

“The food sovereignty movement must be anti-caste”: An Interview with Dalit, Adivasi and other members of the Food Sovereignty Alliance in India

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In this article, part of our [Food Sovereignty and Spirituality series](#), members of the [Food Sovereignty Alliance \(FSA\)](#) in India share about their fight against the dominant Brahmanical patriarchal ideology which is at the root of the caste system. The discussion brings together landless Dalits, considered to be untouchables and ‘out-castes’, indigenous Adivasi whose lands and territories are taken over

by corporations for commodity crops and other FSA members. Jointly, although from different perspectives, they reject the injustice of the caste system and insist that food sovereignty is about living in harmony with nature and with other fellow human beings. It is about being able to keep ancestral lands, decide what food to grow, what to eat and how to cook food. Based on these principles, they are reasserting their own ancestral spiritual practices, including the right to consume beef as part of their cultural heritage and identity. They are also working for the right of oppressed people to liberate themselves and to restore gender equity in farming.

AN: Sagari Ramdas, you have been a member and co-founder of the [Food Sovereignty Alliance](#) (FSA) since it came together in 2013. How would you describe the FSA?

Sagari: The Food Sovereignty Alliance is an alliance of Adivasi, Dalit-Bahujan food producers who are landless agriculture workers, marginal and small farmers, animal rearers, as well as non-food producing citizens in the states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in India. It is a diverse platform to build solidarity, reciprocity, and collective thinking around food and food justice.

AN: Murugamma, you are the leader from the Savitri Bai Phule Dalit Mahila Sangham, which is the collective of Dalit women in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. Dalits, were historically the caste-oppressed institutionalised by the system of Caste as untouchables. They face severe forms of discrimination and marginalisation as a result of the caste system. The term “dalit” literally means crushed. Why did you join the FSA?

Murugamma: Our survival is linked to our control over the food that we grow, the food that we eat, and over our land. Land struggle is a major element for us Dalit women because the majority of Dalit families are landless. Beyond land, it is about who decides: we want to be able to decide what food we grow, what we eat it and how we cook food.

AN: Marsakola Kamala, you are an Adivasi leader from the Jai Jangubai Adivasi Mahila Sangham, in Telangana. Adivasis fall outside of the caste system. They are recognized as Indigenous and Tribal Peoples under international law. Why did your organization join the FSA?

Kamala: Food is key to our existence. When we talk about food, it is not just about what we buy, but it is about sovereign control over our land, resources, forest, and water. It is about the kind of diverse foods that we grow to meet our cultural priorities and needs. Key to all of this is sovereignty over seed. If we lose control over our seed, we have virtually lost control over our sovereignty over food. As Adivasis, we are losing control over our food and our seed as a result of the spread of the cotton crop. As a Sangham, we have investigated the impacts of cotton on our communities and territories, and have come to see that this cotton is really going to destroy us; it is alienating us from our foods, seeds and lands.

We therefore reenergised the community, especially women to create women's seed committees who govern community seed banks, to enable community exchanges of seeds and collective local control. This is a kind of organising we cannot do in isolation. Being part of a broader alliance, it builds energies and strength to be in this struggle, so that future generations will be sovereign and will have self-rule.

AN: Chundru Nooka Raju, you have been a leader organising for food sovereignty in Adivasi areas of the Eastern ghats since the early 1990s, particularly in East Godavari district, where you began your journey and pioneering actions through Girijan Deepika. Why did you join this struggle?

Nooka Raju: There has been a massive invasion of Adivasi lands and territories by corporations, for a variety of commodity crops like cotton, tobacco, cashew or tapioca. Adivasi communities are organising food sovereignty collectives or Sanghams, in every village. This enables us to have dialogues about these new plantation crops, and to have a space to collectively save our seeds and ensure that we are keeping our animals, land, forest, and knowledge. It is also a space where elders and the young come together in dialogue. If we don't, we essentially become enslaved, even though we may have control over our land. I am organising our young people so that we can build leadership in our next generation, because it's a long road ahead.



Photo: Food Sovereignty Alliance, India

AN: Madhoo, you are one of the co-founders of the Food Sovereignty Alliance. Why did you join the FSA?

