

**In November 1998**, activists from the Karnataka State Farmers' Association (KRRS) – one of the largest and most radical farmers' movements in India – began Operation Cremate Monsanto, a programme of direct action against the infamous US biotech corporation. Unbeknownst to the farmer Basanna Hunsale the 'experimental' seeds Monsanto had given him to plant were genetically modified (GM). When Hunsale discovered this, he helped KRRS activists rip up the crop – the first trial of GM cotton in India – then they threw the plants into a pile and made a bonfire.

Monsanto had been illegally conducting 40 field trials of genetically modified cotton across five Indian states for at least three months. As that first GM crop went up in flames, KRRS activists declared: "We send today a very clear message to all those who have invested in Monsanto in India and abroad: take your money out now, before we reduce it to ashes." The action inspired a mass movement of direct action and crop-pulling against GM crops around the world. In Karnataka State there were several more GM bonfires, and the banning of similarly undeclared field trials which Monsanto were discovered to be operating in other Indian states too.

An enormous and radical farmers' movement is building, not just in India but across the world as agribusiness moves in to monopolize the seed, pesticide, and food markets. The KRRS are the pioneers of this peasants' revolt. The prospect of having to buy patented, hybrid, and genetically modified seeds each year is motivating Indian farmers to defend the practice of saving seeds for the next crop. Currently 80 per cent of Indian seed is saved for the next harvest. Breaking that ancient relationship is crucial for the expansion of the profitable seed market in India. As KRRS leader Nanjundaswamy says, they are: "forcing seed dependency on farmers who cannot afford to buy seeds."

## **Cremating Monsanto: genetically modified fields on fire**

by Professor Nanjundaswamy

*"We are aiming to consolidate the entire food chain."* – Monsanto, 1998

### **Open letter – November 1998**

Dear friends,

Monsanto's field trials in Karnataka will be reduced to ashes, starting on Saturday. Two days ago the Minister of Agriculture of Karnataka gave a press conference where he was forced by the journalists to disclose the three sites where field trials with [Monsanto's GM] Bt cotton are being conducted. KRRS activists have already contacted the owners of these fields, to explain to them which action will be taken, and for what reasons, and to let them know that the KRRS will cover any losses they will suffer. On Saturday the 28th of November, at mid-day, thousands of farmers will occupy and burn down the three fields in front of the cameras, in an open, announced action of civil disobedience.

These actions will start a campaign of direct action by farmers against biotechnology, called Operation Cremation Monsanto, which will not stop until all the corporate killers like Monsanto, Novartis, Pioneer etc. leave the country. Farmers' leaders from the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh (states where Monsanto is also conducting field trials) were yesterday in Bangalore to prepare the campaign.

The campaign will run under the following slogans: “Stop genetic engineering”, “No patents on life”, “Cremate Monsanto”, “Bury the WTO”, along with a more specific message for all those who have invested in Monsanto: “You should rather take your money out before we reduce it to ashes”.

We know that stopping biotechnology in India will not be of much help to us if it continues in other countries, since the threats that it poses do not stop at the borders. We also think that the kind of actions that will be going on in India have the potential not only to kick those corporate killers out of our country: If we play our cards right at a global level and co-ordinate our work, these actions can also pose a major challenge to the survival of these corporations in the stock markets. Who wants to invest in a mountain of ashes, in offices that are constantly being squatted (and if necessary, even destroyed) by activists?

For these reasons, we are making an international call for direct action against Monsanto and the rest of the biotech gang. This call for action will hopefully inspire all the people who are already doing brilliant work against

biotech, and many others who so far have not been very active on the issue, to join hands in a quick, effective worldwide effort.

This is a very good moment to target Monsanto, since it has run out of cash in its megalomaniac attempt to monopolize the life industry in record time. It is going now through a hard time of lay-offs and restructuring in a desperate effort to survive, since it cannot pay its bills. It is also a good time because several recent scandals (like the pulping of *The Ecologist* magazine’s exposé of Monsanto, the whole Terminator Technology [seeds genetically modified so they cannot reproduce] affair, the illegal introduction of Bt cotton in Zimbabwe [similar to the scandal in India], etc) have contributed to its profile as a corporate killer, which, being the creators of Vietnam War’s Agent Orange and [bovine growth hormone] rBHG, was already good enough, anyhow.

We are hence making a call to:

» Take direct actions against biotech transnational corporations (TNCs), particularly Monsanto (be it squatting or

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programme, generating protests across the region. Social movements from Indonesia to Thailand link the crisis to economic globalization and predatory financial speculation.

**>> July 26-August 2 >>** Over 3,000 people gather in Spain for the Zapatista-initiated Second Encuentro for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism to continue the first Encuentro’s work by building networks of resistance

and communication to link struggles around the globe.

