



Beej Vruksh Seed Totem

Pro Seed Now Biodiversity and Organic Food Festival

AUROBINDO SOCIETY, NEW DELHI, 8 & 9 MARCH, 2014

The Biodiversity and Organic Food Festival – jointly organised by Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), Organic Farming Association of India (OFAI), Sahaja Samrudha, Save Our Rice (SOR), Vividhara, and Development and Justice Initiative (DAJI), in collaboration with Aurobindo Society at its New Delhi campus – was a grand success! Several hundred farmers, seed savers, farmer-breeders, grassroots organisations and activists from 15 states across India showcased, for public awareness, over 2,500 seed varieties of cereals (rice, wheat, millets), pulses, vegetables, tubers, medicinal plants and uncultivated/forest foods.

It was a riot of colours and an enthralling display in a welcoming village *haat* ambience. Open blue skies, green surroundings and small shaded *shamianas*, propped up with bamboo, and furnished with just *chatais*, charpoy and string for displays. Perfect for the occasion and the convivial gathering it attracted!

The Festival was a heart-warming confluence of synergies to exhibit a sampling of India's enormous diversity of foods adapted to diverse conditions. Unfortunately, this mind-boggling variety of crops – vital for ensuring India's food and nutritional security, sovereignty, and sustainable, self-reliant livelihoods for millions – is severely threatened. Determined collective efforts are urgently needed to conserve, regenerate and widely share such diversity, combined with care for its bio-cultural habitats.

In stark contrast to the several thousand varieties of foods on display at the festival, a very few varieties of barely 8 crops/foods constitute over 75% of the people's diet in most industrialised (impoverished) western nations.

Preceding the Festival was a two-day National Seed Savers meeting on March 6-7 – for joint consultation and collaboration – attended by about 80 people representing different organisations and initiatives from all over India. Present were a galaxy of outstanding seed savers, breeders, and organic farmers. Setting the tone for the consultation, Krishna Prasad, Seed Convenor of ASHA, urged farmers to engage actively in plant breeding and the exchange of native seed varieties with regional partners, keeping careful track of all material and knowledge shared to guard against bio-piracy by MNCs. He emphasised too the need to strengthen market linkages for wider use of our traditional foods and seed varieties, while steadfastly resisting the introduction of ruinous GM crops.

HIGHLIGHTS

Myriad Seed Diversity



Organic Food Cafe and Music



The Biodiversity Festival at the Aurobindo Society was inaugurated on March 8, International Women's Day, by the traditional lighting of a lamp, followed by *raksha-bandhan* style tying of diverse seeds to a Beeja Vruksha or seed totem by farmers from different regions. This symbolised a commitment to conserve, regenerate, share and use the farmers' own open-pollinated, open-source seeds that recognize no Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs)!

The ceremony then roused to a round of collective cheering, singing and chanting of slogans, denouncing the multi-national agri-corporate design to wrench strategic control of Indian farming, while poisoning our soils, waters, seeds, foods, and the health of our farmers and consumers. Among the many interested visitors to the Festival – some plainly delighted – were a number of urban organic gardeners aspiring to grow their own poison-free food, and looking to pick up vegetable seeds that were in high demand. Organic traditional foods were served during the two-day event for the participants and visitors.

Events like these are now growing in frequency and popularity across our country. In the past few years, there have been organic food and seed festivals in many parts of India, including Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Patna, Bhubaneswar, Nagpur and several other urban and rural centres. Clearly, a fresh tide of awareness and enthusiasm is rising, free of paralyzing cynicism or helplessness. Monsanto will get no walkover, and may yet have to quit India! But of course, there is no room for complacency, for the challenge is still daunting.

Among the prominent seeds-savers, breeders and organic farmers present at both the National Seed Savers Meeting and the Biodiversity Festival were: Natabar Sarangi (Odisha), Vijay Jardari (Beej Bachao Andolan, Uttarakhand), Dadaji Ramji Khobragade, Vasant Futane and Sanjay Patil (Maharashtra), Jaiprakash Singh (Uttar Pradesh), Dr Debal Deb (from West Bengal, now working in Odisha), Nagappa Nimbegondi, Syed Ghani Khan and others (Karnataka), Deepika Kundaji (Auroville, TN), Sanjeevini (Andhra Pradesh), Nitish Kumar (Bihar), Dr Anupam Paul and representatives of 'Save our Rice' Campaign (Karnataka, Tamil Nadu & West Bengal) and DRCS (West Bengal); also others from Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Punjab.

