

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 31

Around 12 years back, an international voluntary organization did a project for cotton farmers, handloom workers and garment workers. We did the baseline survey for that project, and as part of it, I and my team had gone to Warangal district to do a study on cotton farmers' conditions there.

Under the project, they took each cotton farmer household in a village as a unit, with both women and men as members, and formed Self Help Groups (SHG) with 10 households each. They then federated these SHGs by establishing Mutually-aided Cooperative Societies (MACS) at the cluster level and Farmers Trading Companies (FTCs) at the district level.

For cultivation of agricultural lands, Warangal district is mostly dependent on Ghanpur, Laknavaram, Ramappa, Pakala lakes. While some part of the remaining land was rainfed. When the farmers here had first started cultivating cotton, they used to earn good profits. Gradually, with the increased incidence of pests, the farmers had resorted to excessive use of insecticide to control the pests. Due to this, the input cost of agriculture increased a lot, pushing many farmers not only into financial distress but also forcing many farmers to take the drastic step of committing suicides.

Under this project, they had tried to encourage cotton farmers to turn towards organic farming.

Through the cooperative societies set up at the cluster level, they had started many activities such as providing quality seeds, organizing training sessions on organic farming methods, providing the necessary help to follow organic methods, setting up of the revolving fund, etc. While at the district level, the FTCs that were established had focused on marketing the organic cotton.

At the time of our study, the project was still in its initial stages. While talking to the cotton farmers, we asked and learnt what the farming situation was like in the past and what it was like now. What we understood, however, was that the situation cannot be compared to the past at all. As cotton cultivation had not been prevalent there in the past.

In the 1970s, the farmers cultivated cotton in only 0.1% of the whole agricultural land in Warangal district. By 2010, this figure had increased by over 40%. Whereas paddy, maize and other food crops that had been cultivated in 92% of agricultural lands in the 1970s, had their share in the agricultural land cut to 50% by 2010.

We had spoken to cotton farmers in many villages. This was the photo taken in one of the villages. The elderly man in the photo previously used to cultivate paddy. But now he was cultivating cotton. Alas, it didn't work out for him and he was deep in debts. 'Why are you cultivating cotton then? If you cultivate paddy, at least you will have something to eat, right?' I asked him with confusion. He said, 'I have left a little bit of my land for cultivation of paddy; the rice I get from there is enough to sustain my family all year long. I cultivate cotton in the rest of the land.'

Almost all the farmers there had said the same thing.

On one side, farmers need to grow crops that are profitable to them. On the other hand, they must produce enough food grains for ensuring food security for the country. I spent many days wondering where the balance between the two was going wrong.

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