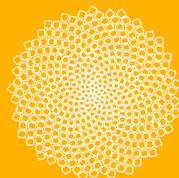


# Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

The People's Knowledge Editorial Collective



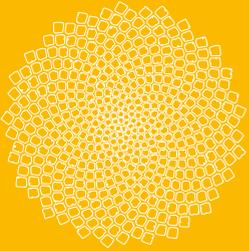
Reclaiming  
**Diversity &  
Citizenship**

*Everyday Experts* explains how knowledge built up through first-hand experience can help solve the crisis in the food system. It brings together fifty-seven activists, farmers, practitioners, researchers and community organisers from around the world to take a critical look at attempts to improve the dialogue between people whose knowledge has been marginalised in the past and others who are recognised as professional experts.

Using a combination of stories, poems, photos and videos, the contributors demonstrate how people's knowledge can transform the food system towards greater social and environmental justice. Many of the chapters also explore the challenges of using action and participatory approaches to research.

The chapters share new insights, analysis and stories that can expand our imagination of a future that encompasses:

- making dialogue among people with different ways of understanding the world central to all decision-making
- the re-affirmation of Indigenous, local, traditional and other knowledge systems
- a blurring of the divide between professional expertise and expertise that is derived from experience
- transformed relationships amongst ourselves and with the Earth to confront inequality and the environmental crisis



The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series* was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

To read any of the 28 chapters in this book freely available to download, please visit:

[www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts](http://www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts)

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Cover photos:

(left): Field teaching by Farmer Research Team members about planting methods, Lobi area. Photo taken by C. Hickey, December 2014. Used with the permission of project participants.

(right): The Coventry Men's Shed participatory video project exploring "What's Eating Coventry" and unpacks social justice issues related to food in the city of Coventry. More information at [www.peoplesknowledge.org](http://www.peoplesknowledge.org)

# Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

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Everyday Experts: How people's knowledge can transform the food system

**Published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University**

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) is driving innovative, transdisciplinary research on the understanding and development of socially just and resilient food and water systems internationally. Unique to this University Research Centre is the incorporation of citizen-generated knowledge - the participation of farmers, water users and other citizens in transdisciplinary research, using holistic approaches which cross many disciplinary boundaries among the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.

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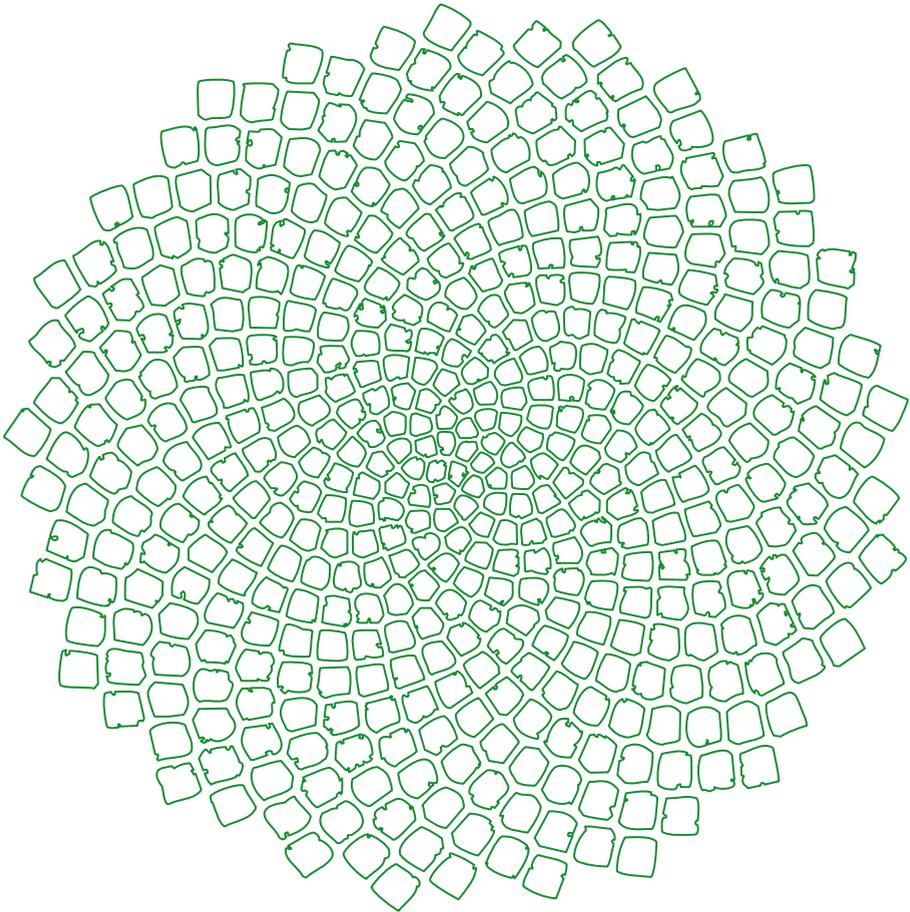
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Professor Michel Pimbert is the coordinator and editor in chief of the *Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series*.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this volume are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, its partners and donors.

