

Interview of Sheelu Francis, Tamil Nadu Women's Collective, Tamil Nadu – India

Sheelu Francis is an outstanding leader of the 60 thousand-strong women's collective, active in the whole state of Tamil Nadu, Southern India. Sheelu is also the international spokesperson for the Collective, speaking about the impacts of international trade, debt and activities of transnational corporations on local development, on food security and sovereignty.

👤 Marcos Arruda, February 2004

🗣️ Languages : Español

I - What is the main goal of your economic activity?

The main goal is the promotion of women and the Tamil Nadu marginalized in general as subjects of socioeconomic activities, overcoming their century-old dependence, subordination and humiliation. In the context of the Women's Collective, they are active in a variety of activities: dairy farming, small poultry, vegetable and fruit production, grocery shops, garment trade shops, cotton weaving, manufacturing edibles, herbal soaps, auctioning fruits (mango, tamarind), pickle and jam production, auto rickshaw driving, cycle repair shops, steel cupboard manufacturing, organic farming, earthworm compost, worm compost spray. 60% of the farmers in Tamil Nadu are landless. Only one percent of the land is owned by women and another one percent by the dalits, or untouchable. The Collective focuses on dalits, women and fisherpeople. A three-year drought has sunk the levels of the underground waterbed, while increasing affliction and hunger in the region. A more material goal, then, is to generate sustainable activities that guarantee at least two meals a day without the need to borrow.

{{II. Are you engaged in a DIFFERENT economy? How does it differ from the dominant economy?}}

Certainly. Besides the production and manufacturing, they also active in a self-managed savings and credit management system, based on groups of 10-20 self-help groups all over the territory of Tamil Nadu. The Collective is present in 20 districts and covers a total 1,540 villages; most of its participants are women. They are organized in self-help groups by village. Their economy is people's needs-oriented and is characterized by horizontal power relations; empowerment is a challenge for each and every member of the Collective. One of the most innovative economic approaches to village development is our methodology of initiation. The basis is participatory learning. We begin with village mapping; we identify the poor, their needs and their resources, those who take credit from moneylenders. Gradually, we are able to show what happens when the money stays in the village, instead of being syphoned away.

III. What does ABUNDANCE mean to you? Is material abundance an aim or the means to achieve something else? What is that something else?

Abundance is defined as families having enough and a surplus for storage. Material abundance is not seen as an end. We don't need too much; we need material sufficiency to bring people together in order to face common problems. A community TV is enough, no need to have a TV set in every house. A decent house for every family, however, is crucial. Job guarantee, three meals a day, a safe environment, etc.

{{IV. What VALUES do you and your fellow workers put into practice in your daily life and at work? Is it possible, in your opinion, for these values to become the predominant values of society as a whole? How can they be mainstreamed?}}

The main values are already there; they are part of Indian culture. But the long exposure to Western colonial and imperial powers operated many changes and in many cases people became alienated from their cultural roots. The key idea is to build economic, political and cultural power with the marginalized, particularly with women. Empowerment as a process is, therefore, crucial, and education for empowerment is the core of the Collective's endeavor.

V. What innovations have you developed in terms of organization, management and the appropriation of the fruits of labor?

Self-help groups that control their own money and financial transactions, is a key innovation. The self-managed financial system rules that when there is drought, borrowers do not pay interest, but only the principal. The groups serve as the base for village activities, including agricultural production. Another innovation is the introduction of organic agriculture for food security and sovereignty. The idea is that families take control of the production and distribution of their own food, and not just any kind of food, but healthy food. They organize the conservation of seeds and then they exchange them with one another. Roof rainwater harvesting for drink and for irrigation requires new structures, like the deepening of tanks, ponds, and protection from evaporation. The motto is 'that no drop of rain be lost in the soil'. We also introduced systems to protect the land from erosion. Other practices aimed at self-reliance and sustainability include agroforestry and other means of protecting natural resources. All of these are collectively managed and the finance to sustain them also.

{{VI. Do you think working in solidarity networks or in solidarity production chains is important? What are these in your opinion?}}

We are dedicated to developing productive chains, and marketing is a key activity. Worm compost producers need to sell their products to farmers. Fisherpeople must sell quickly or their product will spoil. Solidarity networks allow them to sell and to have sustainable markets. We consider the link between urban and rural populations very important. Grocery shops purchase from the cities. Local cooperatives make salt, breaking the big companies' oligopolies. Urban civil society organizations have organized market outlets in cities for the Collective, but our production is still insufficient for this new demand.

{{VII. Does your activity influence the life of the community? How and in which spheres?}}

The former comments answer this question quite effectively.

{{VIII. What is work in your experience? What is its value and meaning in life?}}

Work is twice as important for women, because they already work in household tasks and now also work for the material livelihood of their families in productive chores. The employment provided by government for landless laborers is a relief, but not a sustainable solution. We teach them that they can work with other technologies and take initiatives of their own. The people's economy is a source of stable occupation for women, who used to be confined to their homes and are now active in the state economy. They feel proud and their status has been raised considerably with respect to the formerly dominant male.

IX. What role do WOMEN play in a cooperation and solidarity-based economic initiative?

Women play an important role in building a people-centered economy. Men used to spend half their time drinking, and only half with their family. Women guarantee family funds plus extra work to cater for all needs and wants of the family. Men are often highly indebted and are not capable of financial management. Women are skilled for that, because they are their household managers.

{{X. How can public policies and the State contribute to the advancement of a Solidarity Socioeconomy?}}

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Neoliberalism has brought in machines to increase productivity and profits for capital owners. Women have been largely dislocated. We organize protests against machines, when government or private firms bring them in; people have their own ways of working which are very productive for their needs. The national economy should provide stable work opportunities for all. Women are getting more and more involved in local politics. They are now demanding 33% of the seats in the state assembly and in the national Parliament.

{{XI. Do you believe that a globalization of cooperation and solidarity is possible? How can it come true?}}

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I believe there can be another type of globalization, one that benefits people, not capitalists only. But this can only happen if cooperation and solidarity become the main forms of relationship among people. And these are characteristically feminine values. This is why the women must play a key role in the construction of globalized solidarity.

{1. Name of interviewer: Marcos Arruda, PACS

- 2. Name of interviewee: SHEELU FRANCIS; female
- 3. Name of the type of Socioeconomy initiative: Tamil Nadu Women's Collective
- 4. Date and place of the interview: Glasgow, April 2, 2004.

Contact addresses:

- Tamil Nadu Women's Collective
- E-53, 15th Street, 2nd Cross, Periyar - Nagar, Chennai – 600 082 - - Tamil Nadu – India

- Tel. 9122 2550 1257
- E-mail: sheelu1@vsnl.com}

Sources :

Vision workshop of the WSSE