Madhoo: For me food sovereignty is about how people to people and people and nature can live in a harmonious relationship, how they can really build their own humanity. As a consumer of the food, my

own commitment is to work with marginalised food producers and to be with them in solidarity. We are in a caste ridden society and we also have Indigenous Peoples who are deprived of various rights. They are the ones who actually know what food sovereignty means. There are also intense debates in India around what you should eat and what you should not eat. We are opening spaces to discuss food habits and cultures.

AN: A lot has been written about the political and legal dimensions of food sovereignty, but less about its spiritual aspects. What would you say is the role of spirituality, or religion, in the food sovereignty movement?

Sagari: One of our deep concerns is caste, we are living in a Brahminical patriarchy society. So class is shaped by Brahmanism the ideology at the roots of the caste system established over 2500 years ago, and which also has informed food choices. Today, we see that the genuine critique of industrial meat production, especially beef, are used by the Brahminical patriarchal forces to say that eating beef is bad. They are justifying banning beef by using environmental arguments while theirs is an ideological position, that beef consumption is against Indian Culture.

Food is not just about cereals and millets and pulses, but meat and milk is very critical for various communities. We are also engaged in countering this dominant narrative pushed by the State, of India being a Vegetarian Society. As an alliance, we have created a space for these kinds of dialogues. Even amongst the social and food movements within India, there is a deep reluctance to acknowledge that meat, and beef in particular, is a critical part of our cultural identity as well our food history and current diets.

AN: As a Dalit movement, what is your take on the role of spirituality in food sovereignty?

Murugamma: As Dalits, we have historically been treated as untouchables and 'out-castes'. Food is one of the key areas where untouchability is practiced. For instance, we have multiple relationships with animals, and we eat the meat of our animals, including beef. Our animals are a source of food, of energy, of dung and manure, and a source of money for us. Brahmanism is telling us that the cattle we are eating is our God. This animal is placed in the temple and worshipped, and we Dalits are kept 'outside' of that temple. We experience the heinous practise of untouchability, from other communities, even if we do not eat beef- because Brahminism has created this unjust system of grading humans according to your birth. We say that you may worship the cow but this cow is not our god. We reject this Brahminical dominant religious practice in India today. We will not give up eating beef, it is our right. We have a right to this food and it is part of our cultural heritage.



Source: Food Sovereignty Alliance, India

For us, spirituality is what Dr Ambedkar gave us, liberation is our

spirituality. Ambedkar gave us a lot of courage and hope and a lot of scientific insight to fight and counter caste injustice. Brahmanism says that you were born into this caste because God created these four castes. We want to demystify and reject this notion. If God created these castes, we reject that kind of religion and that kind of false spirituality.

AN: As an Adivasi movement, what is your take on the role of spirituality in food sovereignty?

Kamala: Adivasis are not part of the caste system, yet we are experiencing the effects of Brahmanism. We keep animals for ploughing, transportation and traditionally Adivasis have eaten beef. Now Brahmanism is telling us not to eat beef, that it is against our culture. As an organisation we are actively and proactively, with the youth, countering this, informing them that not eating beef has never been part of our culture. We have a long tradition where all our festivals have been about establishing and sustaining our relationship with our lands, our forests, our crops, our animals and nowhere have we ever had a celebration saying we don't eat beef. It is not as evident as in caste society, but this colonisation by Brahmanism is happening day by day. We are countering this by reasserting all those amazing diverse spiritual practises of ours.

Every single part of our relationship to land is marked by a very special festival that we celebrate. Festivals show up the importance of our relationship to our gods and goddesses, and our relationship to the land. For instance, a very important festival is '*Sanchi Bheemsen*' which is celebrated before the monsoon's break. In that month the entire village gathers and brings the seeds which they have saved in the previous year. Every family comes together with food and it is collectivised at the sacred point in the village, where

the rain is our gods. The spiritual leaders in the village will gather the seeds contributed from each home and tells us which seed, and which crop, should be planted in the next season, whether there is going to be more rain or less rain, this is knowledge which they have acquired from their elders. In this way the entire village collectively decides on the crop we will grow, depending on the reading of the air, of the land, soil, climate. It's a very intricate kind of science and knowledge that informs this decision, on which seeds will be planted. There are other festivals for the harvest of specific grains and pulses and for special moments like before ploughing and sowing.

