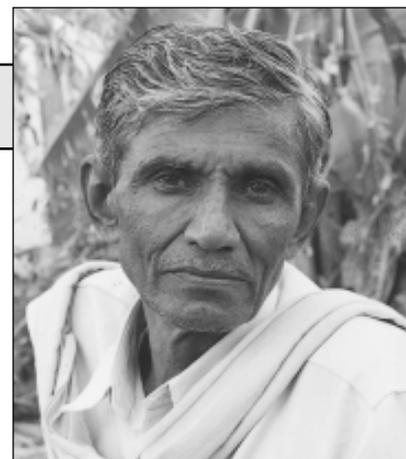


Gift of seeds for life



It was a custom in India that instead of dowry the newly married bride used to carry a cow and seeds to her in-laws place. Sale and purchase of seeds was prohibited in Indian tradition. I remember very well that some families used to produce seeds for the whole village. They were respected for sharing them freely with those who needed them. My parents were one among them. It was a festive period to the family to invite relatives and friends and to collect earheads after performing rituals. It was the elderly women, not men, who used to locate area for collecting good earheads. Because, it was women, who watched the field regularly, unlike men, who would be away most of the time, with other responsibilities. After collecting enough quantity of the earheads, they were dried in shade and hung above the traditional stove in the kitchen. The smoke from the stove kept them free from insect attacks while the warmth kept them free from fungal attacks. Since the grains and seeds were not thrashed until two weeks before sowing, they were safe in the earheads. Just 2 to 3 weeks before sowing, the seeds were thrashed and cleaned up.

There was a traditional way of testing the seed germination. On the day of Ugadi (New Year) festival, we had a ritual of sowing seeds on a 4 centimeter thick dry cow dung bed on a wooden plank. They were watered regularly for nine days till Sriramanavami, another festival. These wooden planks with seedlings were ceremoniously taken to the drinking water well. The rate of germination was observed and the batches with more than 90% germination were used for sowing. These practices were not only inexpensive but also ensured the varietal traits for which they were selected. In my village, we had different varieties of rice for roti, cooked rice, payasa (a sweet gruel) etc.

Even the storage of seeds was very scientific. They used to store seeds in earthen pots, wooden and bamboo containers. Cereals, legumes, spices and other grains were mixed with wood ash, herbs, aromatic grasses and leaves. Just 20 years back, we had 15 or more varieties of tomatoes, brinjal, bhendi, gourds, tubers etc. May be due to smaller land holdings, divided family systems, introduction of hybrid seeds and their false propaganda, production of own seeds has been neglected. Besides being expensive, the quality aspects in terms of taste, nutritional value etc., have also been sacrificed. Indigenous seeds have traditionally been suitable for the local weather and soils, while the improved or hybrid seeds need excessive fertilization and plant protection measures, resulting in high external inputs. In the villages, we had a system of making sweet potato cuttings. We used to plant a few vines (creepers) of sweet potato, 3 months ahead of sowing, in the main field, so that we get some tubers, enough of planting materials and also some fodder for farm animals. Similarly farmers can make their horticultural planting materials like grafts, layers (air layers) runners very easily at a very cheap cost saving a lot of money, transport risks and time. Fortunately, some NGOs all over the world have started good work of collection, preservation, multiplication of indigenous seeds, and their distribution among the farmers, with a responsibility of giving back more and more seeds. Even school children are encouraged to collect diverse varieties of seeds by

holding annual competitions. The organic farmers associations and groups have cultivated good practices of sharing their seeds and planting materials during their meetings. A noble practice of giving seeds and plants as gifts on ceremonial occasions has become popular in many parts of the country. Even the forest and horticulture departments of many states have started distributing plants and seeds at places of human congregation.

The diversity was reduced once the hunters-gatherers settled and turned to agriculture. The diversity was further reduced once the subsistence agriculture turned to intensive market oriented production. Species such as wheat, maize and rice destined for the urban markets were given importance through research, production and marketing through giant multinational corporations. Infact, some NGOs or associations are doing a very good job of selecting a "godparent" for particular variety of seed, so that the "godfather" or the "godmother" can choose any particular variety of seed to conserve for future years in his or her garden and produce seed every year. Thousands of seeds are in search of a refuge. We shall adapt at least a few seeds. Together we can create thousands of seed banks with no expenses or risks. As farmers, let us accept such noble task of saving seeds for the future. Otherwise the Multi National Companies will take over the seed trade and control the farmers of the whole world. This is the only way of promoting and protecting the genetic resources, 'The gift of seeds for LIFE' and sustainable agriculture practices.

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