

THE HINDU

Only a ready seed market can help conserve traditional crops

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Cultivation of traditional crop varieties is decreasing day by day, the major reason being low productivity compared to the high yielding varieties (HYV). The only way to encourage farmers to grow these is to create a market for them and make consumers aware about the speciality and nutritional aspects of these crops. “Take the case of Wayanad. There were about 105 traditional rice varieties cultivated here as per early records. But today this has dropped to 35 out of which less than 10 are now extensively cultivated in the district. “If the situation continues it will take only a few more years for the erosion of this vast genetic wealth,” says Dr. Anil Kumar, Director, MSSRF, Kalpetta.

C4 model

Accordingly the institute devised an approach called the C4 model, which was found to be highly suitable for conserving the traditional varieties.

“To conserve an indigenous variety we have to ensure its cultivation, consumption and commerce. All these stages were addressed in the seed village programme developed by us,” says Dr. Joseph John, scientist at the institute.

MSSRF team mobilised rice farmers from ten villages, clustered them into seed villages, mainly serving as seed, grain and gene banks.

Over the past two years the institute worked on community mobilisation, clustering farmers in to groups, awareness generation on the importance of the traditional varieties, purity maintenance and management of seed and gene banks.

Each of the seed villages had two to eight traditional varieties cultivated, conserved and consumed among its residents.

To overcome the issue of seed contamination, two acres of paddy land were leased out and utilised for growing ten selected varieties like *Chennellu*, *Chenthadi*, *Chomala*, *Jeerakasala*, *Gandakasala*, *Mullan kaima*, *Thondi*, *Adukkam*, *Veliyan*, *Kalladiyaryan* and the seeds were supplied to growers for cultivation.

Training

The seeds thus produced were supplied to other farmers across the district and outside. Training was provided on purification techniques, seed and grain management, mechanisation etc for helping the community in its efforts to conserve.

Enquiries for seed availability were linked to the seed bank management committee at the village level which supplies the seeds at a premium rate fixed by the centralised unit of “seed care,” a grass root institution (GRI) of traditional seed growers of Malabar.

Marketing

Farmers could sell additional quantities of rice after consumption to traders for a better price.

Some villages have even identified niche markets for their produce, according to Dr. Joseph.

Previously, farmers in the seed villages used to sell traditional paddy seeds at Rs. 14/kg before the intervention. Now they sell at Rs.35 – 40 /kg. Aromatic rice varieties are now being sold at Rs.50/kg and enjoy a good demand among consumers.

In a year, the farmers could sell two and half tones of traditional varieties and presently the area under traditional varieties is 71 acres since the major seed buyers are those who were cultivating hybrids.

The project intends to purify the seeds of traditional varieties consecutively for three generations, supply it to the villages and link them up with farmers and institutions interested in rice cultivation.

This proves that only a good and ready market can fetch the traditional rice “cultivators a premium price for their produce and only a good price can encourage more farmers to cultivate traditional varieties.

Impact

“Mere rhetoric on steps to save indigenous varieties or seminars or workshops to save and conserve native seeds will never have an impact unless and until there is a market to buy it from the producer”, stresses Dr. Anil Kumar.

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