Nooka Raju: There are several Adivasi communities, tribes. And what's common for all us, is the entire cycle of food from preparing the land till we consume the food, begins and ends with celebration; it's a coming together because food is a collective community action. We have so many festivals throughout the year. Animals are very important for us in our agriculture. In our festivals, we worship the animal, we worship the plough and all the agriculture equipment. Being an Adivasi itself is a spiritual being. Every experience is a spiritual relationship with our territories, our forest, and what we worship is our land, forests, water and seeds.

What is spirituality and what is God? For us it is the relationship we have directly with nature. Nature is God, and we look after nature and in turn nature looks after us; there's godliness in us and we need to look after ourselves; and there's godliness in nature, and it is this relationship which defines our spirituality. Where crops are alienated from humans, humans are alienated from nature, and in turn this means godliness/ spirituality is alienated from humans. In Adivasi culture, spirituality is connected to our food which comes from our crops and forests, which is connected to our land, and territory.

We have reached a point today, where a strong kind of Brahmanical religion is trying to take control of Adivasi life. Brahmanism coupled with corporatization is destroying this relationship, the interconnectedness, the links between one and the deepening alienation...I am very worried about this because what will be there for future generations? We are actively organising to reaffirm who we are, what is our form of spirituality, otherwise we will no longer be Adivasi and that is my fear that we lose our Adivasiness.

AN: Madhoo and Sagari, as founding members of the Food Sovereignty Alliance, what is your take on this?

Sagari: The alliance brings together various communities: Dalits, Adivasi, Bahujan which are the majority of the rural population from the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC) or oppressed castes and the Muslim and other religious minority community. When we meet we have our dialogues, celebrations and popular education programs. How does this spirituality manifest itself, when we gather and come together? We have our own assembly or form of mystica. Our assembly is the *Kacheeru*, or *Teydung*. Kacheeru is from a cultural tradition or a space for people to interact, dialogue and relate. Teydung, inspired from the Savara adivasi community, is a conversation between you and your ancestors. It is almost as if your ancestors are there and you are having this conversation. As an alliance, our own spiritual practices are about bringing together or sharing of solidarity, some kind of joy, humour, fun, and sense of serenity.

AN: What are some of the gender dimensions of spirituality in your movement?

Murugamma: Let me start with with me – a Dalit women. When we

look at our society today, it is about families, and in the family there is a husband, there is a wife and most of the time you find that there will be inequality in the home, the workspace, in terms of labour, wages, who eats what. Therefore, as a Sangham, and even as part of FSA, women are part of dialogues and decisions at every level, the family, decisions about what crops will be grown, which seeds will be saved, what kinds of decisions we make about farming. Organising for equal wages for both men and women, it cannot be that the labour of men is favoured more in terms of wages. Here there are proactive conversations and organising as a Sangham about food, and women have to have equal access to the consumption of that food, and not be eating last. This gender parity is part of our movements.



Source: Food Sovereignty Alliance, India

Kamal: Historically, in our Adivasi society, there was mostly equality between men and women. Everyone had some food and an equal amount of foods to eat and consume. This basic concept and

philosophy of equality was there. However, because of Brahminical forces, inequality is creeping into our societies. So, in the Sangham we reflect upon why and when did we have a time of equality and why is it that we are allowing gender inequality to occur now. What are the factors, the forces behind this, and what are we gaining, what are we losing? Through that kind of very critical self-reflective community analysis, we are able to take collective decisions about gender equality, gender parity, and wages. That's a strength of being organised as a women's organisation and being part of a food sovereignty movement, an alliance where these elements are very critical.

Nooka Raju: In farming and especially in shifting cultivation, there are men and women in the family and both have to work together, and equally share labour. For us, it is always been in our society that everybody eats together. We also share toddy equally. Toddy (a natural fermented drink) is a very important element of our food and we drink together, women and men share the toddy. However, today, commodified agriculture and farming are penetrating Adivasi areas, and the community is under attack. Patriarchy enters our regions and communities. There is Brahmanism and there is corporate agriculture, which actually is built on the backs of patriarchy, these forces are making our societies more and more unequal and more and more patriarchal. These larger macro forces are a huge factor in the increasing patriarchy emerging in Adivasi society.

