

Farming, Food and Environmental Stewardship

A workshop for children (ages 9-16) 2nd - 4th May 2011

A Report by Bhargavi S.Rao

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Growing up in concrete and glass covered urban neighbourhoods, little do children today know or understand the age old process of farming and food production. In the world of food business, giant multinational corporations have already taken control of what is grown and what is consumed by whom. In this context, in a country known for its rich biological diversity, traditional systems of farming and amazing indigenous varieties of food grains that can provide adequate nutrition to eliminate hunger and malnutrition, it is important for children to understand what they eat and from where it comes and how it comes. May, the month of mid-summer vacation for all schools was when Environment Support group conducted a three day workshop for children in the age group of 9-16 on the theme of Food, Farming and Environmental stewardship to help children understand and appreciate our traditional farming and viable processes. 20 kids from the neighbourhoods of Banashankari, Konanakunte, Kanakapura Road and BTM layout enrolled for the workshop. Not a surprise, girl students were more in number probably indicating the role of women in agriculture and food production.



The first day started with a game through which everyone introduced themselves. Each participant introduced themselves with a prefix that denoted a farm crop which was followed by mentioning a favourite fruit, vegetable and food and the school and class he/ she is studying in. For example the introductions went like this “I am Sweet Sugarcane Surya, my favourite fruit is Mango, favourite vegetable is Bhendi and my favourite food is Masala dosa. I study in Delhi Public school and I am in class 4. My hobbies include reading, collecting stones, and cycling.” This was thoroughly enjoyed by the children for they had to really think hard for the names of common local fruits, vegetables and food. It was challenging for a few who were fond of imported uncommon fruits and trendy pizzas and snacks. This was followed by an introduction to the workshop by Ms

Bhargavi Rao during which she walked the group through the many activities listed for the three days.



The first session was about understanding Indian agriculture, the agricultural calendar, the role of the monsoons and traditional knowledge in planning the agricultural cycle. Ms. Bhargavi described the different cropping seasons namely Kharif Crops, those that are sown at the beginning of the south-west monsoon and harvested at the end of the south-west monsoon and mentioned the important crops of the Kharif namely: Jowar, bajra, rice, maize, cotton, groundnut, jute, hemp, sugarcane, tobacco, etc. Rabi Crops she mentioned need relatively cool

climate during the period of growth but warm climate during the germination of their seed and maturation. And mentioned the important Rabi crops: wheat, barley, gram, linseed, mus-tard, masoor, peas and potatoes. Besides these two seasons, Children were surprised to hear the third cropping season namely Zaid. Zaid crops are certain crops which are being grown throughout the year due to artificial irrigation or in dry areas and in dry periods with little water and could include crops like chillies in the absence of irrigation or rice, jowar, rapeseed, cotton, oilseeds, watermelon, cucumber, leafy and other vegetables with irrigation.



After a short tea break Mr. Mallesh K. R interacted with the children and shared his knowledge and experience about the entire process involved in the sowing and harvesting of traditional varieties of paddy and ragi. It was interesting to note that the rice consumed every day of our lives comes after such a long process that had a little sacred ceremony at different stages of its growth. It starts with the removal of seeds that have been stored away from the previous year's harvest either in the attic which is warm and free from pest and fungal attack or kept in mud pots or in cow dung lined store rooms in the ground. The seeds are worshipped by the women prior to sowing in the nursery beds. Transplantation follows with the entire community taking part in the process. He highlighted the role of women in the transplantation and the traditional beliefs of ceremonial farming practices that applied mostly to indigenous varieties. Mr. Mallesh also shared the many practices of mixed cropping, rotation cropping and dry land farming that are common in southern Karnataka.

Lunch was followed by watching a couple of docu films on organic farming, indigenous seed varieties and traditional seed banks. Watching the films opened a pandora box of questions on the viability of organic farming, the dangers of pesticides, the availability of water and the variety of local food grains such as ragi, jowar, etc.



The next session was with Mr. Leo Saldanha, who shared with children the importance of water in the world of farming and food production. He highlighted the significance of lakes and the need to preserve them. He also shared the ways in which many of the complicated issues surrounding water bodies could be solved with children's involvement. After the vibrant discussions on water, the day concluded with a short interactive game.



