



India: A conversation with farmers of the KRRS

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One key actor in the global peasant revolt is India's Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), the Karnataka State Farmers' Association, from the south Indian state of Karnataka. This farmers movement is struggling for food and people's sovereignty both locally and globally. Although an agrarian movement, KRRS goes beyond farmers issues and aims for broad social change at various levels of society. Autonomy, justice, peace and dignity are fundamental tenets of its vision. KRRS has inspired movements in India and around the world to take direct action against multinational companies by creating solidarity and collective action through people's movements.

When did the movement start? What is its organizational philosophy?

The KRRS was formally created in 1980, bringing together many isolated smaller local farmer groups under the leadership of M.D. Nanjundaswamy, H.S. Rudrappa and N.D. Sundaresh. We see our movement as part of a long process of construction of a new society, which is driven by people at the local level but must reach the global level, and which cannot take place without the active and direct involvement of society as a whole.

Although primarily made up of farmers, we do not focus exclusively on farmer issues, but aim for social change at all levels. Our movement is Gandhian and its final objective is the realization of the "village republic", a form of social, political and economic organization based on direct democracy, economic and political autonomy, and self-reliance. All members of the community participate in decision-making about the common questions that affect them. Specifically, the movement is strongly based on Gandhi's philosophy of swadeshi, or home economy. This means that political and economic power must reside in the villages through democratic village assemblies. The needs of the villages should be met first and foremost through local production and consumption. Swadeshi emphasizes local technologies and cultures. By relying on a localized economy for village needs, everyone can aspire to work and a dignified life.

What is the political structure of KRRS?

The basic unit of organization is the village, the only level of membership. Every village unit decides on the shape of its organization and finances, as well as about its programs and actions. There are other levels of organization above the village level - the Taluk level, the district level and the state level. The decision-making body at state level is the State Executive Committee, which consists of delegates from all the districts.

While our movement is deeply rooted in local struggles we have also been pivotal in forming and leading not only national level networks like the Indian Coordination Committee of Farmers Movements, but also international networks such as the global peasants movement La Via Campesina and the Peoples' Global Action Against Free Trade and the WTO. We believe that solidarity between people must be built throughout the world to confront unjust economic globalization.

KRRS condemns unjust social practices. How does this translate into action?

Since its beginning, our movement has aimed for progressive cultural change. We have always denounced the caste system, promoting its eradication as a necessary step towards social justice in India. We have members from indigenous communities and lower castes. An example of the cultural change we promote is the organization of "simple, self-respect weddings" as an alternative to the expensive and extravagant weddings on which peasants usually spend a fortune because of social pressure, often going into debt. We have conducted many intercaste marriages, shunning the presence of upper caste priests and expensive religious ceremonies. We have also challenged patriarchal structures, organizing a protest against the Miss Universe Pageant and demanding equal representation for women in governance, for instance.

On the one hand KRRS is strongly committed to Gandhian principles, but on the other it is famous all over world for attacking genetically modified crops or ransacking the head office of the agribusiness giant Cargill. How does this fit together?

We have a strong commitment to non-violence. This is understood as violence against living beings (except GMO crops), not against inanimate objects. We engage in confrontational politics against unfair socioeconomic systems through nonviolent methods such as civil disobedience and direct actions that challenge unjust laws.

Can you give examples and explain the context in which these actions took place?

In the early 1990s, close to one thousand farmers occupied and ransacked the head office of the global agribusiness giant Cargill Seeds Company in Bangalore, making a bonfire of the equipment and documents. We also dismantled Cargill's seed unit with iron bars in one of the districts of Karnataka. During the action, we gave notice to multinational seed companies to "Quit India", echoing Gandhi's Quit India Movement

of the Indian independence struggle. It was at the Cargill action that we officially launched the Beeja (seed) Satyagraha,ⁱ inspired by Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha, and using peasant seeds as a symbol of peasant resistance against seeds patented by multinational companies. The call of the Seed Satyagraha received a national and global response from many other movements.

In 1996, we destroyed the first Indian outlet of the global junk food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) in Bangalore. Fast food chains like KFC consume a lot of resources to produce unhealthy food for the urban elite. The incident sent shivers down the spine of multinational companies in Bangalore, provoking the then chief minister to publicly re-affirm his government's commitment to foreign investors. We feel that the entire paradigm of neo-liberal globalization led by multinational companies must be resisted and that people's autonomy and the autonomy of peoples must be constructed on the ground through the development of people alternatives.

We also launched massive actions against Monsanto, such as the 1998 global call to action "Operation Cremation Monsanto". We knew that stopping biotechnology in India was of little use if it continued to be developed in other parts of the world, so we called on social movements around the world to engage in direct actions against companies like Pioneer, Novartis and Monsanto, by burning their GM fields and squatting on or destroying their offices. We warned not only companies but also investors in these companies. In Karnataka and other Indian states our farmers burnt many illegal GM field trials under the eyes of the media, as a direct action. Other movements around the world answered the call, and farmers and peasants in France and Indonesia, for example, also destroyed GM crops.