Sagari: Why are women not revolting in such a critical situation in India today? The bulk of labour is on their shoulders, they are subsidising a hugely exploitative, corporate and industrialised system of agriculture. It is the labour, of the Dalit, Adivasi and OBC women. How come there is no active revolt by women when you are not only

the most belaboured, the most exploited, on the fields and in your homes but also impacted as far as your health and your nutrition go? This is where Brahmanism has played out and we are proactively countering that. Our movement is not just about food, it is about food sovereignty and social justice. This is important because it has become normalised to be oppressed from a gender and caste perspective. When you normalise oppression then how do you begin to reject it, when violence is normalised?

Whether you belong to the oppressed castes or genders, Brahminism enslaves you and teaches you not to question the inequality, oppression and discrimination of caste, as you are told that this is 'written by gods', is your 'fate' and unchangeable. So here in the alliance we learn how the caste system is not a creation of 'god' but by humans wanting to enslave other humans; and controlling women is key to perpetuating and reproducing over generations a system of graded inequality in the form of caste. So we learn to question and to counter Brahmanism through our popular education classes, whether its youth, women, or leaders. We have to become more and more conscious of this because if we just talk about food and organising around food without addressing this core of oppression, there is no complete liberation. Brahmanism is so strong, and Brahmanism continues because of patriarchal oppression.

AN: Do women play a special role in all the Adivasi festivals and spiritual moments that you have mentioned?

Kamala: Historically, women in our Adivasi community, have always been the seeds savers. They have the knowledge of which seeds to select, how to process and store them. For example, the knowledge they inherited from their ancestors is that if you store the seed, whether in a pot or a basket, during the new moon, the chances of it

getting eaten up by worms or insects is very low. Whereas if you store the seeds during the full moon, the chances of your seeds going bad and rotting is very high.

Sagari: While this knowledge is inherited from the ancestors, it also has a scientific basis. During the full moon tides are at their maximum. Moisture levels are linked to the tide, gravity the moon, and so there is a strong scientific basis to why you would store your seeds during the new moon.

Kamala: For us, as Adivasi women, forest, land, the water and our relationship with those three elements is core to our spirituality. Therefore, even the festivals we celebrate, or our gods/goddess are related to this kind of relationship with nature. Our Karra pen is a festival but it is also a space of knowledge transfer from generation to generation in the village. All the animals that we have are taken to the boundary of our village, everybody attends this festival. Even the youngest child learns where the boundaries of the village are located, and that boundaries of the village are very important for living and coexistence between villages.

AN: In your view, what are some of the challenges around food sovereignty and spirituality in the future?

Murugamma: It is important as Bahujan and Dalit families that we reject Brahmanism, we have to recognise that the final core of our existence is land, our people and resources. Our biggest challenge today is land rights, and that struggle becomes the core of our organising. We have to reject the form of spiritual oppression which is religious oppression. If we do not do that, we won't be able to sustain this ongoing organising.

Sagari: Our biggest challenge is the Brahminical forces and their effect on communities. We have two streams within our movement. On the one hand, we have the Adivasi stream of organising where there is a lot of clarity in terms of spirituality. On the other hand, we have the Bahujan and Dalit communities. There are also Muslim communities who follow Islam, and yet are not liberated from the inequalities and discriminatory practices entrenched in caste. Because of this diversity, we do not try to pin down food sovereignty to a kind of 'spirituality'. But our understanding of spirituality is rooted in challenging Brahmanism, and the concept of Buen Vivir from the Indigenous people/ Adivasi peoples.

There is also the issue of the personal and the political. In the alliance its also about how in our own lives we have to become aware of and stop discriminatory practices. In our collective meetings, for instance we have beef. You don't have to eat beef but you have to become comfortable with people around you eating beef. These are new ways of redefining what is the spiritual because we are rejecting Brahmanism.