The second day was filled with excitement as it was a day for field visits. Children came packed with lunch and plenty of water to beat the summer heat. The first visit was to the Green Foundation seed bank at Maralwadi about 60 kms from Bangalore. Mr Harish of Green Foundation described the role of the women self-help groups in setting up the seed bank. He highlighted the training given to women to increase the economic empowerment of women through the seed banks and the increased general awareness on health, nutrition, sanitation, banking etc. Following this he displayed the varieties of vegetable, Paddy, Ragi and Millet seeds stored in the seed bank and explained how the seed banks function to benefit the organic farmers. He also described the many methods employed in storing seeds. The role played by Neem, Chillies and many herbs in storing seeds to prevent pest and fungal attack amazed the children. Mr. Harish also explained the preparation of bio pesticides from Cow urine, ghee, neem, cow dung and many other



herbal components. He described the method of application and the different times of crop growth during which the bio pesticides are needed.

Children were stunned at all that they had seen and learnt and were motivated to try some kitchen gardens at home, each of them collected a small reward of indigenous seeds of vegetables of their choice to start a kitchen garden. The group also learnt about the handicraft project initiated by Green Foundation to help landless women in the region and slowly walked to the bus taking in as much as possible of the beautiful village, an Anganwadi filled with children waving at the group and the unhurried pace and calm of the village.

The group then passed through the winding roads of the region that come under the Bannerghatta National park, saw some elephant droppings and were excited hoping to see an elephant as some villagers shared their experiences of crop loss due to elephant menace. With great excitement the group then reached Vanashree, the 8 acre farm that is organically and naturally cultivated over last 5 years, and is more a “Discovery Lab” initiated by Dr. Priti and Srikanth. Located at Maralwadi, 50 kms from Bangalore, it is very close to Bannerghatta forest range and surrounded by gently wooded hills. At the farm, Mr. Shanmukha, the care taker of the farm, walked the group around describing many things that are being experimented at the farm.



Children learnt about the local varieties of cow breeds and the important features of such breeds, they also learnt about mixed cropping, kitchen garden, water harvesting methods, solar lighting, biogas, soil conservation techniques and much more, most of which are low-cost, low-tech and also less labour intensive. Children were delighted to see about 3500 saplings planted many of which had

grown to adult size and the spread was over 125 species. A beekeeping box attracted their attention and also learnt about bees and the process of honey production. After the tour of the farm, the group settled under the beautiful pagoda like shade to have their lunch. Mr. Shanmukha and his family gave some organically grown plantains which was a welcome dessert for all. The group enjoyed sitting under the shade wondering about the many alternative lifestyles one can choose to live to make this planet a better and safer place for all. The day ended with a visit to the organic food store at Lalbagh botanical gardens and some shopping for the next day’s organic meal.



The third day started with a lot of excitement as it was a day when the group was to cook an organic meal. The group spent some time reflecting on the field experience and learning about Indian food and health and how the science of Ayurveda played a great role in influencing Indian cooking. The group also learnt the importance of spices and their combinations in Indian food. The group discussed about traditional home remedies for common ailments and the many cultural practices that are directly linked to health.

After a short tea break, the children were divided in to groups and each group was to cook a particular dish for the organic lunch party. With abundant enthusiasm children collectively made a healthy organic meal with help from Susheelamma at ESG. The group had decided on the menu very carefully to ensure almost everything was organic. The menu for the day was as below



- Welcome drink made from pineapple juice concentrate with honey and mint
- A Peanut Masala starter
- A vegetable salad
- Organic brown rice
- Mixed vegetable sambar
- Fruit Salad

The group enjoyed the lunch followed by dessert with a pleasant surprise of ice-cream served with the fruit salad.



Following the lunch session was an interactive session with Ms. Akshatha Balakrishna, a nutritionist. Ms. Balakrishna presented to the children an overview of the basic nutrition required for children and the many food grains that are packed with nutrition. She also showed a variety of millets, ragi and rice that were organically grown and rich in nutrient content. Children were also presented some simple online tools to understand more about nutrition and food.



The presentation also highlighted the importance of eating local foods and traditional foods that had evolved over thousands of years after rigorous experimentation. She stressed the importance of fermented foods and their health benefits. The presentation wrapped up almost all the things they had learnt over the three days. Children were all excited about the many things they learnt and were eager to experiment some themselves. The workshop concluded with a round of cookies and everyone chatting about the many things they learnt.

