavy untimely rain, the uneven levelling of land (workers not doing their job well enough) and the extremely low rate for ginger prevailing in the local market.

### Losses from Cash Crops

The acre of land that I had planted with ten bags of potato seeds fetched me approximately 40 bags of potatoes, which could be sold at the rate of just Rs. 250 per bag. Thus, I earned Rs. 6,400 in all, after deducting transport costs to the Hyderabad market (because the local market does not need potatoes in large quantities) and the trader's commission. This meant a loss of approximately Rs. 6,000, as I

had spent Rs. 2,500 on manuring and Rs. 3,000 on fertilizer and pesticides, plus another Rs. 2,000 on labour for weeding, harvesting, transport and other costs.

The acre of land with sugarcane did not cost me any money for the seed as I was planting it for a second year in a row. However, I had to sell even that at a distress rate of Rs. 500 per tonne, because there was already too much sugarcane available in the area. Also, the story that the Nizam Sugar factory, which was to buy our sugarcane, was closing the purchase of sugarcane soon, forced us to sell it to another factory further away. I got Rs. 12,000 for approximately 30 tonnes of produce. After deducting labour costs for weeding and bundling of the cane, I made a profit of only Rs. 5,000, not taking into account the irrigation costs. And this was the result of a whole year of hard work - sugarcane takes that long to grow to its full length!

The rain fed rice produce amounted to half a bag, the other one-eighth acre of irrigated rice to one bag, and the chillies to approximately 15 kg (dried and processed). The turmeric is yet to be harvested, but will not yield more than two or three bags amounting to no more than Rs. 1,500. The chickpeas were approximately 25 kg; the tomatoes fetched me just a handful of rupees in the local market.

After an investment of Rs. 80,000, I am left with approximately Rs. 25,000 worth of produce, thus incurring a total loss of Rs. 55,000.

### **An Elite Adventure**

Being privileged enough to have some savings from my previous jobs abroad, I have not had to take loans. But my neighbour and most other small and big farmers are in a desperate situation. Being so heavily burdened with debt, many farmers

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have taken the earliest opportunity to migrate to the next big city to earn a livelihood. In other areas, farmers are committing suicide as the only means of escaping from debt. My experience has convinced me that organic farming is more of an idealistic adventure which only the elite can afford. As a small farmer, it is impossible to survive on it.

### **A Loss Making Enterprise**

That agriculture as an occupation in India today, does not suffice for a livelihood beyond bare subsistence, is validated by another personal experience. I have given the rural family assisting me over the last nine years, 9.2 acres of black soil — good quality dryland in a neighbouring village. I have had to bear the investment costs for fertilizers, seeds, pesticides, labour, and transport, which the family has never been able to repay. All we have achieved is our own organic sustenance crops like sorghum for breadmaking, oil from safflower seeds, red, black and green pulses, and spices like mustard seeds and various other small items. The cash received from selling the rest of the produce could never recover the investment and maintenance costs. If this is the result of nine acres of land, of what help can an acre or two of dryland, given by the government within the various SC/ST schemes, be to the poor villagers?

I would also like to emphasise that it is one thing to give small demonstrations and hold training

programmes on organic agriculture, and another thing to put these into practice for earning a living, particularly in today's overall economic and market scenario. Also, as the NGOs that demonstrate permaculture in neighbouring villages do not mention the huge amount of foreign funds invested, and the government support they, the big NGOs get for their work with villagers, they convey an incomplete picture and a false impression, which is extremely harmful for anybody actually wanting to put these methods into practice to earn a livelihood.

My own experience has shown that without proper government support in managing organic agriculture (e.g from extension workers of agricultural universities), proper supply of electricity, cheap organic manure, a farmer-oriented market and a farmer-sensitive price policy, the entire effort is of no practical use. At present, only traders make money from agriculture.