# 3



# Earth Mother: participatory theatre with indigenous peoples

## N. Madhusudhan

Member, Food Sovereignty Alliance India

**Geographical location:** Telangana, India

**Chapter highlights:** This article should be read alongside viewing the film 'Bhutalli' (Mother Earth), available at: [https://youtu.be/\\_9gwo8-uLPI](https://youtu.be/_9gwo8-uLPI). Non-Telugu speakers need to select the 'C' subtitle box on the bottom right-hand side of the screen.

The play was developed through many months of dialogue with local people using participatory theatre approaches inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal and Indigenous peoples.

It builds on dialogue process with the members of the communities.

Participatory theatre is a pedagogy that enables critical reflections and actions on situations faced by oppressed people. It creates critical spaces in which people can identify their experiences and shape their responses.

It plays an important role in popular education campaigns, through the creative expressions of people involved in struggles for their rights.

**Keywords:** Participatory theatre, conscientization, Adivasi, Dalit.

## 3.1 Introduction by the editors

Bhutalli (Mother Earth) is a play in street theatre format. It captures the relationship between Adivasis, Dalits, shepherds and peasants, and Mother Earth; interrogates the forces that are systematically dispossessing people from their land, livelihoods and resources; and celebrates the diversity of people's resistance. The play is performed by actors from Adivasi, Dalit, shepherd, peasant and co-producer communities.

The approach to participatory theatre taken by Madhusudhan and members of the Food Sovereignty movement, makes for a truly democratic mode of action research. Like many in this book, he was inspired by Paulo Freire's work. Like Freire, his approach to inquiry counters the lack of what has been called cognitive justice (Vishvanathan 1997) or epistemic justice (Fricker 2010) – when professional expertise is supported to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge. Expertise derived through life experience rather than professional training is typically side-lined (which Fricker labels “testimonial injustice”), while marginalised groups are also denied opportunities to develop greater knowledge (“heuristic injustice”).

This approach contributes to heuristic justice via a prolonged process of Frierean dialogue with the people as a play is developed. The performance of the play then provides a platform for testimonial justice, since the collective knowledge of the community is presented in front of a range of knowledge holders – from smallholder farmers to policymakers. This knowledge is not static, but is open to interrogation by the audience, both during and after the performance. As he does at the beginning of his plays, Madhusudhan opens the chapter with the historical context of how, where and with whom his practice evolved.



Figure 3.1. Still image from *Bhutalli – Mother Earth*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_9gwo8-uLPI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9gwo8-uLPI)

### 3.2 Participatory action research and theatre

The approach to participatory action research used by the Food Sovereignty Alliance is fundamentally different to that used by academics. It is grounded in work I began with Girijan Deepika over land struggles beginning 25 years ago.

Girijan Deepika is a group of Indigenous people (Adivasis) who have been engaged in a long struggle against the requisitioning of their land by non-Adivasi settlers. At the beginning, I wanted to understand the role played by their culture in their struggles. I had been involved in street theatre before that and had produced three plays on issues such as child labour and gender. I felt that plays were not just for performing, but should become part of the movement itself. At the time, I didn't have a clear understanding of the legal framework of land. At the time, key players involved in the debates and actions about land included, (i) the legal routes to change provided by the government, (ii) political parties including the radical left, and (iii) non-government organisations.

I wanted to know the answer to three questions:

1. How do Adivasis see their representation?
2. How do Adivasis see their participation?
3. How are Adivasis articulating their issues?

This is what took me to Adivasi territories. The journey began in 1990. Adivasis from East Godavari invited me to be part of their struggles. When I went there I was in a dilemma. Theatre was a new form for the community. Three forms of performing art dominated among the people I visited – singing, dancing and story telling. These were part of their daily lives, their food production cycles, their collection of forest produce, and their celebrations and rituals. I was trying to understand these forms. I was concerned that if I introduced a new concept – theatre – people might not embrace it. It would be an alien form for them.

