

SARADA LAHANGIR

In rural areas, the role of women is particularly important in ensuring food security for the family. Almost half of all agricultural workers in the developing world are women. Among the women who are employed in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, two-thirds work in farming. The agriculture sector in India employs 80% of all economically active women; they comprise 33% of the agriculture labour force and 48% of self employed farmers. According to National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) reports, 18% farm families in India are headed by women. Despite playing an extensive role in the Indian agriculture production system, women most often are not recognized as farmers either legally and socially. Against this rather depressing background, women farmers in Koraput district are blazing a new trail by ensuring food security not just for their own families, but for the whole village.

Kamala Pujari, 62, of Patraput village of Koraput district is a tribal woman who has not only established herself as a farmer and set a trend for others to follow, but has also ensured food security for her



village by preserving hundreds of desi varieties of paddy. "We had a small patch of land and we depended on it to earn our livelihood. From my childhood, I have known that this place was once home to some of the best varieties of paddy. But gradually, most of the varieties disappeared and many more are on the verge of extinction. On the other hand, tribal farmers who were depended on cultivation for ages lost interest in it and lost their livelihood in the process. Many of them preferred to go for wage labour. It was heart breaking for me to see this situation. So I involved myself in this and tried to do something. I underwent the required training to use organic farming technology from the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation at Jeypore and applied the knowledge that I gained there on my land," she ruminates.

Initially, things were not easy for her. Villagers

# Women farmers show the way

were reluctant to listen to her. But she was determined and organized group meetings, interacted with the villagers, convinced them to take to organic farming. "I had to virtually launch a campaign for organic farming and had to visit door to door and march from village to village telling people how organic farming will bring rich returns in terms of harvest and soil fertility. Gradually, I started getting positive response from the villagers. Now you cannot find a single farmer in our area who uses chemical fertilizers. Every farmer in the area has embraced desi varieties of paddy and has shunned chemical fertilizers," says a proud Kamala.

"Initially, we thought we had no future in farming because the yield was so low. But after adopting organic farming, the yield improved dramatically. Most of the women in Patraput village, who were depending on minor forest produce and sometimes on wage labour, have now



"Earlier, we were using a large amount of chemical fertilizers for farming. Now we are

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returned to cultivation. Now, our children are not going to bed on empty stomach. All credit goes to Kamala Maa," says 35-year old Champa Muduli, another woman farmer. Due to her effort Kamala Pujari has won the Equator Initiative Award in Johannesburg in South Africa in 2002 and the Krusi Bisharada Samman in New Delhi in 2003.

A decade ago, Raila Muduli, another tribal woman from Boliguda village of Boipariguda block in Koraput district, was struggling to feed her family of six. But exposure to a nature friendly farming system not only changed her condition but also got her tribe UN recognition in the shape of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS). She had represented the farmer community in her area and was felicitated by the Prime minister at the 99th Indian Science Congress."

using cow dung and vermin compost for manure. To prevent crops from getting infected, we prepare insecticides in a traditional manner using neem leaves and other plants found in the forests that have medicinal qualities. This has nearly trebled the annual yield in the last few years and has led to a quantum jump in earnings from farming," she explains. "Now our annual income from cultivation amounts to more than ₹50,000. We are able to meet not just the basic needs of our family, but also other requirements without any problem. Most importantly, now we are able to send our children to school," she adds.

In rural areas of Koraput district, women are involved at every stage of the food production cycle. Although men usually plough the fields and drive draught animals, women do most of the work involved in sowing, weeding and harvesting of staple crops which allows for more

than 90 per cent of the rural poor's diet.

Manima Disari is a skillful tribal woman farmer in her early thirties. She lives in a joint family with her husband and three children and the family of her brother in law. They live in a remote village called Gadiagumma in Golluru Panchayat of Nandapur block in Koraput district. The family owns 10 acres of land but the produce from these 10 acres of land is shared between the two families consisting of 12 members. They grow paddy on 6 acres and ragi on 3 acres exclusively for the consumption within the families. In the rest of the land and another 3 acres of lease land, they grow maize, vegetables, pulses and spices and Pipla (medicinal plant) for cash income. Manima takes a lead in all agriculture activities. Her share in farming work includes transplanting, weeding, harvesting and seed preservation. Manima has adopted System of Rice Intensification (SRI) method of cultivation in her field and has ensured food for her family.

Three years ago, Manima was the first woman in her village to take a decision to experiment with SRI on half an acre of land. She participated in farmers' training organized by 'Pragati', a Koraput based NGO which inspired enough to experiment herself. "Initially, my husband and my in-laws did not agree with my decision, but I managed to convince them and they supported me to try it out on a small patch of land. The success encouraged them to expand the area cropped to one acre last year (2011). The experience of less seed, less labour and more yield was very encouraging for us. I could harvest 20 quintals of paddy from one acre whereas I used to get no more than 12 quintals in the traditional method," Manima says. "Last year, we did not buy PDS rice as we grew enough on our own land. This year, I have convinced my family to put all the 6 acres of paddy land under SRI (Kharif 2012)," adds an exultant Manima.

