

The quest for Kasbai

I am a software professional turned into an organic farmer. I own 4.5 acres of land near Dahanu, Maharashtra. I do not have much knowledge of Organic Farming and am still a novice in this field. In the last one year I have gathered some information on this subject by reading and visiting farmers practicing this method of agriculture. I try to experiment with different methods of agriculture at my farm, not that they are all a success. I grew rice, ground nuts, vegetables last year and this monsoon am trying out rice using the SRI method of cultivation though I modified it to suit my needs. I also have a few fruit trees on the farm. I am not into commercial farming but grow everything for myself.

It all started in the hot summer month of April 2005. With the monsoon round the corner we started to look for a good variety of traditional rice to plant at our farm. Most of the farmers in and around the village of Peth had switched over to hybrids and there were no local traditional varieties being grown anymore.

The younger generation of farmers thought I was crazy asking for the 'desi' variety as they called it. My regular visits to the villages around also did not yield any results and we were almost giving up hope of finding good traditional seeds before the monsoon.

I decided to give it one last try and started speaking to some of the elders in the village, that is when I could make any sense of what they were saying. Most of them were too old to work and are drunk all day. In fact, they get pension from the government, which according to them, is meant solely for their alcohol consumption. A wonderful use for the pension scheme! Anyway, a series of meaningful conversations and they mentioned the name of Kasbai. Kasbai is a traditional long grained rice variety which has a distinct aroma akin to Basmati though much milder. It's a long duration crop and most of the older people remembered growing it years ago. But they all shook their heads when I asked about seeds and they told me that it may have "disappeared."

The tales of Kasbai and its great taste made us more determined to get this seemingly lost rice from somewhere. I vaguely thought the government may know something about it. A visit to the agricultural officer was enlightening. He had not even heard of this rice variety. His response was that the villagers were taking me for a ride and there was no rice by this name. He rattled off the names of a number of latest hybrids and even offered to give me some of them free of cost for a trial. Cursing myself for wasting time with him I moved on to the next destination.

This time it was the Adivasi Mahamandal which buys the rice from the villagers on behalf of the government. A search in their files revealed that Kasbai did not figure in them. A good indication why people did not grow it anymore. The market itself did not recognise the rice, so if you grew it you would not be able to sell it. However, the officer incharge here had more knowledge of rice and did remember Kasbai being sold to him a few years back.

A couple of cups of tea and some gentle prodding revealed that the rice was grown four or five years ago in a nearby village called Dhanivari. Excellent news for us and it was destination Dhanivari, which turned out to be a sprawling village with hamlets scattered all around. We rushed back to the Mahamandal and requested him for a name or a lead in the village. Looking into his records we narrowed our search to a farmer called Devu Handa. He was the largest seller of rice to the Mahamandal last year and seemed like a guy who could help us out.

Back to Dhanivari, we started looking for Devu Handa and found a greying old man wearing a cap who proudly said he was the one we were looking for. An ex-sarpanch of the village he has acres of land, a huge house and a large family. Sitting outside his house on a charpoy, after exchanging the usual pleasantries we came to the topic of Kasbai. The mere mention of Kasbai and Devu Handa drifted into the past. His eyes turned dreamy and with a tremble in his voice he told us how the entire village at one time grew only Kasbai. He said, "There was a time when people passing our village during lunch time would be forced to stop and ask for a meal. Such was the alluring aroma of Kasbai." The entire area would have this heady aroma hanging in the air as all the houses cooked the same rice. Today he said he had to force himself to eat rice. It was so insipid and tasteless!

We asked him the reason for this shift and without a moment's hesitation he said it was all due to irrigation. He said that years ago there was no canal system in the village and they depended on the monsoon. With the advent of irrigation, farmers were tempted to grow a second crop and Kasbai being a long duration rice, was replaced by the shorter duration hybrids so that the harvest was earlier and the farmers could take up a second crop. We prod him further and ask why if he was so unhappy with hybrids, did he shift over. No one forced him to, did they? He smiled and replied that their fields did not have fences and once the harvest is over the cattle were released into the fields. "If only my field has Kasbai it will be a treat for the cattle," he explained.