I was aware that mainstream theatre troupes did come into these areas, perform and then collect money from people. Thus, an introduction to some form of theatre was already there. This theatre was performed inside a tent. There were also commercial touring movies run by business people, who would tour with a 16mm projector and collect money from local people.

I spent time with a friend in the city of Hyderabad who directed street theatre through the Ethnic Arts Centre, an organisation he had started. I spent a lot of time with him as he worked with people living in slums, women's groups and other communities. He used to call the approach 'victims' theatre'. These were the people who had been victimised by the economic system, other social structures or any other injustices. He used to make them act in the plays. But I didn't want to call Adivasis victims. I studied the approaches to theatre of Augusto Boal. I was also inspired by Paulo Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

I was trying to do two things. One was to be a popular educator and the other was to be a theatre activist. I questioned the idea that Adivasis are victims, since these are not labels they apply to themselves. They feel: "This earth is ours, but it has been taken over by people from outside – we've been colonised. We have lost our lands to the Forest Department, but we are the original inhabitants of this land".

I wrote and produced a small play on land alienation, using actors who were already activists in the struggle for land. They were Adivasis from villages where land alienation had taken place. Because the actors were already involved in the struggle, the play was very easy to develop and perform. The people sat for half an hour, watched the play and participated in the performance, as it was being performed.

I was helped by the same friend from Hyderabad to make another play about land alienation. We extensively researched the land alienation question in Adivasi areas. We did a month of workshops, leading to a long play – a documentary play, as we called it. It was like a documentary film. The play was performed in several villages and in universities, which provided an impetus to academic research on the Adivasi land question. At the time, little academic research focused on Adivasis.

### 3.3 Traditional governance systems

Whilst I was working on theatre in these areas, we discovered the Gottis, the traditional governance systems of Adivasis in East Godavari. People come and sit for various purposes relating to the management of resources, as well as family and community life. Originally, we thought the Gotti system was no longer used and so we should revive it, but I then realised that this was wrong since they were already functioning successfully. I had to go through a process of un-learning the development mindset myself.

My aim as a political activist had been to use theatre to involve people in critical dialogue. I realised people must represent their issues, and lead their struggles, through strengthening the Gottis. Gottis became very central to Adivasi assertion. Theatre and REFLECT<sup>1</sup> were extensively used in Gottis, to enhance the participation of people in critical dialogues and action.

The post-independence struggle by rural people in India over the right to land has a rich history (Desai 1986). Theatre sharpened the ongoing struggle for land rights in this region, and over 250 acres of land was recovered from the non-Adivasis. Around the same time in the early part of the 90s, cash crops were being introduced and Adivasis were handing over their land to moneylenders and companies who came into the area requisitioning land for non-food crops. Sagari Ramdas, a livestock specialist and vet who has worked extensively with Indigenous peoples, joined us at that point. Discussions on livestock also connected the conversations to the larger linkages and interconnections between land, food, forests, water, animals, spirituality and knowledge systems. As part of this enquiry, Adivasi youth documented traditional songs, stories, festivals, crops, production systems, dances, and related knowledge systems. There were a lot of songs about produce from the forest and a lot about

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<sup>1</sup> REFLECT is an approach to adult learning and social change, which fuses the theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire with participatory methodologies. It was developed in the 1990s through pilot projects in Bangladesh, Uganda and El Salvador and is now used by over 500 organisations in over 70 countries worldwide. See <http://www.reflect-action.org/>.

seasons in agriculture and how the people worship their ancestors and Mother Earth. Festivals were rooted in the sowing and harvest of seasonal food crops. Gottis became a main dialogue forum in which these songs were sung and a range of issues were debated, such as the relative merits of cash crops versus food crops. These discussions became a storyline for my plays.

In 1995, we decided to start producing full-length plays which lasted between 1-2 hours. In our plays we never start with an issue, but start instead with some element of Adivasi history. We start with how this community was born on this earth – because there are various stories around this concept describing how the people came from fruits or animals. That became the introduction to my play.

Between 1995 and 2002 we completed and performed at least 15 plays – around two per year. The actors were always from the Adivasi community. We particularly involved Adivasi youth, since they were getting alienated from their cultural roots, their stories, songs and their relationship to their land and food crops.

The characters of the play are individuals who are easily identified by the audience, as their real stories becomes the content of the play. The audience respond to the characters, whilst they narrate their (the audience's) real story.

