

# International Farmers' Dialogue

## Conference Report, Asia Plateau, India

February 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> 2001

*The Dialogue was held at Asia Plateau, the Moral Re-Armament Conference and Training Centre at Panchgani (Maharashtra). Upwards of 100 Indian farmers and agriculturists met with 42 visitors from twelve countries – UK, France, Ireland, Poland, Switzerland, USA, Canada, Cambodia, Australia, Tanzania, Madagascar and Uganda.*

The Dialogue brought together farmers who were deeply concerned with the direction much of the developed and developing world's farming is taking. Whether it was discussing short term planning or the disregard for the long term future of the land, water supply and water quality or the global problems stemming from the over use of chemical fertilisers, herbicides and insecticides, and the effects of globalisation, the focus of the Dialogue was on finding the best ways to tackle these enormous challenges. Some were looking for quick fix solutions and others were more focused on the long term methods of finding the right people to take on the task to bring lasting changes.



*Welcome at Mr Jagdale's farm*

The 42 visitors from overseas had two days before the Dialogue to meet Indian farmers, and were welcomed to Mr B K Jagdale's farm at Godoli. Mr Jagdale had created a productive farm of 63 acres out of barren stony land in the last eight years and is now an impressive example of what can be achieved. Our welcome to the Baramati area on the second day was made possible by Vasant and Anasuya Gargate. We visited Mr and Mrs Atul Shah's Saraf farm near Baramati where we were asked to inaugurate a new Bio-gas plant to use the manure from 100 milking buffaloes. Also at Baramati there was an opportunity to see a brand new Institute of Information Technology, and to learn something of the agricultural extension work and education in the locality.

The Dialogue was opened by Dr M S Swaminathan, the internationally known agricultural scientist. His wide grasp of both science and policy was coupled to a warm humanity and all inclusive vision.



*Dr M S Swaminathan (centre) talking with delegates*

By general demand his talk is being printed in full as a separate booklet. In it he declared his faith in the ability of Indian farmers even with small farms, to compete in world markets. India has become self-sufficient in grain and milk production with important improvements in many other crops and fruits. He looked to an Evergreen Revolution to establish sustainable farming based on happy farm families and including many of the new choices science could offer. Trade must be conditioned by 'ethics' and 'human livelihood security' which he underlined with Mahatma Gandhi's message 'pay attention to the needs of the poorest person.

Among many of his telling phrases were -

- - A job-led economic growth, not a jobless growth. We have to have a human-centred kind of development
- - Production of masses in contrast to the mass-production technology of the industrialised nations. We may be food secured but not livelihood secured
- - Anything you do for the poorest farmer, the whole society benefits. Anything you do for a woman in a household, the whole family benefits.

Finally he endorsed the importance of the role of dialogue in defining a common purpose world-wide, forged through farmer to farmer contacts.

Certainly the solidarity of farmers from the West with their Indian colleagues was evident from the beginning even in the task of examining and understanding their differences. As ever in India the latest in technology can be seen side by side with abject poverty. Deepak Mullick, Managing Director of Advanta Seeds – India, is a leader in the drive to supply good seed stocks. He has 5,000 farmers producing seed for him, and the work of 7 Research Stations to draw on. A major stroke, leaving him paralysed down the right side, has not deflected him from the purpose which he found as a student after a profound reconciliation with his father whom he had hated. His work has united the company and the

farmers, and has been dedicated to providing the best practical service. Their programme recently won a major award for sustainability.

At the western end of the farming spectrum Sever Peterson, a large scale family farmer in Minnesota USA, told of his farm where with 5 brothers and sisters, and all 16 nieces and nephews work on the farm on a seasonal basis. They specialise in vegetable production which is sold at 12 local farm markets called "Sever's Farm Markets". Yet he does not see any real economic future in farming despite being one of the most successful in his locality. Ordinary farmers feel disenfranchised by the powerful concentration of agri-business which dominates Washington policies. Can a trend apparently so firmly established be turned around? Sever Peterson led two informal gatherings to pursue this question, and there was clearly a conviction among many of the delegates to continue to grapple with it.