In 2011, some of our farmers uprooted Dupont's illegal GM rice field trials that were being held without prior intimation to the farmers or the state government in Dodballapur, Karnataka. Recently we also mobilized against land grabs and disrupted the Karnataka government's Global Sustainable Agribusiness summits, which aim to dole out tax breaks, subsidies, and land to agribusiness.

KRRS mobilized very early against the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the precursor of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Why?

In the Dunkel Draft, GATT recommended the patenting of seeds by multinational companies. We fully oppose this. We launched a massive protest with north India's Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) at the Red Fort in New Delhi. 200,000 farmers made it to Delhi despite efforts by the government to prevent protests. As there were limited arrangements for shelter and food, the farmers slept outside in the cold and cooked on the streets. They attended the rally at which they burnt the Dunkel Draft, protested against the patenting of life by corporations, and cheered in favour of the right of farmers to save seed.

KRRS has also engaged in protests against the WTO. How did that happen?

We decided to head to the heart of continental Europe and stir things up on the doorstep of the WTO and of the headquarters of many transnational companies. In 1999, in solidarity with movements in Europe, we and the Peoples' Global Action network achieved the gargantuan task of organizing a month-long Intercontinental Caravan for Solidarity and Resistance with 450 southern farmers. 400 farmers from India were accompanied by 50 members of movements such as the MST of Brazil, landless people from Bangladesh, Zapatista support groups from Mexico, Mapuches from Chile, the Afro Colombian movement and others. We took part in 63 direct actions and 85 public meetings, and visited 38 farms ending at the G8 summit in Köln, Germany. In France we uprooted a GM rice trial with René Riesel and José Bové of the radical Confédération Paysanne (French Farmers Union), who were arrested and sentenced to 6 months imprisonment. In Geneva we marched at the WTO office, shouting "Kill the WTO". In Rome we protested at the FAO headquarters, and at the G8 Summit in Germany we engaged in a laughing protest as part of a global day of action.

More recently we spearheaded the South Indian Coordination Committee of Farmers' Movements, a network which includes not only farmer movements from South India but also the adivasi movement and fisher-folk community groups mobilizing against free trade and land grabs. In 2010 we blockaded the Mangalore port on the coast of Karnataka, as a symbolic protest against the Indian government's free trade policy allowing the duty free dumping of cheap palm oil.

What role do alternatives to the industrial agriculture model play in your struggle?

KRRS believes that resistance cannot take place without people alternatives. Therefore we are building an international sustainable peasant development centre called "Amrutabhoomi" in the Chamrajnagar district of Karnataka. The centre will revive traditional farmer knowledge and technologies. It will have a training school where farmers can conduct research, train one another and support the conversion to agroecological technologies. The centre will also include a seed conservation centre that will encourage the "in situ" conservation of native seeds on the farms themselves, as well as seed banks to facilitate the development of new varieties by farmers. Centres for local medicine, education and the arts will cater to rural children and help work towards self-reliance in energy production. Such efforts are essential to reverse the disasters caused by green revolution technologies. They provide a space in which farmers can realize their new paradigm of self-reliance by learning the values and practice of democratic participation.

In the course of promoting agroecological farming methods, we particularly supported one popular movement called "zero budget natural farming". This unique system based on indigenous knowledge offers a strong answer to conventional chemical farming as nothing needs to be purchased from the market. More than 4 million farmers are already practicing it across the country! It puts an end to the reliance on

loans and private inputs, thus addressing the problem of farmer suicides. Many farmers have natural farms with proficient levels of production and have been training one another without institutional support.

Our farmers have also been teaching their techniques to farmers from other parts of the world. In November 2011 KRRS and La Via Campesina organised an exchange visit by Asian farmers from more than ten countries to Karnataka's natural farms, to encourage and inculcate direct farmer-to-farmer exchange of farming methods.

Another initiative was direct farmer to consumer marketing, with shops at village level called Namdu, which means "ours" in the Kannada language. Through these stores farmers can sell their products directly to local consumers, avoiding middlemen. An intensification of such marketing efforts is a major part of our future agenda.

During the actions KRRS members can be seen wearing green shawls. If you travel through Karnataka you also see farmers wearing them here and there in day to day activities. What is their meaning?

The green shawls are the symbol of our resistance, every day. We wear them as part of our daily attire and also at every action to reaffirm with pride our commitment to this struggle. It is our symbol of peasantry, self-respect and honour, best reflected in our hymn:

Our Green Flag

held by Peasants is walking towards a Revolution,

Our green flag

is the symbol of Dignity and Equality

Born in Karnataka over the sacrifice of hundreds of peasants lives

it has made a call for the victory of a new world without exploitation

It has embraced Gandhi's Principles

It has waged a war against the exploiters

Our Green Flag!

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ⁱ Beeja Satyagraha implies seed sovereignty. The Salt Satyagraha or the Dandi March, protesting against the British salt monopoly, was held under the leadership of Gandhi that triggered the civil disobedience movement. The Beeja Satyagraha was carried out in the same fashion in 1993.