### **3.4 The making of a play: surfacing deeper themes**

I lived with the people, and hence I was able to closely observe and understand their concerns and happiness, their ways of communication and expression, ways in which they engaged with conflicts, their participation in Gottis, their involvement in seasonal livelihood cycles, gender roles and decision making processes, their ways of relating to Mother Earth (their land, forests, water, and so on), and their intergenerational relationships.

We develop the play with around 15-20 people who become the main actors. So for each play we would spend about a month devising it with people, including making the props, choreographing music, songs, dance, the promotional posters and costumes. The play evolves through collectively (the actors from the community along with myself) deciding upon the issue/ crises we would like to explore. We create the story through sharing various real-life incidences, which bring out the subtle layers of the issue or crises. These are woven into scenes, dialogues are improvised, and finally fixed for each character. As a director, I work with the group to sharpen and fix scenes, dialogues, body movements, the use of space and so on. Whilst the characters' dialogue with one another on the stage space, they are simultaneously in deep conversation with the audience. From the beginning of the performance, the audience gets engaged with the characters and images as these are from their own lives. Our theatre draws upon the indigenous music, dance, oral narrations, stories, as also the vibrant body movements. Though the play is performed in the centre of people, who sit around in a circle, characters set the stage with props, as and

when these are required. The entire environment (the surrounding hills, the forests, the fields, the village huts, the cowsheds, the school premises) all become part of the play, with characters moving to and from these spaces. They also change their costumes according to the characters depicted.

We set the political context at the outset, and through the nineties and 2000s, our theatre captured and deconstructed the unfolding neo-liberal post economic reforms agendas in adivasi areas: privatization with decentralised community participation, the strong presence of World Bank in poverty alleviation programs, the aggressive entry of industrial agriculture and commodity production displacing food crops, plantations on community forests, new forms of colonisation, and specific education and skill building programs targeting adivasi youth, further alienating them from their histories.

The dialogues between the characters, whilst sounding like regular conversations, are different in that they reflect the various layers of oppression, as also in a simple fashion decode the oppression of the larger context. The oppressor's character evokes plenty of laughter from the audience, as people see how they are fooling them, and the oppressor's character describes the mode of oppression. In response to this the character of the oppressed always questions the oppressor. The audience too instinctively takes the side of the oppressed and individuals often enter the scene to add their views and voices, and become another character. Sometimes this new character from the audience remains till the end of the play. It is then the responsibility of the oppressed character to give the space to, and also facilitate on the spot, the role of the new character (from the audience).

### 3.5 Ending the play

Sometimes, the play ends as in Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre, where the audience become part of the dialogue and decide how the play should end. In one play, a woman berated the actor who had taken a loan to grow cotton. She shouted that she had been saving food crop seeds for many years. How could he go to the shops and buy cotton seeds, which risked getting into debt and having to give up the land, without telling her? That led to a big discussion after the play ends. In other instances, the play raises various questions, and the post show discussions happen. Sometimes the community continues to discuss the play through the night in their homes and in smaller groups.

In the post-show discussion, the actors can react to suggestions from the audience and re-enact a section of the play including this extra element. Someone might say: "cotton is not rubbish – it is an excellent crop". So a dialogue can reflect on this.

People would come from 10 or 15 villages to see the play. Word got around that these plays were great. It meant that people would make a real effort to come. The plays would often go on late into the night and people would even bring along some bedding to stay through the night.

If they came too late they would extend the invitation for the theatre troupe to come to their own village, with the offer of food being provided. No food was provided as part of the play itself. The idea was that people came to the play after having their evening meal.

### **Bhutalli: A play involving diverse communities**

This was my first experience as a director, working with diverse communities. The Bhutalli play at the February 2015 Food Sovereignty Summit (see YouTube video in Figure 3.1) brought together Adivasis, shepherds, Dalits and urban co-producers to make a play. The overall theme was how people treat Mother Earth. It makes the point that the money economy appears to be becoming more important than the food economy, thereby resulting in deep destruction and violence.



*Figure 3.2. Images from the performance of Bhutalli at the Food Sovereignty Summit 2015.*

In my experience, participatory theatre is a pedagogy that enables critical reflections and actions on situations that oppressed people are dealing with. It creates critical spaces for people to identify their experiences and respond.

A collective voice emerges at the end of the performance. The spectators wait for what the actors, or any one of them, are going to say. It is the continuity of a dialogue to work towards political transformation. In my view, theatre plays an important role in conscientization, through the creative expressions of people involved in struggles for their rights.

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