Such questions are at the heart of the Dialogue, and many issues were explored. Jean-Pierre Emériaud a farmer from the west of France, told of co-operation in sharing farm machinery, and the way members of the group do the work of anyone who is ill. His wife Sylvie, new to village life, spoke of her work with a club for children, and a home for families in difficulties. She is now standing for the local council.

Shailendra Mahato, an Adivasi farmer, supported by a strong delegation from the new State of Jharkhand, spoke of their determination to make it a pattern for something new. 'I created a political party and became a full time politician, but I was full of bitterness. Moral Re-Armament taught me to listen to the inner voice. I had not got a good relationship with my wife because of my political activity. I apologised to my wife and, against the wishes of my followers, to my Congress Party rival. When man listens, God speaks. We joined hands and got a primary school for the village children and a college for the district. We also brought improvements to the village farms.'

Gérard Barbé, a dairy farmer from the East of France, told of the link farmers in his area have with farmers in Colombia, and of the visible progress made in the last twenty years. Speaking of his responsibilities with FIMARC (The International Federation of the Adult Rural Catholic Movements), he stressed the need to complete the cancellation of the unrepayable debt in the Developing countries. In 1980 the debt was 360 billion dollars. In 2000 it was over 2000 billion dollars, and in those twenty years the capital amount has been repaid 6 times over in interest.

He went on to commend the pattern of family farming and co-operation developed in France, and in Europe through the CAP (EU's Common Agricultural Policy). This had been based on respect for the environment, for cropping and livestock and the consumer. It had an

ethical basis and we should not be in a hurry to change it for what may be considered a more up to date model. Sever Peterson's disillusionment with what is happening in the United States underlined this point, and he felt that rather than seek salvation in trade liberalisation, we should be thinking of the ethics of commercialisation as well as of production, which should shape such developments.

The moral values at the heart of rural society were further emphasised by Maurice Réveillère, until this year, President of the Maine & Loire Chambre d'Agriculture. He gave two examples of how debates in their district of 100,000 people arrived at consensus. In the first the key was to give priority to those most in need, the young farmers and the smallest farmers. In the second the use of water in a small river was resolved after a thorough airing of all the interests involved, which showed people many aspects of which they had been unaware.

His wife, France, mentioned how their four sons had been working together for 2 years in a farming partnership known in France as a GAEC. She herself had been involved for thirty years with the training of young people in agriculture and rural trades. Known as the Maisons Familiales Rurales, these institutions had been successful in keeping people in the countryside, not only through work experience but also through offering an education for life. They aimed at a longer perspective on the future than just today's employment.

*Arun Chavan and his colleague Anuradha Bhosale*



Arun Chavan, secretary and activator of the Verala Development Society, a farmers' committee in Sangli, asserted that the outreach of moral issues covered 'humanity as a whole and indeed its relativity to all creation.' He pointed out that in marketing, 'the economics of farming in the North and South is not radically different. The producer, the farmer, has the lowest share of benefit. Capital plays a dominant role and capital transactions reap the larger chunk of the benefit. People at large are passive consumers.' But he ended with the rousing declaration that globalised thinking and activism should become the order of the day. 'Farmers of the world unite, it is within you to redeem this Earth.'

What that might mean was reflected in the convictions and initiatives expressed as the Dialogue developed. Without any formal resolution of intent, there were

clearly many seeds which will be germinating in the months and years which follow.

The most prepared of these initiatives was a project for rural development in Cambodia, which came from Koy Choeurn now living in Minnesota with his colleague Sokha Chan. They were joined direct from Phnom Penh by Son Soubert, a Member of the Constitutional Council, equivalent to a member of the Cambodian Supreme Court. Underlining what the farmers have suffered, Koy Chhoeurn described what followed the "killing fields" of the Pol Pot regime. 'From 1979 to the present day, the Communist government installed by Vietnam indirectly killed between a half to one million Cambodian farmers.... They were forced to dig bunkers at the Western frontiers where mines were already planted in deep forest, infested with malaria. But the government did not provide them with food or medicine. They died of starvation, malaria and mine explosions.'