"Sometimes, we have to fall in line with the community," he lamented. Hybrids needed more water, fertilizers and pesticides. Besides they are so delicate that even a slight increase in the wind they get lodged. He said that yields were good initially but have been dropping regularly. He told us that even when there were flash floods in the sixties, Kasbai did not falter and stood its ground. He fondly remembers how the rice was still standing when they all returned to the

village after the floods had receded. "Such was the strength of the rice. But look what we have done," he said expressively. As he goes on reminiscing about the rice, we gently guide him back to the reason of our visit, the Kasbai seeds... He says the only people who still grow it would be the Adivasis in a hamlet at the foothills in the next village. We bid farewell to Devu Handa as he lovingly blesses us and tells us that Mahalaxmi, the local goddess will give us the seeds of Kasbai.

Armed with his blessings we reach Asarvari and start our search for the adivasi hamlets. We are not very fluent with the local dialect of Marathi and request the sarpanch of the village to help us out. He dispatches Jeevan, his trusted aide with us into the hills. A half hour walk through thick vegetation, crossing numerous streams and ditches and scrambling over rocks and gravel we reach the sleepy hamlet of Boripada. There are just two houses in front of us and we wonder if this is the right place. A wrinkled old woman sitting in the porch of one of the houses looks at us with curiosity. Approaching her we signal to Jeevan to ask the crucial question. She mutters in reply and we look at Jeevan for a quick interpretation. He breaks into a smile and informs us that she does have the rice and wants to know who we are and why we want it. It was a difficult task to keep a straight face and control our strong desire to rush and hug her. For here after searching for months, we had found the elusive Kasbai. We explained to her that we are from Peth nearby and we needed the seeds to grow it. We ask for 10 kilos of rice. She mutters and she scowls. We wonder what could have triggered this. Jeevan interprets that she has never heard of Peth village and also does not have a weighing scale and can give the rice only in baskets. We ask for a basket of rice. As she barks at someone in the house to get the rice, we wonder what size the basket would be. We collect the rice she gets us in a sack and ask about the payment. Jeevan says she does not know- just pay her something. We hand over a 100 rupee note and for the first time in the last ten minutes, her face breaks into a smile. She nods her head in approval. As we walk into the fading sunset, leaving behind a smiling old lady we can't help wondering that here, nestling in the foothills of a unknown mountain away from the hustle bustle of the road or the city, were the real people of India. These are the people who still hold the rich biodiversity of our land and no one even cares about them. They have never heard of hybrids, fertilizers or pesticides. They just grow their rice and eat what they get. The old lady we met has probably never left Boripada. Her world is unspoilt by "progress." And for once I was grateful for that.

My name is Iyer Venkateshwaran. I am 39 years old and was working for IBM as a software professional till December 2003. I quit my IT job and am now into Organic Farming. I have taken up 4.5 acres of land near Dahanu, Maharashtra about 100 kms from Bombay and for the last 1 year have been practicing Organic Agriculture.

I am a science graduate (Physics) and have done a course in computers. I was working in the IT field for the last 15 years and am a Certified Project Manager. I wanted to do something meaningful in life than punch at the keyboard and was amply supported by my wife in this line of thought. She is a journalist working for the The Hindu in Bombay. She has authored a book on Organic Cotton and its history in India. Both of us are very keen on the organic method of cultivation and intend to live off the land. It will not be long before she will quit her job and move in with me at the farm. Presently, I am usually there during the week and come to Bombay for the weekends.

I do not have much knowledge of Organic Farming and am still a novice in this field. In the last one year I have gathered some information on this subject by reading and visiting farmers practicing this method of agriculture. I try to experiment with different methods of agriculture at my farm, not that they are all a success. I grew rice, ground nuts, vegetables last year and this monsoon am trying out rice using the SRI method of cultivation though I modified it to suit my needs. I also have a few fruit trees on the farm. I am not into commercial farming but grow everything for our self. We are only two of us and have no children. It does not need much to feed us so we are trying to do just that. Whatever extra remains we try and sell it off to our friends who are keen on organic stuff.

I usually work on my farm and take in nearby villagers on a need basis. I do not use any external inputs like fertilizers or pesticides nor do I trust any of the new fangled bio dynamic products. I have two compost pits and use the plants around the farm to make my own medicines for the crops. Am still far away from sharing this knowledge but am trying my best to use the knowledge of plant life around to help myself.

So thats about us and our little farm.

Venkat Iyer

