



Janaki Jagannath

Justice For All

Former Coordinator, Community Alliance for Agroecology

WORKS: Central Valley | **LIVES:** Davis

FIELDS: Farmworker Advocacy, Policy, Environmental Justice

In her three-and-a-half years working in the Central Valley, Janaki Jagannath focused on agriculture-related policy matters for the non-profit organizations Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment and California Rural Legal Assistance. A graduate of the University of California, Davis, Jagannath returned in 2017 to work towards an environmental law degree. She grew up in San Diego, and spent summers there farming alongside third-generation Japanese growers and recent Oaxacan immigrants. An Indian American, this farmworker advocate and environmental justice organizer is active in policy efforts on behalf of farmers of color.



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Perhaps not surprising for someone whose given name—Janaki—is the Hindu goddess of agriculture, Janaki Jagannath felt a calling to work the soil and advocate on behalf of farmworkers in California’s Central Valley.

While at [California Rural Legal Assistance](#) in Fresno, she lobbied for access to clean water, air, and soil, and fielded concerns about pesticide exposure, wage theft, and sexual harassment for a mostly Latino, low-income clientele. “I learned quickly that farmworker legal advocacy is not only critical to advancing social justice but it’s critical to advancing agriculture in general,” Jagannath says. “Farmworkers are not just the backbone of our food system, they’re the backbone of our entire economy.”

At the [Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment](#) (CRPE), she served as the coordinator for the [Community Alliance for Agroecology](#). Agroecology, she explains, is a farming practice that balances and respects all the participants in an agricultural production system and is built from traditional knowledge that links environmental, economic, and human health, while protecting natural resources for both people and the planet.

The alliance, made up of six environmental justice nonprofits—CRPE, [Californians for Pesticide Reform](#), [Community Water](#)

[Center](#), [Cultiva la Salud](#), [El Quinto Sol de America](#), and the [Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability](#)—wants to improve agricultural and natural resource policies for all residents in the Central Valley, the biggest agricultural powerhouse in the United States. “Despite its role in the region, the San Joaquin Valley has been subject to agricultural, environmental, and land-use policy that has burdened the community with some of the worst health and social outcomes in the nation,” says Jagannath. The area has an immigrant labor force working on large-scale corporate farms and ranches producing commodity crops.

Jagannath’s focus at the alliance: Advocating on behalf of small-scale farmers and farmworkers of color, whose different experiences “are often glossed over in public policy,” says the 28-year-old. “There are so many different kinds of farmworkers and different work situations—whether you’re a vineyard worker, a strawberry and lettuce picker at a large ag operation, or an employee at a high-end, slow food farm.”

The environmental and slow food movements have been dominated by urban, mostly white, well-off populations, she says. Food justice advocacy is important, says Jagannath, because it’s an attempt to address inequities in the food and farming system that has historically taken advantage of



people of color. “A lot of residents living in rural communities don’t have access to the fresh produce that they pick in the fields,” she says.

During her two years with the alliance, she helped work on the passage of the Farmer Equity Act of 2017, which amends the California Food and Agriculture Code to include a more diverse set of farmers who have been federally classified as “socially disadvantaged” in the allocation of government resources. “It’s time for the California Department of Agriculture to direct funding to the next generation of farmers—many of them from immigrant or refugee backgrounds—to allow these thought leaders and pioneers to succeed,” says Jagannath.

Jagannath is the child of immigrants from South India, who originally settled in Mobile, Alabama, where she was born. Her father worked in paper mills in the rural South. After her parents’ divorce, her mom moved to San Diego to raise her two children. That’s where Jagannath’s love of the land blossomed.

While an undergraduate at the University of California, Davis (where she is now studying environmental law with a focus on agriculture and land use), Jagannath spent summers working at [Chino Nojo](#), a fruit and vegetable farm in Rancho Sante Fe, in northern San Diego County. The farm’s upscale clientele includes culinary celebrities Alice Waters and Wolfgang Puck.

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Jagannath enjoyed harvesting vegetables and fruits—the mixed row crop farm is known for its extensive selection of microgreens—and working at the farm stand. The third-generation Japanese-American-owned family farm—nojo is Japanese for farm—is a model farm business in Jagannath’s mind. She ticks off reasons why: The Chino family value farming as an occupation; workers receive long-term, stable employment; there is a reverence for the land and tradition; a commitment to teach, share, and innovate; and a dedication to growing good food.



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As an undergraduate, Jagannath found the language for her interest in environmental justice. She worked with the faculty at Davis to build a Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems degree, which dovetails with her own interests. “Davis is a federally-funded, land-grant agricultural school that has been historically funded by agribusiness and focused toward industrial agriculture,” she says. “This sustainable agriculture degree, has been a long time coming.”

Jagannath combines field experience and farming practice with policy and advocacy. She earned a certificate in ecological horticulture from UC Santa Cruz’s Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. “That’s where I challenged my own assumptions about what it means to be a farmer,” she says. “It was my gateway from the farm into the agricultural policy and food justice world.”

Why law school? “It definitely got to a point in my policy and advocacy work that I realized it was great to have lawyers as a resource, but I wanted to have those skills. I want to be that person at the policy drafting table,” says Jagannath.

Jagannath is also an unabashed soil nerd. She thinks the EPA should have a Department of Soil. And soil may well be where she spends her working hours, after law school. “I see myself advocating at that intersection of soil health and human health. It’s also tied very deeply to climate change, and that’s a very new, emergent area of law—climate change law—that I want to explore.” It just makes sense to her. “When it comes to soil—the thing we spend our entire lives walking around on—we seem not to care about it as much as air or water. To me, the health and vitality of soil microbial communities has everything to do with the vitality of the communities who walk around on top of it.”

And she expects that her work will take her back to rural agricultural communities. Rural work is challenging: It can be isolating, even intimidating for a young woman of color advocating radical ideas in a socially conservative region. But in the Central Valley the need is great, Jagannath says, and there’s a sense of urgency to represent low-income people of color during a time of stark anti-immigrant rhetoric.

—Sarah Henry