Manima, with help from her family mem-

bers, has prepared seed bed, land and has completed transplanting. Now she goes out for weeding along with her family members. "Now I have prepared pot manure, which I will apply after weeding", says Manima as she walks with the weed to her SRI field with a big smile on her face. The family members of Manima are happy with her decision. They have been able to complete transplanting in all 6 acres, which required nearly 2 quintals of seeds in the traditional method, with just 12 kg. Besides, the requirement of labour and water have also been significantly lower for weeding while there is no need to apply chemical fertilizers anymore. She now hopes that with SRI, which is compatible with all kinds of paddy land and weather conditions, she would be generate a surplus after domestic consumption and earn some much needed cash after selling it. Along with SRI, Manima has also cultivated Pipla, turmeric and pigeon pea. Along with her family members, she plans the crops they raise throughout the year. She feels that crop diversity can ensure the food basket as well as fetch some cash income for farmers who solely depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Besides doing it herself, Manima has motivated other villagers to adopt SRI and guided them in field operations like nursery raising, transplantation and weeding. She has also prepared pot manure along with 24 other farmers who have adopted the SRI method of cultivation following in her footsteps. Out of 47 families in the village, more than 50% farmers (25 farming households) are inspired by her getting good harvest every year and living a happy life. "All credit goes to Manima. She has changed our lives," says a grateful Ichha Majhi, another woman in the village.

"Tribal women have a lot of potential with their indigenous knowledge of farming. The only requirement is to push them and guide them in the right direction. Tribal women are hard working and very receptive to changes suggested to them even though they have little or no awareness of the very purpose of change. Our women farmers have adopted organic farming and SRI and have made a huge difference in the society, ensured food security for their families and their community," says Prabhakar Adhikari, Director, 'Pragati'.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report on women in 2010 argues "If men and women had equal access to productive resources in agriculture, food output in developing countries would increase by between 2.5 and four percent-enough to pull 100-150 million people out of hunger."

Dr MS Swaminathan, founder of MS Swaminathan Research Center, feels "Women farmers will determine India's agrarian and rural economy in the years to come." And Koraput's women farmers like Kamala, Raila and Manima have perhaps already started proving him correct.

(This article is written as part of the Akshaya Patra-One World Media Fellowship on Hunger)

# Chinese Defence and Commerce Ministers visit India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

The visits by Chinese Defence and Commerce Ministers to India in a space of one week from August 28, 2012 have helped the two countries to address the tricky bilateral issues in two key areas in a forthright manner and make some forward movement in putting often prickly bilateral relations, marked by distrust, on a more even keel. That is a welcome development because the two fastest growing giant economies in the world are not only jostling for spheres of influence in each other's backyards but also because they are both nuclear-armed. The first to come calling was Chinese Commerce Minister Chen Deming who met Commerce, Industry and Textile Minister Anand Sharma and the two grappled with a host of important issues relating to bilateral trade at present pegged at 75.4 billion dollars, which is heavily tilted in favour of China with India's exports to China being about 18 billion dollars and imports from that country at 57.5 billion dollars.

The growing trade deficit with China is a major area of concern to India whose exporters often complain of facing non-tariff barriers to access the huge market of that country.

It is in this context that Sharma raised with Chen the issue of Indian goods getting greater market access by opening Chinese government contracts and easing stringent quality and procedural norms for exports from India to China. Chen assured Sharma that China would consider increasing imports of pharmaceuticals, agricultural products and information technology and IT-enabled services from India, something New Delhi has been pushing for to help narrow the bilateral trade gap.

China, on its part, brought up the issue of India's imposition of 21 per cent levy on import of power equipment from China for mega power projects in India. The Union Cabinet had in August imposed the levy to bring mega power projects at par with non-mega power projects to give domestic manufacturers of power equipment a level-playing field.

Sharma assured Chen that the

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levy would not be imposed on the power equipment from China for all those power projects which have been given final provisional mega certificates and all projects where procurement orders have already been placed with Chinese companies.

The Chinese Commerce Minister also raised the issues of easier visa regime for Chinese workers and stronger protection for Chinese investment in India. For his part, Sharma made it clear to Chen that while India may need highly-skilled workers from abroad, it has to keep in the mind the fact the large local work force needed to be encouraged.

The Chinese minister pitched for higher level of investments by India and China in each other by contending that enhancing investment is one important way of addressing the issue of trade imbalance.

Chen pointed that while cumulative investment of China in India is to the tune of 580 million dollars, Indian foreign direct investment in China is about 460 million dollars. India too showed its keenness to have more investment from China by inviting that country to invest in planned national investment and manufacturing zones.

