



Annual seed festivals have helped in conserving paddy varieties

Photo: Author

Seed festivals promote seed conservation

The Nel Thiruvizha in Adirengam

Sreedevi Lakshmi Kutty

There is renewed interest in conserving seeds and growing traditional paddy varieties among the farmers in South India. The annual seed festivals have played a significant role in bringing about this change. This initiative by Save our Rice Campaign has resulted in improving agro-diversity of paddy, re-introducing healthy red rice into the diet and also rebuilding the germplasm of climate resilient paddy seeds.

May 25th, 2013 was an occasion for celebration for farmers in Tamil Nadu. It was an occasion for celebrating biodiversity in paddy. More than 3000 paddy farmers from all the 32 districts of Tamil Nadu joined the two day paddy seed festival in Adirengam village in Tiruvarur district in Tamil Nadu. Besides exchanging information and experiences, farmers

also shared 61 traditional varieties of paddy, largely brought from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. Farmers in the festival share seeds in good faith that they will cultivate the seeds organically, share the seeds freely and return double the quantity during the next festival.

Genesis of Nel Thiruvizha

The seed festival which has become a prominent event for many paddy farmers in Tamil Nadu, had its humble origins in 2006, two years into the Save Our Rice (SOR) campaign in India.

The CREATE team, an NGO, that runs the SOR campaign in Tamil Nadu, began its seed conservation work under the aegis of Mr. Jayaraman, the Tamil Nadu State Coordinator for the campaign. Initially, the team just began collecting traditional/indigenous paddy seeds from various groups and growing them in their training centre at Adirengam village. They began with three varieties of paddy seeds including the famous *Jeeraka Samba*. The team had no idea about purification of seeds or the selection process. Seed multiplication and conservation was the focus.

In 2006, the idea of a seed festival originated to bring together interested paddy farmers. The first *Nel Thiruvizha* (paddy festival in Tamil) was born. Organised during the month of May, the first gathering in 2006 saw 425 farmers who chose from sixteen traditional paddy varieties. Two kilograms of paddy seeds were distributed to all the farmers.

As Mr. Ponnambalam, Trustee, CREATE says, “The seed festival was not the result of a long term plan or strategy. The festival was a result of the interest of the SOR team to involve the farmers in the village and surrounding villages in the indigenous paddy cultivation effort; then it took a life of its own, growing bigger each year. The late Dr. Nammalvar, the legendary organic farmer in Tamil Nadu began talking about it at every meeting and slowly the word spread.” The festival and seed conservation work grew organically with Jayaraman taking the lead with guidance from partners of the campaign and many other seed savers.

Further impetus for the festival came with coverage in the Tamil media. The story of *Aruvatham Kuruvai* (a paddy variety which matures in 60 days, as its name suggests), the seeds of which were procured by SOR from a farmer in one of the meetings and multiplied over years, made a cover story by Pasumai Vikatan, a Tamil magazine on agrarian issues. This brought considerable attention to the existence and need for revival of traditional paddy seeds. It aroused the interest of many farmers who read the story. The interest on traditional varieties grew. Today, around 2000-3000 farmers cultivate *Aruvatham Kuruvai* variety. Similarly, *Kattuyanam* and *Mappilai Chemba* are two other varieties which have gained immense popularity through the campaign.

Growing seed diversity

Tremendous efforts are required to multiply and conserve seeds. Seed festival provides an opportunity for farmers to share and multiply traditional varieties. Though, initially only some farmers who took seeds from the festival cultivated, now, most farmers collect the seeds and plant them. Every year, more number of farmers return double the amount of seeds taken from the seed festival.

Among the 61 varieties being distributed, some are more popular than others. According to an analysis done by SOR, it was observed that 19 varieties are most popular, which include *Mappilai Sambha*, *Jeeraka Sambha*, *kattuyanam*, *Kattu ponni*, *Aruvadam Kuruvai* and others. Farmers have reported good yields for the traditional varieties they have grown and have observed high resilience during adverse climatic conditions.

Sometimes SOR made extra efforts to multiply seeds. For instance, in the last two years, when the Kaveri belt in Tamil Nadu was reeling under drought, the SOR team had to lease-in land with

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Table 1: Number of farmers who procured seeds during the seed festivals

Year	Varieties	Total Farmers
2005-2006	16	425
2006-2007	26	1116
2007-2008	28	1629
2008-2009	47	2016
2009-2010	51	2320
2010-2011	53	2860
2011-2012(Nov 2011)	61	2900 +
2013	63	3000+

Source: PADDY, July 2103

irrigation facility to produce the required quantity of paddy seeds for the festival.