The goal is to help Cambodian farmers become self-sufficient and to improve their living standard through a project which provides farm land, technical services and community development. Son Soubert underlined that 'With the rampant corruption which plagues Cambodia, I am afraid that any actions in good faith will be transformed into failure. There needs to be a co-operative system. Only western countries can help us to set up this type of network and programme, in order to alleviate the poorest of Cambodian farmers with a system of mutual bank loans .... This initiative must be private if we want to escape the loss of funds going into the personal pockets of corrupt officials.' he had a further thought at the Dialogue: that, in view of the success of India in resolving agricultural problems and the similarity of Indian and Cambodian agricultural situations, Indian farmers and farm leaders should be invited to Cambodia for a round table discussion with their Cambodian counterparts, within 6 months. He will approach the UNDP in Phnom Penh to see what could be possible. He hoped a number of the Indians and French farmers he had met would help when the time came to launch. They had valuable experiences to offer.

Australia had played a big role in the creation of the Cambodian Agricultural Research and Development Institute opened in November 2000. Phil Jefferys – a sheep farmer from Australia who has struggled over the years with poor wool prices and the pressure to keep ever greater numbers of sheep – was invigorated by the spirit of the Dialogue. He expressed his determination on going home to become fully conversant with Australian policies on farm trade, overseas development and the wider impact of economics through multinationals etc. This would include thinking for political leaders and caring for immigrants as part of the way to effect a change – in which every individual counts.

Sunita Amolik, had given up a better paid job to work with Dr. Chavan on a Sangli Project teaching and

advising the women about nutrition and health matters. She and her sister both spoke with enthusiasm about the challenge for young people and the education needed for the women and girls. Anuradha Bhosale another of Dr Arun Chavans colleagues spoke of her concern for the role of women. Perhaps, ironically, it is because women have so many responsibilities that they have been overlooked by agriculturists and policy makers. Concerted efforts are needed to speed the thrust of changes which have begun'. Speaking of the need to include the fishermen, she said: 'The economic collapse of the fishing industry is at hand. One alternative is the development of larger fishing armadas, reaching out to valuable expanses like the antarctic and stepping up the catch. The other is to allow greater scope to the fishing fraternity the world over to step up their trade in a decentralised eco friendly manner.

Mayur Bora, proprietor of the Mapro jam factory in Panchgani, in talking of 'added value' underlined the potential of a brand name. One 5-acre farmer growing Turmeric had simply presented better quality in bags bearing his name. After 5 years the recognition of his regular customers was such that the price received was around 50% better than the market average. While warning that this might not always work, Mayur Bora pointed out that a lot of processing involved a great deal of paper work and administration which was too much for the average farmer. An alternative was co-operation, a theme developed by Véronique Guérin, who runs the Brussels office of the French Confederation of Agricultural Co-operatives. She emphasised that whether Co-operatives are large or small, they must put people first in all their dealings. She had been asked to write an article on the Dialogue for *Ensemble* a regional agricultural periodical. Though not from a farming background, her continuing faith in the European ideal had taken her to Brussels. She found great satisfaction in her work and had embarked on it despite the higher salary available from a private company.

This kind of commitment is at the heart of the questions raised at the Dialogue. It is not so much a question of where people start from, but where they will go as a result.

Colonel S K Ghadge from Satara convened a meeting of farmers from different parts of Maharashtra to consider how they could establish team work on a State-wide basis. Yeshwantrao Ghorpade from Miraj said, 'So far we have talked about change, but now with like minded people we will make an action plan.'