### **Lack of Infra-structure**

Most losses in agriculture are due to fluctuations of electricity as well as its haphazard supply. The Andhra Pradesh Electricity Supply Board (APSEB) in Zahirabad, the next town in this region, is most corrupt and inefficient. In the beginning I was naive enough to go with neighbouring farmers to the Assistant Engineer's (AE) office to protest, and to try and speak on behalf of the illiterate small cultivators. Over the years, I have stopped wasting my time on that, because even after succumbing to the traditional method of bribing the officers and linesmen to get the work done, things did not change. Every other month our motors would burn out and break down, the crops would go dry and we would have to go and plead at the

APSEB office nearly six kms from our farm for improvement in electricity supply.

At a later stage, we were offered a new transformer of a higher voltage, provided we paid for it. I was told by the AE that he would deliver a transformer to me the very next day if I paid for it and gave him his share, "without telling anyone". It was as if the transformers were his private property!

An important reason why the farmer loses out is the absence of well developed local markets. In addition, government's pricing policy works against the farmers. The government ignores the farmer's situation and/or consciously sides with the trader.

Another problem is that storage facilities for agricultural produce are not available to farmers. As a result, they have to sell in a state of distress, falling prey to the whims of traders. And since the electricity supply is erratic, storage of even small quantities cannot be done without a negative impact on nutritional value. For me, personally, apart from losses in agriculture, an inadequate electricity supply has ruined my eye-sight—I have been forced to read and work in very dim light.

### **Paucity of Cultural Resources**

Though in the beginning I enjoyed a quiet and simple lifestyle with rural, illiterate people, and even delighted in their traditional songs and theatre forms, in the course of time I have become more critical of it. The reason is that the tradition is anti-women, as apparent in the Elamma and Poshamma dance theatre where, though women are projected as goddesses, they are beaten by their own sons for "adulterous behaviour". Also, being illiterate, the villagers are unable to expand their knowledge base. They still believe in some very odd practices. One such alarming practice is to keep newborns and their

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mothers indoors for a period of at least three weeks, without access to fresh air and sunlight.

The various festivals celebrated in praise of nature, and the various gods and goddesses are good in so far as it gives them (primarily the women) a chance to relax and eat better than usual. However, the blind belief in some deities also leads them to follow unhealthy traditional healing practices.

For instance, when a worker fell ill with nervous problems due to a heavy dose of allopathic drugs given by a fraudulent local doctor, he was taken to traditional healers and then to the Tuljabhavani temple at Tuljapur in Karnataka. For his cure I had to spend a huge amount on rituals that obviously had no effect.

Very often the sick go to local healers who give *duas* and *mantras* but the health problems remain and may even worsen. There is little that I have been able to do in such cases, especially since there is an absence of adequate allopathic medical services.

There are also no playgrounds for children or recreation centres for adults, no libraries, theatres or cinema halls for women in rural areas, leaving these people with no alternative but to continue with their unemancipated traditional lifestyle. Perhaps the government and urban society want it to remain like that.

### **Increasing Cash Dependence**

With the dominant lifestyle becoming increasingly cash oriented,

it is no wonder that even the rural people are becoming dependent on money income. They need larger amounts of cash in times of emergency, and even for everyday life—to buy soap or clothes. These cash needs exceed their daily wages. It is a vicious circle of expenditure and debt. The government provides no support in the form of free vocational training so that they may earn more. As poorly paid illiterates, some even resort to begging for their daily needs. I tried out various income-generation schemes with many of them, but most have failed due to the lack of start capital and spares for maintenance or other emergencies.

I have experimented with trying to provide employment in the village by helping them buy animals (goats, buffaloes, oxen, cows), vehicles (autorickshaws, pickup vans, tractors and trawlies, jeeps) and even land. The animals are of use only if they have access to free fodder; the vehicles, only if maintenance and servicing is locally and cheaply available. Also some major setbacks have been caused by needless paperwork, corruption and bureaucratic obstructions.

There is, however one area where some optimism is justified; that is in the activities of women's self-help groups. I am happy to have empowered women in approximately ten self-help groups in three villages in the area. They can now do their cash saving and auditing themselves, have goats and small gold ornaments, instal toilets and tin roofs in their houses. Some even own land, oxen and bullock-carts.

I firmly believe that until privileged members of our society, and the government, provides free education and training in skills which can generate employment, the rural poor will have to continue to put up with the almost insurmountable difficulties involved in farming as an occupation. □