A decision is made to target the Second Ministerial meeting of the WTO in Geneva in May 1998.

**>> July 31 >>** A 24 hour general strike brings Bangladesh to a standstill; ports and factories close, and all public transport grinds to a halt. Workers demand that the government agree to an eight point plan, which includes safeguarding jobs, guaranteeing a

minimum wage, and reopening abandoned factories.

**>> August >>** Thailand’s economy collapses, causing a domino effect of social and economic crisis across Southeast Asia. Unrest ripples out across the region.

**>> August 14 >>** A general strike called by unions and government employees wreaks havoc through much of Argentina. Bridges, ports and roads are blockaded, and teachers walk out of their schools. The government

burning their fields, squatting or destroying their offices, etc)  
» Maintain the local and/or national press informed about all the actions going on around the world  
» Take direct actions at stock exchanges targeting Monsanto, to draw attention to its state of bankruptcy

We are making this call for action on the line of Peoples' Global Action (PGA), a worldwide network of peoples' movements, in order to emphasize the political analysis beyond our opposition to biotechnology. This analysis does not only take environmental concerns into account, and is not limited to the defence of food security – it attacks neoliberal globalization as a whole, the World Trade Organization regime as its most important tool, and the global power structures (G8, NATO, etc.) as the root of all these problems. You will find the complete political analysis in the manifesto of the PGA.

We are calling ONLY for nonviolent direct actions. Nonviolence in this context means that we should respect all (non-genetically modified) living beings, including police and the people who work for these TNCs.

The campaign will take place in a decentralized manner, and nobody should speak on behalf of other people involved in the campaign without their consent (also not on behalf of PGA, of course); however, people are welcome to report about the actions of others without pretending to represent them.

Friendly greetings,

Professor Nanjundaswamy – President, *Karnataka Raiya Ryota Sanghe* (Karnataka State Farmers' Association)

## **An Introduction to the Karnataka State Farmers Association, 1998**

### **Context: Indian agriculture and trade liberalization**

The situation of Indian agriculture (and of the whole society) is deteriorating very rapidly due to the globalization process. The wave of suicides of peasants (since they cannot anymore compete on the market and are covered with debts) has stopped now (it will start again after the next harvest), but the desperation is leading to an escalation of tension and violence in rural areas. In Haryana, 23 peasants were killed by the police in October, and five were killed in Karnataka in early November. In the case of Karnataka, these peasants were protesting against the drop in the price of the peanuts that they produce, which took place due to the liberalization in the import of vegetable oils that can substitute peanut oil (like palm oil). The Agreement on Agriculture of the WTO is at the root of these problems.

The farmers' movement that was to give birth to KRRS in 1980 was initiated by five people in 1965. They see the movement as part of a very long process of construction of a new society, which must be driven by people at the local level but must reach the global level, and which cannot take place without the active and direct involvement of society as a whole.

There is no central register of KRRS members (it would be impossible to maintain, unless a huge bureaucracy was

set up). However, according to the information coming from the village units, the membership of KRRS is now estimated to be around ten million people.

### **The dream of the Village Republic**

The KRRS' work goes beyond the specific problems of farmers – it is aimed at social change on all levels. Another important element is that the autonomy and freedom of the village should be based on the autonomy and freedom of its individual members.

In terms of coherence and elaboration of its analysis and practice: KRRS is a Gandhian movement. This means that the final objective of its work is the realization of the Village Republic, a form of social, political and economic organization based on direct democracy, on economic and political autonomy, on self-reliance, on the participation of all members of the community in decision-making about the affairs that affect them, and on creating ways to ensure that affairs affecting several communities are decided upon through processes of consultation involving all affected.

This model is applied to the internal organization of the

movement. The basic unit of organization is the village unit, which decides on its own forms of organization and finance, programmes and actions.

Above the village level there are several other levels of organization: the *Taluk* [sub-district] level, the district level and the state level. The decisions that affect more than a village but not more than a *Taluk* are taken at *Taluk* level. The decision-making body for the state level is the State Executive Committee, which consists of 400 delegates from all the districts. (KRRS is present in 17 of 19 Karnataka districts).

Since its beginning, the movement has also aimed towards cultural change. It has always denounced the caste system, promoting its elimination as a necessary step towards social justice in India. An example of cultural change promoted by the KRRS is the organization of what it calls 'simple, self-respect weddings' as an alternative to the very expensive and extravagant regular weddings (where peasants usually spend a fortune).