Seed diversity at stake

The immense variety of traditional nutritious foods on display mesmerized



visitors to the Festival. But the modern diet, limited to one or two staples (rice & wheat) threatens such diversity, pushing it to the verge of extinction. Since colonization, our traditional

crops, languages and indigenous culture and wisdom have been getting progressively erased. With the so-called green revolution, and increased urbanization and industrialization, their erosion has greatly accelerated. The newest danger is from the release/field trials of GM crops that threaten to severely contaminate our traditional seeds through cross-pollination. It is time to support our farmers to reconstruct a better rural economy through holistic policy-level intervention.

The festival was a watershed in terms of diversity and there could not have been a better indicator of the dire need of today. A total of 2436 seed varieties of cultivated crops were brought and displayed by different farmer groups, as shown in Table 1. The festival exhibited varieties of seeds and food which are forgotten in the lives of urban people. Many visitors, especially seniors fondly remembered their childhood grains and millets and lamented the deep loss our current policies and markets have on our traditional food systems.



Farmers assisting with creation of Seed Ritual

Participants and visitors also interacted to discuss the future of food and the ill-effects of Genetically Modified (GMO) seeds and the impact it will have on the livelihoods of farmers and the consumers.

Today, farmers are heavily dependent on the markets for all inputs required for agriculture, be it seeds or fertilizers. With new policies on seeds and the commercial economy surrounding it, that dependency of farmers will only deepen and worsen. The farmers declared that the seeds are the property of humanity and hence cannot be the property of commercial interests. Today, national and international policies create a commodity and intellectual property for seeds. This leads to a system where slowly the farmers lose their right to save, protect and exchange seeds. As a senior seed saver from Odisha, Natabar Sarangi commented - "Just like oxygen is needed for human life, seeds are the oxygen of the farmer". Today, farmers' seeds, are poached upon directly or indirectly (through government institutions, universities) and passed on to the corporate domain, where they are appropriated as intellectual property and sold back to the farmers at rates and means which suit the markets.

Farmers also lamented the fact that public institutions such as the NBPGR (National Beareau of Plant Genetic Resource), despite



holding such a wide array of germ plasm, does not declare it as a national asset and treat it as 'prior art' for Intellectual property application and ensure that none of the national resources are sent for genetic modification and/or commoditization to corporations or distant gene banks in other countries.

The festival also saw an organic food café, where visitors savored traditional foods made of millets on slow cooked traditional kitchen systems. Most were transported to the time of their childhood and remembered the delicious, safe and nutritious cooking that had existed in the recent past in India, but which is now rapidly disappearing in the age of fast food.

Having displayed the richness of *Bharat*, the farmers vehemently reasserted their rights to seeds and livelihoods and concluded that the existing regime being proposed by governments and the corporate sector was not in their best interest. They also vowed to unwaveringly pursue their course of saving and sharing indigenous seed varieties of foods and organic cultivation techniques to ensure that citizens of India are provided with safe, nutritious foods, free of toxic chemicals to ensure a healthy and happy future for generations to come.



Farmers Pledging Seeds to the *Beej Vruksh* (Seed Totem)