Chen made the right noise by arguing that since both India and China have large domestic markets, closer economic cooperation between



them in trade and investment would help contain the negative fallout of global economic turmoil.

It was encouraging to see that instead of just putting across each other's concerns at the Commerce Ministers-level meeting, the two countries took two important decisions - (1) that of setting up a joint working group for all trade and investment-related issues, which will submit its report in three months; and (2) to work on a five-year plan for economic cooperation.

While commerce has over the years emerged as an important aspect of in Sino-Indian, understandably, the media interest was more on Chinese Defence Minister Gen Liang Guanglie's talks with his Indian counterpart A K Antony. Observers have taken note of the fact that it was the first visit by a Chinese Defence Minister to India in eight years in view of mounting tension between India and China not only in bilateral defence cooperation but also in the wider security scenario of Asia in the last few years.

The framework of defence cooperation between India and China was set up during the then Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Beijing in 2006.

The process seemed to be proceeding well before it faltered two years ago when China refused to give

a normal visa to a senior Indian army officer stationed in Jammu and Kashmir, apparently keeping in mind Beijing's all-weather friend Pakistan which regards the state as disputed, and India hit back by scrapping the visit and freezing defence exchanges and joint military exercises. It is a measure of mature handling of their ties that both India and China did not take much time to revive military contacts.

One of the two most important outcomes of Antony-Liang meeting was the decision to resume the joint military exercises at an earliest date and Antony's acceptance of an invitation to visit China sometime next year, restoring the high-level defence interaction.

That is significant in view of the fact that while China has undertaken a major exercise to upgrade its infrastructure along the border with India, raising concerns in security establishment in New Delhi, and India decided to follow suit. India has also decided to raise additional army divisions and both the countries are strengthening their air forces along the frontier.

Given this scenario, it was important that an official statement issued by Indian Defence Ministry after Antony-Liang talks said that both the Defence Ministers agreed that expanding bilateral coopera-

tion between the defence ministries and armed forces of India and China helps enhance mutual trust, and agreed to work together to enhance the same in the security field and continue to maintain peace and tranquillity in India-China border areas.

The meeting between Antony and Liang predictably went beyond the bilateral issues and surveyed the larger picture of Asia-Pacific region where both India and China are looking to raise their profiles on all fronts.

The official statement issued by the Indian Defence Ministry after the Antony-Liang meeting said, "The two sides proclaimed their decision to work together to maintain peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific region, promote port calls by naval ships of the two sides and conduct joint maritime search and rescue exercises." This is significant considering that New Delhi and Beijing are seeking to build up their naval presence in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea and East China Sea.

While India regards the Indian Ocean as its own backyard, China views South China, rich with gas, oil and aqua resources, the same way. While increasing Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean, defence contacts with South Asian countries (Liang came to Delhi from Colombo) and Indian Ocean islands of Seychelles and the Maldives have caused concerns in New Delhi, India's growing interest in South China, through which around half of the world's sea trade is transported, has generated suspicion in Beijing. China is aware that India has a growing defence relationship with Vietnam, Japan and China has disputes with Vietnam and Japan over certain islands.

Liang was in Delhi around the time when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was in Beijing as part of her tour of Pacific region underlying once again the Obama administration's strategic focus on the area which is critical to global economic growth and yet characterized by territorial disputes between China on one hand and Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines on the other hand, and military build-ups.

While the official Chinese reaction to Clinton's visit has been restrained, its stronger views were articulated by the country's ruling Communist Party mouthpiece *People's Daily* and official news agency Xinhua which accused Washington of trying to drive a wedge between China and its neighbours. Beijing's suspicion was further fuelled when Clinton visited the Cook Islands.

There is a convergence of views between India and the US that peace and stability in the South China Sea is of utmost importance mainly due to safety of international maritime trade and freedom of navigation in international waters. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi made it clear that his country's disputes were no one's business but the directly concerned countries.

There lies the difference between the US and China. While Washington has been pushing for a resolution of territorial disputes between China and its smaller neighbours so that the latter have a bigger leverage, Beijing wants to solve them bilaterally, apparently aware that it can seek to bulldoze its way through to a solution. A code of conduct to maintain peace in South China and a multilateral resolution could not be worked out in June this year at a meeting of ASEAN countries Foreign Ministers with Cambodia, current chair of the regional grouping, holding out.

Interestingly, China has made major investments in Cambodia in recent years and has apparently succeeded in persuading Phnom Penh not to go with majority opinion in ASEAN. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had some years ago said that there is space enough for both India and China to grow together without being in competition or confrontation with each other. As Clinton argued during her latest round of visit to the Pacific region, "The mark of a mature relationship, whether it is between nations or between people, is not whether we agree on everything but whether we can work through the issues that are difficult".

It applies equally to India and China which must remain engaged with each other in the same spirit.