The KRRS also has other programmes aimed at challenging patriarchal structures. Women have their own structures, mobilizations and programmes within KRRS,

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continues to make empty promises and forges ahead with free market policies and social spending cuts.  
>> **August 21** >> "It's a good day to pie!" The Biotic Baking Brigade (BBB) emerge from their secret headquarters and ovens, located somewhere in the mountains of the Californian northwest, and commit their first act of pie-rect action. Infamous corporate raider and Maxxam CEO Charles Hurwitz receives an

apple pie on top of his head for his role in clear-cutting ancient redwoods in Headwaters Forest. He responds "Too bad it's peach. I like blackberry." As Special Agent Apple says, "What does one say about a man who can't tell an apple pie even when he and his stained suit are wearing one?"  
>> **August 22** >> Earth First! activists in Humboldt County, California, US lock down to a gate at Pacific

Lumber's main entrance into the Headwaters redwood forest. Blocking the road is a 'living room', with couch, coffee table, and smashed up television. The activists are covered in mud to spotlight the local town of Stafford, which recently experienced a mud slide from a Pacific Lumber clearcut. Three arrests are made. Three weeks later, 7,000 people converge for the third annual mass rally for Headwaters, and help Stafford residents

organize women's rallies, present their own demands, etc. The KRRS (both women and men) participated in the mobilizations against the celebration of the Miss Universe ceremony in India. It also has for a long time demanded and mobilized for the creation of women's constituencies so that a minimum percentage of the parliament seats are reserved for women. As a result of this pressure (which was joined by other, smaller organizations), the *Panchayats* [village councils] in Karnataka became the first entity of India to create women's constituencies, so that now 33 per cent of seats and offices are reserved for women.

KRRS works under a clear commitment to nonviolence (understood as violence against living beings, not against inanimate objects), and promotes the use of nonviolent

methods (particularly direct action) in order to solve conflicts and overcome problems. This anti-violent stand does not only apply for the protest against governments or companies; it is also generalized to broader areas of conflict, like communal conflict. For example, in the regions where KRRS is strong, the level of violence between different religious groups is much lower than the average.

The KRRS is one of the most important targets of the BJP (the Hindu fundamentalist party which is now running the central government in coalition with 31 other parties), which has unsuccessfully used all kinds of means in its attempt to weaken the movement.

### **Ecological approaches: alternatives and resistances**

The KRRS has always integrated ecological issues in its work in a complete natural way, since the livelihoods that they are defending are a brilliant example of what 'experts' call 'sustainable development'. They have hence taken direct action against eucalyptus plantations [commercial invasive species which deplete the groundwater]. For KRRS there is no sense in dividing resistance and alternatives, since none of them can take place without the other. Rejecting chemical agriculture and biotechnology necessarily implies promoting traditional agriculture.

One district unit in the south of Karnataka is building up a Global Centre for Sustainable Development, which will include the in-situ conservation and development of traditional varieties of seeds, a centre for traditional technologies, a centre for traditional medicines, a green school, etc.



Burning genetically modified crops. Karnataka, India

**“The American Ambassador in Delhi has written to the Government of the State of Karnataka asking to provide a strong police protection to all American companies in the city. Pointing out the previous repeated attacks on American companies by 'miscreants', the Ambassador... has stressed the need for a special security for companies related to science and technology and also for their hundreds of foreign companies in the city.”** - from article in local newspaper *Samyukta*

*Karnataka, 25 November 1998*

The fact that traditional technologies and knowledge play a key role in the alternatives proposed by the KRRS does not mean that we reject new technologies. For instance, the electric fence that will surround the centre for sustainable development (needed given the presence of wild elephants in the area) will be powered by solar energy. The criteria for the acceptance or rejection of technologies in KRRS are not related to their age; they are related to factors such as whether the technology can be directly operated and managed by the people who use it, whether it is labour-intensive or capital-intensive, and other political criteria.

KRRS has been opposing so-called 'Green Revolution' technologies (ie: chemical- and capital-intensive agriculture) since day one, and now it is mobilizing different sectors of society (not just our own constituency) against biotechnology.

Very related to agricultural issues, trade liberalization has also been a basic target of KRRS mobilizations for a long time. The KRRS was the first peoples' movement in India (probably in the world) to organize massive mobilizations against the GATT (the previous incarnation of the WTO) with demonstrations of up to half a million people.

sandbag their homes.

>> **August 23** >> One thousand Hondurans from the Lenca indigenous nation arrive in Tegucigalpa for what they called the “First civic day for the dignity of the Lenca people.” After a march, a public meeting takes place in which they outline their demands to the government: land titles; the creation of a National Council of Ethnic Groups; definitive delimitation of

municipalities; recognition of the National Lenca Indigenous Organization of Honduras (ONILH) as the only legal organization representing the Lenca people; and community development programmes, among other demands.

>> **September** >> Workers in Ecuador occupy the Paute Power Works in an attempt to prevent privatization of the company during a wave of threats

to publicly-controlled health care, social security, oil, telecommunications, ports and docks, education, water, and irrigation.