Glimpses of the Seed Festival



Participants at the Biodiversity Seed Festival

Group – State	Background	Seed Diversity Display
Pebble garden Auroville, Puducherry	Conserving fifty varieties of traditionally bred vegetables, part of a larger collection of 90 hardy plants for home gardens	Rare and unique vegetable seeds for display and sale
Beej Bachao Andolan, Uttarakhand	Internationally renowned seed saver of Himalayan hill region.	Millets, rice, colourful beans, pulses and vegetables
Sarjan Samjick Samskruthik sahytha Munch, Madhya Pradesh	Grassroots group actively involved in Biodiversity Conservation	60 millets, 20 varieties of rice, 26 pulses and vegetables
<i>Nagappa Nimbegondi,</i> <i>Haveri,</i> Karnataka	Renowned seed saver, conserving <i>desi</i> cotton, millets and vegetables	24 <i>desi</i> cotton, 30 millets and 20 vegetables
<i>Sri Dadaji Ramji Khobragade,</i> Maharashtra	Farmer breeder and HMT popular rice developer	25 rice varieties
Sanjeevini Rural Development Society, Araku Valley, Andhra Pradesh	Gene savior award winner, actively involved in conservation and promotion of tribal seed culture and seed diversity	30 rice, 36 millets, millets, 32 pulses 40 and vegetables.
Bhittubhoomi, Sambalpur,Odisha	Farmers network conserving 150 rice varieties.	Display of 92 rice samples
Swala, Jharkhand	Tribal group actively involved in conservation of seed diversity	80 varieties of Desi maize, millets, rice and pulses
<i>Dr. Anupam Paul,</i> Agriculture Training Centre, Dept of Agriculture, Govt of West Bengal	Rice scientist conserving 300 rice varieties.	Display of 'Jugal' two rice in a single paddy grain and rice panicles
CREATE, Save Our Rice Campaign, Tamil Nadu	Revival of traditional rice varieties	Display of 71 rice samples, including 'Mapille samba' Bridegroom rice
<i>Jaiprakash Singh,</i> Varanasi, Uttarpradesh	Well-known farmer breeder from Tadiya Village, Varanasi Dt, UP, popular in north India	Farmer bred varieties - Paddy, Wheat and Toor
BAIF-MITTRA Maharashtra	Plant genome savior community award recipient, conserving 250 rice and 37 millets.	Paddy – 80 , Finger Millet – 10, Proso Millet- 5, Maize-4, Sorgum- 5, Cow pea- 15, Barnyard Millet- 1, Tubers- 5
<i>Vasant Futane,</i> Maharashtra	Renowned seed saver and Sarvodaya activist	Mung 2, cowpea-2,jowar-1,beans-5,Wheat-6 Vegetables-16
<i>Dr. Debal Deb,</i> Save Our Rice Campaign, Sunderbans, West Bengal	Conserving 40 salt tolerant and 80 <i>desi</i> rice varieties	105 paddy, vegetables- 20, pulses-5
Sharana Muddanna Savayava Krushikara Sangha, Davanegere, Karnataka	Pioneer in rice conservation and marketing traditional rice	150 rice varieties
Living farms, Odisha	Conserving tribal habitat and uncultivated food crops	Uncultivated food crops
<i>Sudam Sahu,</i> Seed Saver, Odisha	Farmer-breeder and rice saver	65 rice varieties and 6 pulses
<i>Syed Ghani Khan,</i> Save Our Rice Campaign, Karnataka	Conserving traditional rice varieties	70 rice varieties
Sahaja Samrudha, Karnataka	Conserving 22 varieties of wheat, more than 600 paddy varieties and 60 millet varieties	22 wheat, 2 Niger, Millets and desi cotton, 32 varieties in the form of Torana
Rajendra Desi Chasa Gabesana Kendra, Odisha	Conserving 450 rice varieties	Rice album and rice samples
<i>Shankar Langati,</i> Khanapur, Karnataka	Gene savior award winner	Paddy- 20, medicinal rice- 11, vegetables- 30
PSNFT, Tamil Nadu	Traditional vegetable seed producer	29 varieties of vegetables
DRSCC Kolkata, West Bengal	Organization involved in promoting bio-intensive food gardening and community seed banks	Paddy 25 vegetables- 28
Vaagdhara, Rajasthan	Conservation of Millets and other rain fed crop varieties	Millets, maize, vegetables
Sahaja Seeds, Bangalore Karnataka	Farmer-owned producer company involved in production of traditional food and fiber crop seeds	25 varieties of vegetable seeds for display and sale
Ahimsa Club, Odisha	Organic farmer group conserving traditional paddy varieties	150 traditional paddy varieties
Kheti Virasat Mission, Punjab	Organic farmer group conserving traditional crop varieties	Traditional carrot, pulses and millets

