

## **A Curator of Paddy Seeds**

Some 35 kilometers from the city of palaces, Mysore, sits an orchard, hidden with shrubs, trees and sugarcane, called Bada Bagh. It was once famed for its flavored mangoes, but now has become popular for being a museum of traditional rice seeds.

Bada Bagh is actually located in Kirugavulu village at Malavalli taluk in Mandya district of Karnataka. With paddy panicles of different colors, size and shapes, each lined up next to each other, the view of the lush paddy fields is amazing. It's a real visual treat for urban dwellers grown up in the concrete jungles.

Bada Bagh is managed by an organic farmer Syed Ghani Khan who has collected over 600 varieties of paddy seeds and is spearheading the message of 'Save our Rice Campaign'.

It is very difficult to catch this young and energetic farmer, as he is always surrounded by farmers, who come to him to get the new variety of seed that he has archived, but as the adage goes; when there is a will there is a way.



Talking to Ghani Khan at length helps to construct the picture of a farmer who is trying to revive the lost legacy of traditional paddy plants through organic method of farming. He is planting paddy seeds and retrieves them and archives them in his museum for posterity. He is also distributing them to farmers for promoting the cause of 'Save our Rice Campaign'.

Like most converted organic farmers, Ghani tells his story in a humble way. "I was studying archaeology and wanted to become a curator of a museum, when fate struck and my father passed away. As the eldest son of an Indian family, I was called to take his place and take care of the family and manage the family farm. I was 22 then, my four brothers were all in their teens," he said.

Describing about the Bada Bagh, Ghani says, this place was bequeathed to his family by the great king Tippu Sultan and till recently was known for its tasteful variety of mangoes.

“We were dry land farmers. Then the Krishnaraja Sagar dam was built and we all had the Cauvery water. Most of the farmers chopped down the mango trees and planted rice in large scale. With this started wide spread hybrid cultivation and the region lost almost all the traditional rice variety that then existed.”

"Initially I too started with hybrid farming but one day I fainted while spraying chemicals on the crop. That made me think about alternative method of farming. I wondered if it was possible to do farming without chemicals. This event actually started my journey towards organic farming.”

Ghani Khan who is now an organic farmer for a little over 10 years says while hybrids have outstanding qualities, the ability to reproduce themselves is clearly not one of them. In his effort to shrug off modern hybrid rice seeds and return to more nutritious and health traditional rice seed, he narrates his experience candidly.

"Once my uncle brought a variety of paddy seed that I didn't recognize, I planted it and kept asking him and others about it but none knew anything about it. Then one day an agricultural scientist visited our farm and he was able to identify it. He told that it was a drought resistant variety of paddy that was traditionally grown in Mysore - Mandya region but has been lost in our collective memory.”

This prompted a spark in Ghani Khan's funnel and he embarked upon the idea to go after tracing all the paddy seeds that were getting lost. His curiosity developed into the eagerness to collect all such rice variety and save them for posterity.

He started collecting what was locally available first. He then moved to the adjoining states of Kerala, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Maharashtra.

In a span of 8 years, Ghani Khan collected over 600 varieties of rice seeds. Each variety has distinct flavors, and come in many different and unique colors, sizes, and shapes.

Ghani Khan started archiving them by giving new found number to each of such variety. As he didn't know the name of the seed, he developed his distinct style of labeling; Ghani Khan New Found Number- GKNF 786 / 2013. He has a wide diversity of wetland, dry-land, medicinal, aromatic, irrigated variety of rice seeds.

Ghani is maintaining different paddy strains to keep alive the evolutionary processes. He has developed skills in the art of seed production and has the ability to select the best seeds.

"I conserve them in the field each year, I plant, multiply and save all the seeds, also give them to farmers who assure will be saving them and returning me twice the amount."

"As a matter of principles I don't give the seeds to the companies developing rice seeds...I know farmers are more genuine... even though it means a loss each year, but I am not doing it for sales, it's my hobby my passion. I always wanted to be museum curator, and, now, I am a curator of a living museum", his face chuckles with a bloated smile.

Ghani Khan, lives in a large joint family, one brother has moved for livelihood to Bangalore and one more is a qualified technician, one helps him in the field. He manages his family farm of 15 acres with the support of other family members. He is not sure when the division of the land will happen in his family what will be left for him in future. He hopes his children will take interest and involve themselves in the farming. He is not confident that they will ever do that.

Beyond all those regular challenges of farming, Ghani Khan holds the rare distinction of having a 'living museum' of which he is the proud curator. A museum where every variety of paddy seeds conserved narrates a story of its own; history, location, lineage, features, benefits etc.

Ghani's concern for conservation of biodiversity has in fact got many farmers interested in traditional varieties. His farm in the outskirts of his village has grown into one of the largest experimental restoration plots, drawing visitors from villages far and near.

More than 2000 farmers have taken seeds from him and he is on the verge of setting up a trust and getting things a bit more organized. His experiment has enthralled Scientists and Officials, who have applauded his venture.

India being a diversity country has a plethora of traditional paddy varieties which are nutritious and developed over centuries. The traditional strains are more resistant to drought and could be an answer to the climate change. So saving them is a great act of service to the nation.

Ghani's story is a tale of a farmer who with a bit of imagination and hard work has made his name encrypted in the record books. With over 600 paddy variety and with a mission of creating more, Ghani khan has become an institution in himself. It would be joke to call him just an ordinary paddy farmer.