>> **September** >> Workers protest against a World Bank/IMF meeting in Hong Kong, saying they take inspiration from workers resisting lay-offs and privatization in Sichuan, China and in South Korea.

>> **September 8** >> An international day of action for

The main tools of action of KRRS are civil disobedience and direct action. They have organized a large range of really impressive actions, including an action of civil disobedience where 37,000 people were arrested in a single day. (This action was part of a period of intensive mobilizations on which such mass arrests were provoked by KRRS activists every single day).

An important component of KRRS' work is bringing global issues to the local constituencies, and fighting against global institutions and transnational corporations in Karnataka. They have also done spectacular direct actions, including the occupation by 1,000 activists of the Cargill office in Bangalore (they threw all the equipment through the windows and made a big bonfire), the physical dismantlement with iron bars of a seed unit of Cargill that was being constructed in Karnataka, and the occupation of a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. "Monsanto, quit India!" is the running campaign from the KRRS against Monsanto.

They have also created awareness (in Karnataka and beyond) about the impact of global policy-making bodies, tackling issues that are really not easy to bring close to people's lives, like the multilateral trading system, the WTO, intellectual property rights on life, etc.

Besides taking global issues to the local level, KRRS is also very actively involved in national networking processes, since it is clear for them that global issues cannot be tackled unless awareness-raising and mobilization take place beyond the local level. They have played a key role in bringing about

**“Genetically modified seeds are polluting the local species. It will not solve the food problem – in fact it will terminate food security along with biodiversity.”**

– Nanjundaswamy, quoted in *The Times of India*, 20 November 1998

national networking processes such as the one that gave birth to the BKU (Indian Farmers Union) or the JAFIP (Joint Action Forum of Indian People against the WTO, which includes movements representing farmers and other social sectors like industrial workers, womens' groups, academics, etc).

### **International networks**

In terms of international networking, they were also a key initiator of the PGA process, and they were the ones to propose the Intercontinental Caravan. They are also one of the main actors within *La Via Campesina*, a worldwide network of peasant movements. KRRS hosted both the Second PGA Conference in April 1999 and the Third International Conference of *La Via Campesina* in October 1999.

There is now an effort going on to include representatives of other mass movements besides the peasant movements (tribals, anti-dam, women's, fisherfolk, etc), provided that they share the kind of analysis reflected in the PGA manifesto.

## Participation in the caravan

The movements that will send representatives to participate in the Caravan are the state-level branches of the BKU (Indian Farmers' Union) in Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and of course Karnataka, where the idea came from and where the largest movement of India (the KRRS, part of the BKU) is based. There will be about 170 people participating from Karnataka (selected directly by the district units of the KRRS, plus a special group of people who will be helpful for all the participants, like ten doctors, one dentist, one gynecologist, etc.) and about 330 from the other states. However, the number of people who want to participate from each of these movements (especially from KRRS) is larger than the quota given, and the number keeps growing and growing. Indian men and women know, although the most of them don't speak English and a lot of them can't write, a lot about their problems with and in relation to the WTO. They're also very motivated to come to Europe.

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dockers who were sacked in Liverpool, UK, for fighting casualization results in dockers taking action in 21 countries spanning five continents. Every port on the West coast of North America, from Mexico to Alaska, is shut down.

>> **October 3** >> The peoples' movement *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save Narmada Movement) bring together 10,000 villagers in Mandleswar, Madhya

Pradesh, India, who will be displaced by the proposed Maheshwar dam. The villagers call for a work stoppage and review of the project in consultation with residents. The company responds with a speed-up of work, and the police seal off roads to prevent an occupation. However, the villagers reach the dam site in the middle of the night, using pathways only known to area residents, and the occupation begins.

>> **October 6** >> Workers in a Hyundai-affiliated *maquiladora* (Mexican sweatshop) in Tijuana, Mexico, vote overwhelmingly for an independent union, despite the company's efforts to sway the vote by paying unemployed people to illegally vote. The union would be the first in the vast *maquiladora* system along the US border. All other *maquila* workers are 'represented' by a company union with close ties to the ruling Institutional

Professor Nanjundaswamy is the leader of the KRRS

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### Resources:

- » Comprehensive site with excellent articles devoted to increasing awareness of the food crisis in India: [www.agbioindia.org](http://www.agbioindia.org)
- » KRRS – Karnataka Raiya Ryota Sanghe, c/o Professor Nanjundaswamy, 2111, 7th-A Cross, 3rd Main, Vijayanagar 2nd Stage, Bangalore-560 040-India, Phone: +91-80-3300965 Fax: +91-80-3302171 E-mail: [swamy.krrs@vsnl.com](mailto:swamy.krrs@vsnl.com); [krrs\\_123@yahoo.com](mailto:krrs_123@yahoo.com)