

TIMBAKTU COLLECTIVE, ANDHRA PRADESH

It sometimes happens that failures open the way to success. For the Timbaktu Collective, opportunity loomed large when the rains had failed for three seasons and farmers in Anantpur district of Andhra Pradesh were desperate and willing to look at new ideas. In reality, the idea presented to them was not so much 'new' as a reminder of an existing tradition. The Collective was merely suggesting organic farming and a return to cultivating millets and other traditional crops of the region. But to the farmers, who were dependent on groundnut cultivation, it was a radical idea. The challenge for the Collective was two pronged – to convince farmers to return to traditional crops and to shift to organic cultivation. To understand the dynamics requires going back in time.

Timbaktu Collective, a civil society organization set up by Babloo Ganguly and Mary Vattamattam, was initiated in 1990 with the

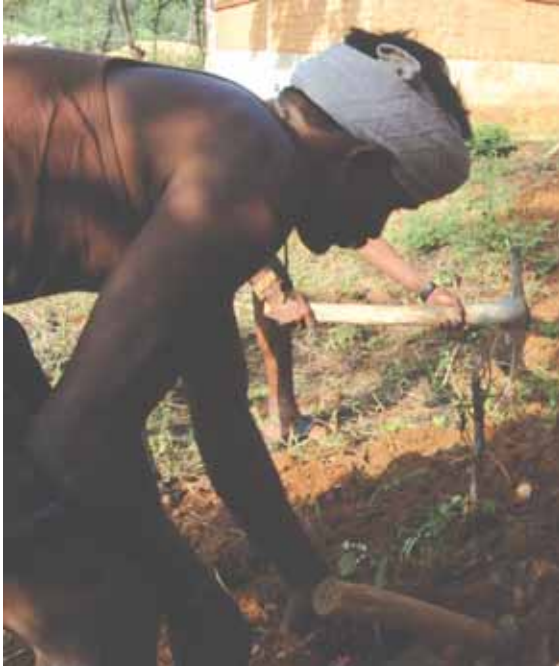
mandate to work for sustainable development in Andhra Pradesh's drought-prone Anantpur district. It began with an experiment in restoration of 32 acres of completely degraded land, which was named Timbaktu. Over the years, Timbaktu regenerated itself. It was so successful that it became the referral point for all the environment-related work that has been taken up by the Collective.

With a primary focus on local self-governance, the Collective looks at natural resource management through watershed development, eco-restoration and biodiversity conservation. The empowerment of women is also integral to its work. This is achieved through the Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Societies (MATCS) - an alternative banking system involving savings and credit groups controlled by the 6,000 women members.

The Collective serves over 30,000 marginalized



Revitalized water body under the watershed program of Timbaktu Collective



Land preparation of organic vegetables. Timbaktu Collective has been collecting and reproducing traditional seeds using principles of non-chemical farming

people in more than 100 villages. Over the years they have built up good social capital and so, when it mooted the plan for organic cultivation there was openness from the farmers to the idea. The Timbaktu Organic project is best explained in the Collective's own words:

"Anantpur district is an arid region, receiving the second lowest rainfall in the country. This has primarily become a mono-cropped district of groundnuts over the past 25 years, ever since the advent of cash-cropping and State initiatives to promote oilseeds amongst farmers, and centrally procured rice and wheat through the Public Distribution System (PDS) was introduced. This has exposed the farmers adversely to market and production risks. Groundnut yields over the last few years have been declining and are plagued by the presence of pests and diseases. Chemical pesticide and fertilizer use is high, and the net return for farmers is marginal or negative. There has been a high incidence of suicides during the last five years, mainly due to extreme indebtedness of the farmers."

The Collective believes agro-biodiversity conservation will solve the agricultural crisis in



Farmer in his field with organically grown groundnuts and with an intercropping of various millets

Anantpur. Their work over the last three years has indicated that a mix of millets, groundnuts and pulses like red gram could be the solution to farmers' woes. The obvious course of action is to promote alternate crops to groundnut and to encourage crop rotation and intercropping. Both significantly reduce the risk of disease and pests, and also cover the farmer from the risks of total crop failure. The advantages of this will be economic and environmental sustainability for the farmer as well as the reintroduction of traditional crops into the region.

Millets and red gram are some of the alternate crops suitable to arid Anantpur. Millets have additional importance as high nutrition cereals, which can play a vital role in the nutrition and food security for poor households, given the inability and failure of the PDS to provide the average household with its basic food and nutrition requirement. But there is a hurdle to be crossed. Millets get a very poor price in the market. So farmers hesitate to cultivate it. However, if organic farming inputs and techniques were shown to the farmers thereby reducing their dependency and expense on agri-chemicals, then there would be

more incentive to cultivate it.

With support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, the Collective has initiated a project called Timbaktu Organic. The purpose of the project is to boost the income of the farmer-members of the three MATCS via sustainable agri-based methods. The project will be taken up in nine villages, with 300 farmers covering about 900 acres of land. In a nutshell, it will be a boost for sustainable agriculture, reintroduce traditional nutrients to local diets, reduce people's dependence on government grains, improve soil quality and reduce risks and increase returns for the farmer.

A crucial link missing in many projects is the marketing aspect. Realizing that the project would collapse if the crops are not picked up, the Collective made a market support plan to buy the millets and other crops. The Adisakthi MATCS undertook the business activity of procurement, processing and sale of the organic produce. It invested Rs 0.25 million of its money and is raising Rs 0.75 million as loans towards the cost of fixed investment and working capital in the first year of business. Measures like this should ensure that farmers have an incentive to grow millets. It's hoped that they will counter the low market price paid for millets – which has so far discouraged the farmers from their cultivation.

Another innovative link created by the

Collective is the food demonstration, an event in which an experienced team of female cooks goes from village to village cooking and demonstrating millet-based foods like idlis, biscuits, cakes in an effort to convince the farmers of the market relevance of the crop. The other successful innovation is the Adisakthi Dharani Hotel, a popular eatery in Chennethapalli, run by Adisakthi members where millet foods are cooked and served. Two local groups of women have been trained to prepare millet foods as have two local bakers whose output of millet-based biscuits and cakes are snapped up as soon as they are out of the ovens.

It's not possible to judge the success of the movement just yet, but there is a healthy curiosity to organic farming and a return to traditional crops and cropping patterns. For instance, after a late evening food demonstration in Kondapuram village, a meeting is held by Timbaktu Organic workers to convince farmers to turn organic. After eating a millet-based meal, the pros and cons of moving over are discussed by the farmers. Much is discussed including an earlier visit to farms where organic is in full operation. At the end of the meeting, 22 farmers opt to go with Timbaktu Organic. The number may be small but it's one more step towards sustainable agriculture.



Wasteland being regenerated into a forest