

# Enhancing value by improving quality

Ingrid Fromm

The unique agro-ecological conditions of Kolli Hills have a direct effect on the coffee aroma and quality. The case of this small-scale, organic farmer reaffirms that a diversified, agro-ecological farming system approach adds quality to the produce, making the system not only viable, but also profitable.

The way up to Kolli Hills, a small town in the Namakkal district of Tamil Nadu, is treacherous- a painful 70 tight curves of road full of motorcycles, cars, trucks and buses just barely making it by. Once the end of the road is reached, the most marvelous, lush forest scenery awaits the traveler. It's an unlikely location for coffee production, but then again, most of the coffee produced around the world comes from exotic, hard-to-reach locations such as this. Undoubtedly, the unique agro-ecological conditions of Kolli Hills have a direct effect on the coffee aroma and quality. Coffee production in this region of India proves that producing under agro-ecological principles is possible, and even profitable.

In Kolli Hills, in the forested area dotted with paddy fields, Ms. Jayam Sulavanthipatti has been producing coffee for over 20 years. With about 2.5 hectares of land, she and her husband have planted one hectare of Arabica coffee, along with pepper, banana, cassava, cardamom, lemon, jackfruit and pomegranate in a diversified organic farm. Coffee farming is a family activity. Together with her husband and the occasional help of 3 sons who are now studying technical careers in the city of Namakkal, they produce about 200 kg of dried coffee beans a year. The pulp removal is done outside the farm, in a neighboring farmer's house. The coffee is then brought back to the family farm, where it's dried in the concrete roof of the house. Since the plantation was renewed 4 years ago, the yield has increased. In order to achieve this, Jayam had to take a loan from the Coffee Board to improve the drying yard and renew plantation. Buyers



Photo: Author

*Coffee beans in Kolli hills is known for its aroma and quality*

come directly to the farm to collect the coffee and they determine the price. It's practically a necessity for their family because transporting coffee to the collection centers would be too difficult for them. Despite the fact that Jayam has no bargaining power with the buyers, she's making a better income than a few years ago; much of the increase in income has to do with the higher yield. She can now afford to pay day laborers during the coffee picking season, even though her husband also works in other farms as an occasional laborer to increase the family income.

A stark contrast to the highly intensified agricultural systems found elsewhere in India, the agro-ecological practices in Kolli Hills prove that sustainable agriculture in India is possible. Most family farmers are able to sustain themselves by cultivating a number of crops, as is the case of Jayam and her family. Diversification is a key element in such a system. Income is generated by selling coffee, pepper, cardamom, jackfruit, pomegranate and lemon. Cassava is

used for household consumption and also sold and processed. Bananas are grown for family consumption and for sale at the local market. The local diet also includes minor millets grown by some of the farmers.

### Adding value to production

About 1500 farmers in Kolli Hills belong to the Kolli Hills Agrobiodiversity Conservers Federation, and Jayam is one among them. This is a self-help group which provides farmers with training in processing and value-addition of crops such as cassava, coffee and minor millets. The federation works towards promoting biodiversity conservation and organic agriculture. Much of the training the farmers receive is geared towards understanding and improving organic farming practices. In some of the fields, VAM (Vesicular-arbuscular mycorrhiza) units have been set up for soil application. Use of bio-fertilizers and bio-inputs is also promoted by the federation. With the help of partners such as the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, farmers have received support in the establishment of self-help groups and the identification of value addition opportunities.

### Reaching wider markets

One special feature of the coffee grown in Kolli Hills is that most of it is locally consumed. Tamil Nadu, and in general the south of India, is known for its coffee culture. In big cities like Chennai or Bangalore, all types of street establishments, from simple vendors to fancy coffee shops and restaurants, sell coffee. Kolli Hills coffee, with its aroma and rich flavor, makes its way from the farm, after being dried by farmers in their own farms to the collection centers in Kolli Hills. Then the coffee is transported to Namakkal, Salem, Chennai and Bangalore. Big roasting companies in Bangalore buy, roast and sell the coffee. All of the coffee production from Kolli Hills is consumed in India. However, the full potential of Kolli Hills coffee is yet to be reached.

The fact that coffee in Kolli Hills is produced under unique, organic agro-ecologic systems that incorporate a wide variety of food products could make it more attractive to consumers. Growing consumer concerns in urban centers in India-Bangalore, for example- about the environment, transparency in supply chains and the welfare of farmers could be answered with proper certifications and labelling. By selling single-origin, organic Kolli Hills coffee, an increased price for the coffee could be guaranteed, especially because of the good reputation of this coffee. Coffee

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production has been a profitable business for small-scale farmers in Kolli Hills. Just as Jayam pointed out, family farmers in the region are more resilient to external shocks such as the current climatic conditions, or fluctuating food prices because of their diversified production systems.

The diversified cropping systems incorporate the cultivation of profitable commodities such as coffee which adds substantially to their

income, and fruits and vegetables besides meeting household consumption needs also contribute to a higher income, when sold in local markets. Jayam attributes her success in being able to pay for her children's education to the diversified, agro-ecological farming approach they have taken in their 2.5 hectares of land.

The example of this small-scale, organic farmer from Kolli Hills in India reaffirms that a diversified, agro-ecological farming system approach is not only viable, it's profitable. In a changing agricultural landscape where there is a higher pressure on land (i.e. soil depletion, erosion, land scarcity), where climatic conditions are becoming ever more severe and unpredictable, and where the feeling of hopelessness in rural areas pushes young people to migrate to urban areas, agro-ecology is the safest way to overcome all these challenges. Both from an ecologic and an economic perspective, betting on agroecology at the farm and community level may just be the best way of finding solutions to the global problems that we currently face.

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*Coffee in Kolli hills is grown along with pepper, banana and silver oak trees*

Photo: Author