Growing popularity

The festival has gained tremendous popularity among farmers with the 2013 festival witnessing farmers coming from Kanyakumari district in the south to the Tiruvallur district at the northern tip of the state. Starting from a little over 400 farmers in 2006, the number of farmers participating in the festival has increased to more than 3000.

With growing popularity, the support for the festival has also been pouring from numerous organizations and individuals. Many organizations and individuals have been supporting the festival and the two day event has seen many illustrious people come to address the farmers. Many banks including NABARD have been supporting the festival since many years. Presently, the government is also showing interest. Last year, the agriculture department took the responsibility of sending invitations to farmers across the districts of Tamil Nadu which resulted in farmers being represented from Kanyakumari to Thiruvallur.

The support from farmers is also worth mentioning in organizing this event. Though initially farmers did not bear the costs, gradually they started paying an entry fee to cover some costs. The entry fee which was Rs 10, has been increased to Rs 50 and to Rs.100 last year. In spite of the fee, there has been tremendous response to the festival. Now the festival is so much in demand that in the last two

Save Our Rice Campaign

The Save Our Rice campaign was initiated in India by Thanal (Kerala) with CREATE (Tamil Nadu), Sahaja Samruddha (Karnataka) and Living Farms (Orissa). Subsequently the campaign also moved to West Bengal in 2009 with a new formation called the Save Our Rice, West Bengal. The campaign is founded on five objectives: (1) conserving rice ecosystems (2) sustaining rice culture and diversity (3) protecting traditional wisdom (4) preventing GMOs and toxics and (5) ensuring safe and nutritious food. The groups have been working in their respective states on all these areas.

years small seed festivals were held in other districts to reach farmers who could not attend the seed festival at Adirengam.

In addition to the thousands of farmers who come directly, many more thousands are involved in organic paddy cultivation, by further sharing of seeds. In many cases, a farmer from a far away district comes on behalf of more than one person.

Outcomes

The farmers who are cultivating traditional paddy through organic means are finding a distinct economic advantage as well. “While conventional farmers spend around 15,000 – 20,000 rupees on inputs and reap around 32 bags of paddy (each bag containing 60 kilos) these farmers are on an average spending 5,000 as input costs and reaping around 24 bags of paddy. In addition, their paddy fetches 1,200 rupees per bag as against the Rs 800 that conventional paddy fetches in the open market” says Jayaraman. However, the sad reality is that the Government does not procure traditional paddy and procures only high yielding varieties or hybrids.

Many families of small farmers earn their livelihood by processing traditional red rice, creating value added products and selling it. Further, many people in Tamil Nadu across different cross sections of the society have started talking about traditional red rice and its benefits. Anecdotal observation is that now supermarkets in many or most towns are stocking red rice, a marked change from the times when one would find only white rice. Also, another interesting outcome is that all the paddy farmers who are growing

traditional paddy varieties, the seeds of which they had collected during the festivals, are now using these varieties for home consumption too. They also preserve some quantity for special occasions like weddings and festivals. Earlier, most of these paddy farmers sold the paddy they grew and bought white rice from the market for household consumption.

According to Usha, the National Coordinator for the SOR campaign, “The interest shown by farmers to grow traditional paddy is encouraging. It shows that farmers still value their traditional agro biodiversity and given a choice they will adopt it. The experience of these farmers also shows that these varieties have a great potential for good yield, quality in terms of nutrition and climate resilience’.

The traditional seed festival has achieved the very important purpose of popularizing traditional paddy among many farmers all over Tamil Nadu. There is a clear revival of traditional paddy cultivation and renewed interest in conserving seeds and growing them. This is a great step in improving agro-diversity of paddy, re-introducing healthy red rice into the diet and also rebuilding the germ plasm of climate resilient paddy seeds.

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PHOTO COMPETITION

Visualizing the potential and contributions of family farmers worldwide



The International Year of Family Farming (IYFF) highlights the decisive role of family farming in the sustainable production of 80% of the world's food and in the conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity. The IYFF-2014 photo competition collects visual expressions to build stronger recognition and support for family farming, and encourage broad participation in the IYFF.

The IYFF-2014 photo competition is calling for photos that represent the motto: Family Farming: Feeding the world, caring for the earth.

Entries must visualize the strength, potential and challenges of sustainable, multifunctional family farmers worldwide, in all their diversity and contexts.

A jury consisting of Angèle Etoundi, Bernward Geier, S Jayaraj, Tomás Munita, Deo Sumaj and Jun Virola will choose the winning photos. The deadline for entries is 1 May 2014, but we appreciate receiving photos earlier. The winning photos will be announced in October 2014.

The photo competition is an initiative of the AgriCultures Network and the World Rural Forum, in close collaboration with the Asian Farmers Association, CLOC/La Via Campesina and the More and Better Network.

Read more and submit your photo at www.agriculturesnetwork.org/photocompetition

