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Board changes at IFOAM's World Board

By **John Paull**

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The medieval Vignola Castle of Vignola, Italy, is a picture-perfect venue for a mini-coup. At the recent elections held at the fortress for the World Board of the organic movement's international governing body, IFOAM, there was a major changing of the guard.

The outgoing president Gerald Hermann of Germany withdrew his nomination half way through the voting process. And while the ripening corn and wheat in the countryside surrounding the castello awaited reaping, a new crop of organic governors was harvested.

Vanaja Ramprasad had travelled from Bangalore, in the central southern Indian state of Karnataka. She has a passionate interest in "the real reasons for third world poverty and hunger" and was one of those newly elected to the ten-member World Board of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements.

Vanaja was the only candidate with data projector slides in Sanskrit and citing the Upanishads in her presentation. Not to mention singing a short rendition of *We Shall Overcome*.

Vanaja is the director of India's Green Foundation. The foundation's projects include "reviving traditional storage and exchange of seeds through Community Seed Banks" - there are now about fifty such seed banks. A key role the Green Foundation undertakes is "the revival of



Vanaja Ramprasad, newly elected IFOAM World Board member and director of India's Green Foundation

traditional agricultural methods reintroduced in conjunction with modern organic techniques".

Vanaja is interviewed here by John Paull about how she sees her new role.

John: Congratulations on being elected to the IFOAM World Board. How does it feel to be on the new IFOAM World Board?

Vanaja: It is the culmination of my life long commitment to a cause and there is a sense of upholding a responsibility to fulfill the expectations of the members who have vested their faith in electing me to the board.

John: What do you hope to achieve as a member of the IFOAM World Board?

Vanaja: I hope to be able to give an added thrust to main stream the organic movement which hitherto has been referred to as the alternative movement .

John: What is so important to you about Organics?

Vanaja: Organics follows nature's order of evolution and therefore it is complete within itself .

Unfortunately the definition of organic has been narrowed to the use of certain technologies.

In short, organic systems are a way of life and not just a technology to produce food.

John: What are two key concerns you have for Organics?

Vanaja: One concern I have is that the political will is lacking since corporations rule the world.

The only option is for different movements to converge to bring pressure on governments.

Two, it is being hijacked by certification bodies and corporations who have the edge over small groups in achieving the economies of scale.

John: How does being from India, and/or being steeped in the Indian Vedic traditions, shape your views of Organics?

Vanaja: Food is sacred in the Indian context. In the rituals from birth to death, food is an offering to the higher spirits and hence has to be untainted.

Everything in nature is a reflection of the self *Tat twam asi* (The spirit is not only in you but all other beings and everything that is).

All flora and fauna come with a certain consciousness and the relationship we build with food. It is part of the spiritual evolution with the ultimate goal of reaching unity consciousness.

Therefore organic food grown to enclose the sacredness is central to people's culture. This notion of the sacredness of food rejects the idea of manipulation at the cell level and engineering of life.

John: Can you briefly tell us about your work in the Green Foundation?

Vanaja: When I look back on the fifteen odd years of hard work to follow a dream, it has been a tremendous learning process without training as an agricultural specialist.

I worked from my heart and rarely from my head and the people who participated in the idea of saving their seed always had something to teach me.

It was a humbling experience to see the diversity we are endowed with and how we have failed to honour the inheritance to conserve it for the future generations.

My interest in the work was inspired by the deep desire to understand the reasons for the disconnect I saw between the food system and the distancing of the very people who produced it.

I have in the last fifteen years focused on this aspect by working with the small and marginal farmers who eke out a living in the fragile ecosystems of the semi-arid tracts. It is also true that it is the subsistence farmers in the dry lands who are the custodians of the diversity.

But the small farms, farmers and their diversity are disappearing. It is also seen that this diversity which is at the heart of organic agriculture is being pushed to internal exile.

I also saw that if we have to resist the onslaught of monocultures and the push for genetically modified seeds in the name of increasing production we will have to continue to work with the diversity of the dry land regions and that the concept of productivity based on diversity has to be re-defined.

John: What lessons have you learned from seed saving projects in India?

Vanaja: One big lesson I learnt was that genetic material is continuously evolving and cannot be conserved in gene banks under artificial conditions of minus 20 degrees.

People living in poverty are always being hoodwinked and challenged by misleading promises of prosperity.

There is an urgent need to redefine poverty and development.

It is very easy to lose the heritage rather than conserve it unless the farmers are involved.

There are many lessons that taught me the futility of chasing the mirage of development.

John: What are the threats and what are the opportunities for Organics?

Vanaja: The biggest threat could come from a naïve understanding of what is organic and perpetuate a belief that the organic movement cannot feed the community of poor.

It is a self defeating myth that industrial system of agriculture based on fossil fuel or the science of genetic engineering alone will feed the world.

Wrapping the organic movement into a vacuum pack to be marketed in high end supermarket is the biggest threat.

The opportunities lie in the agro-ecological understanding of food production, creating community supported agriculture and marketing opportunities that support the producer directly.

John: How do you see the future of Organics?

Vanaja: This is the only future if the planet is to survive. Different social movements supporting different causes such as indigenous communities, or women's movement or nature conservation or human rights have to come together and find a common goal because food is central to human survival. □

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