Madhoo: The onslaught of the dominant religious practises in Adivasi territories is coming. At the same time, food sovereignty writes a counter narrative against capitalism and against dominant cultures, monocultures. There is a monoculture that is being enforced upon struggling communities, particularly Adivasis. In Adivasis context, there are so many stories about the spiritual connection to Mother Earth.

When you speak to a marginalised Dalit community, the story will be a little different. They may agree there is a spiritual connection to Mother Earth but at the same time they are deprived, they are dispossessed of their Mother Earth, because of caste, and the

unacceptable notion of untouchability. They serve as labour to the landed families to grow food or rear cattle, and at the end of the day, they eat whatever the land owning families are deciding. So, their struggle is to do with self-respect and dignity and food justice. Food sovereignty for them is all about food justice and how they can protect their food culture and have access to the land. They can only mention the spiritual connection in terms of how they want to keep their food culture. Dalits centre anti-Brahminism in their spirituality, they may belong to Christianity but at the same time they also talk about their right to eat what we want as a Dalit community.

AN: Are you suggesting there are very different approaches to food sovereignty and spirituality within the Food Sovereignty Alliance, and between Dalits and Adivasis in particular? How are you navigating these as an Alliance?

Madhoo: Adivasi communities are continuously standing against the capitalist forces in India. Adivasis are struggling to really counter the capitalistic invasion that is happening there through agriculture, and the commercial crops that are grown for the outside market. Food sovereignty is so central to them and the concept of *buen vivir*. There is so much spiritual connection with Mother Earth. As activists in the food sovereignty movement, we had to really bring these two conceptions together, where the Dalit community can get inspiration from the Adivasi community and vice-versa, and how together they can fight for food sovereignty. How can Dalit, especially Dalit women, assert their right to land, and to grow and eat what they want to eat? The assertion to choose is a spiritual choice because it is about asserting their right to live in dignity.

Spirituality needs to be defined differently in Dalit and indigenous contexts. Spirituality will work much more strongly in organising in

Adivasi communities. In Dalit communities, it is more about how to counter the dominant spirituality that is imposed upon them by Brahminism, so there is a clear difference. We won't be able to really assert food sovereignty until we acknowledge and recognise caste oppression in India. Anti-caste is at the very core of building food sovereignty. It is important to not generalize the Adivasi experience as *the* Indian experience, which it is not.

For this reason, I feel that the counterculture narratives that are created in movements are so important. We are building a common future together, giving meaning to our lives and breaking the dominant narratives. We have to consciously reject certain practises which are coming from the dominant religious spiritual traditions because they are oppressing. Unfortunately, those forces are overtaking and infecting agroecology movements. We are seeing Brahmanism taking over as the dominant spirituality in the the food movement. We have to counter this trend.

In loving memory of the late Chundru Nookaraju

Chundru Nookaraju, an Adivasi leader of the Food Sovereignty Alliance, India, organising for food sovereignty in the Adivasi territories of East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh, tragically passed away on October 3rd 2022, at a very young age of 47. Nookaraju's involvement in Adivasi movements began soon after he completed

high school in 1992, where as a member of the Adivasi peoples movement Girijana Deepika and Adivasi Aikya Vedika, he worked to defend Adivasi rights to land, forests, water, knowledge, seeds, breeds, crafts, cultures and Adivasi worldviews. He was a fine animal healer and craftsperson, with sweeping knowledge of every tree, shrub, herb, creeper and crop of the territory. Nukaraju was an amazing actor, trained in the theatre of the oppressed, and performed in critical plays to conscientize and organise his people. In the last few years of his life he spent a lot of his time sharing his profound knowledge, wisdom and skills with children and youth not only of East Godavari but other members of the alliance. This interview was one of his last public engagements.

This interview was designed, conducted, recorded, transcribed and edited by Jasber Singh and Priscilla Claeys. The final version was revised and validated by members of the Food Sovereignty Alliance in India who were interviewed in this blog.

Additional Resources

- Ramdas, S. 2021. **Towards Food Sovereignty: Dismantling the Capitalist Brahmanic Patriarchal Food Farming Regime.** Development (64: 276-281).
- Ramdas, S. 2022. **Disruptive Technologies: The Case of Indigenous Territories of Andhra Pradesh, India.** Heinrich Boell Stiftung Hong Kong.