Chandan Honhaga, one of the Adivasi party from Jharkhand, who is an All India Radio announcer and head man of his village, expressed his appreciation for Shailendra Mahato's work as secretary of the Conference, and commented on the wide range of farmers, from those clad in loin cloths to those so prosperous as to seem part of another world. 'All I have heard in the last three days will go out on radio.' The



Jharkand farmers voiced the hope that some of the French farmers would visit their area, share some of their experiences at some future date followed possibly by them bringing some of their colleagues to meet the French on their own farms.

From Madagascar, Leonard Rakotondrakaza underlined the themes of aim and motive. 'Once again I would like to emphasise that a technical package is not sufficient. Transparency and a deeper sense of morality, honesty and love are fundamental in transforming people ... There is a link between debt, lack of economic growth and conflict. One of the significant causes of conflict in Africa is the struggle for survival in a situation of scarce resources. Hence the struggle for State power.'

His comments were endorsed by the judgement of Robert Wangoolo from Uganda. 'It has been a great moment. We should be able to cause sustainable farming programmes. We owe a lot to millions of people who were not able to attend this international Dialogue. We should influence governments to design better policies.'

Perhaps the next Dialogue should be in Africa. But meanwhile there are initiatives to pursue, some of which have been mentioned, which could make sense of many of today's contradictions. Farmers can shoulder the responsibility for change, and feel that they are beginning to take control of their own destiny.

After the Dialogue there was a further opportunity for the visitors to see something of India and its agriculture. A large party went north to New Delhi, the high point of this post-Dialogue tour being a visit to Haryana University near Hisar, and a reception by the farm community at the village of Muklan. The tour was received at the University by the Director of Research, Dr. Bushan Jalali who described the transmission of new research to farms by a network of 37 agricultural universities and their extension systems patterned after US Land Grant Universities with which they are in continuous touch. This was followed by a visit to the village of Muklan, with 5000 people, which is a successful demonstration site for farmer-agribusiness co-operation where Xcel Industries Limited has given on-site support to individual farmers in deciding the optimum use of seed and chemicals for maximum return. Average size of farms at Muklan is 1½ hectares. Much of the Universities work focused on increased production while using less chemicals, all were aware that India has 18 million more people to feed each year

A smaller party stayed near Asia Plateau and made local visits, and later went down to visit Sohrab Chinoy's dairy farm near Pune and his ABC Dairies in the town itself.

In fairly basic condition, Sohrab has the equipment to produce excellent cheeses. Interestingly he has found that a luxury item like Roquefort cheese only sells when it is priced at 4 times the normal range. Anything less and the gourmet consumers don't seem interested.

Asia Plateau



The third group of 7 from Tanzania, Uganda, Australia and the UK visited the Sangli area in southern Maharashtra, and their visit was arranged by Dr Arun Chavan, the organiser of the Verela Development Society and one of the speakers at the Dialogue. These are some of the projects they learnt about and people they met.

- A 5000 acres desalination scheme in the process of being implemented, that will affect 10,000 families.
- An established scheme where 43 retention dams had been built, these were designed to hold back the water in the monsoon and so replenish the depleted underground water table
- To meet grape growers and the leaders of their co-operative and one man in particular, a government advisor who has been helping the grape growers develop their skills and the industry over the last 60 years.
- An established sugar cane factory, followed by seeing a farmers owned co-operative sugar factory which is in the early stages of constructed.
- A school for the poorest of children, started and run by a retired Muslim government officer operating with no government help, yet it has 900 pupils.
- In Kolhapur, a large city of up to a million people the most southerly city in Maharashtra, they met Mr J D Jadhav who is fighting to get the city council to provide a clean water supply. In that city there is no drainage system. Even the hospital which is upstream discharges all its waste into the river.

These visits gave the participants a clearer understanding of India and a valuable context to the talks and discussions at the Dialogue. They all left India greatly encouraged by what they had seen and heard and with a greater determination that farmers become equipped to meet the challenges involved in sustaining our planet and feeding the worlds populations.