

# PADDY

SAVE OUR RICE CAMPAIGN

No. 27 & 28, July 2015



## THE SILENCE OF THE PADDIES!

This morning when I sat down to complete the lead article for paddy, I casually opened my social media account and found this beautiful photograph shared on fb by Usha ( my friend and colleague, who coordinates the Save Our Rice Campaign nationally). I looked at the photo with joy mingled with sadness welling inside me. I had the epiphany, watching the smiling children bathed in the paddy fields, playing in the mud and water merrily, framed beautifully among the lush green paddy stalks, that for this alone we need to keep our rice paddies free of toxins and other contamination.

The paddy fields are our life blood; they are the wealth and legacy of our children. These lovely verdant fields were in the past the providers of safe, healthy, wholesome food for our children, the healthy playgrounds for their growing years, the oxygen tanks for their young lungs and the source of pure water to drink, to bathe and for their growing limbs to swim and frolic in. They were the wonder world full of diverse life forms (with dragon flies, birds, frogs, tadpoles, fishes and beautiful aquatic plants). These unbelievably beautiful agri-ecosystems were also the inspiration for sublime art, music, literature and photography. They were also the schools where children grew up learning how to work with the land, climate, plants and animals. Our erstwhile paddy fields were all this and more!

Today along with birds and fishes our children have also fled from our paddies. The paddies have become silent lands with no laughter or music, sparsely peopled, heavily machined and liberally sprayed with toxins. In our current paradigm, governed solely by the mantra of productivity, we have turned our paddy fields into mere economic machines pumped with toxins and synthetic chemicals, devoid of diversity and other life forms. Today, they are no more the growing grounds of our children; instead these have become poisonous zones from where we have to keep the children away.

On the other hand our children have been made into programmed machines confined within homes and schools, to grow up into adults who can take over this productivity apparatus.



**Children frolicking in paddy fields**

Children are increasingly found to have learning disabilities and problems ranging from disruptive behaviours to allergies to depression and much more. For all this we provide them the modern day panacea of pills and prescriptions. Research in many parts of the world has established that children (and adults) will be less prone to depression when in regular contact with dirt. Other studies have found that children growing up in organic farms tend to have fewer allergies and other health problems in comparison with children who are growing in cities. Also no research needs to tell us that children who play, swim and frolic freely are happier!

Therefore, we need to rethink this paradigm, supposedly created for our own well being, which is on one hand poisoning our lands and waters and ruining the health and happiness of our children. We wish for a future when our lands, waters and eco systems are pure and pristine and our children are free and unfettered. Inspired to work harder, to continue with the campaign to Save Our Rice!

With deep gratitude to the unknown photographer who reminded us so simply yet so profoundly why we do what we do!

**Paddy team**

*PS: Unable to give photo credit as we were not able to locate the identity of the photographer*

## SAVE OUR RICE -THE CAMPAIGN, THE WORK AND LOOKING AHEAD....

### How it all began!

We began the Save Our Rice campaign at Kumbalangi in 2004 , the second international year of rice with a pledge to conserve ecologically bio-diverse rice ecosystems and traditional paddy varieties and promote traditional rice among consumers. Many groups and people working on sustainable agriculture gathered in the scenic village of Kumbalangi to resolve to “save our rice”.

The Campaign partners who began the work (and continue into its tenth year) are Thanal in Kerala, CREATE in Tamilnadu and Sahaja Samrudha in Karnataka. The campaign decided to focus on ecologically bio diverse paddy farming, revival of paddy seeds, policy framework for conservation of paddy lands, revival of paddy culture and pesticide free paddy cultivation. The Campaign took off in each state in a different form, and different threads of work flourished. In retrospect, the campaign and the campaigners co-evolved through successes of some initiatives, learnt from the failures of some other threads of work and were many times led by external drivers and challenges.

Since the first meeting almost ten years back the Campaign has achieved many goals, it brought the idea of traditional paddy seeds into the consciousness of people and state governments in the campaign states, it has succeeded in generating interest amongst 1000s of paddy farmers to grow traditional paddy. The Campaign has created many replicable models of paddy land conservation, ecologically bio-diverse and economically sustainable organic paddy cultivation and large scale seed conservation.

### Paddy land protection:

In Kerala, where the crisis of paddy land conversion for non paddy farming and non agriculture use of land was ( and continues to be) an acute problem , the focus was protection of paddy and wetlands. Various stakeholders including the government, civil society, farmers groups and many others came together and had many discussions, debates, consultations about the need for wetland conservation. Also the emerging water and food crisis in Kerala and awareness creation by civil society along with

involvement of policy makers resulted in the paddy land protection act in Kerala. The Campaign was one of the stakeholders involved in the process from the civil society.

The paddy land act was promulgated in Kerala , however, the implementation of the Act is very challenging and paddy lands continue to be converted for non agricultural and/or non paddy uses. It is a constant process to sensitize the public and the powers that be that protection of paddy lands is absolutely essential.

On the seed front the paddy seed conservation efforts along with harvest festivals, rice melas, yatras, have resulted in widespread awareness about traditional rice varieties and the need for traditional paddy conservation and promotion. Demand for traditional rice is also increasing among the consumers. This has created a ripple effect where many organizations, educated young people , even celebrities have got involved in the revival of the lost food culture based on paddy ecosystem in the state.

### Seed diversity blocks of Karnataka:

In Karnataka, where the coordinating partner Sahaja Samrudha had extensive prior experience in seed conservation work, automatically the campaign veered towards seed conservation work. One of the innovations in seed conservation work, introduced in Karnataka by Sahaja Samrudha, which has been picked up by many farmers and numerous groups is creation of seed diversity blocks. This entails cultivating many different traditional



varieties in small patches, separated from each other, in a small area.

The idea is to propagate many varieties of seeds and also pick the best variety through selection. The seed diversity blocks and the harvest day celebrations associated with them also had the additional advantage that these proved to be excellent demo plots to observe and study the performance of many varieties. They also motivated (and continue to motivate) many more farmers to grow traditional varieties. Over the years these seed diversity blocks have become an excellent method for conserving 100s of varieties in one location at a very reasonable cost.

Another important development is the recognition of traditional seeds by the agriculture department and the introduction of the same through the seed supply system for the organic villages initiative of the state government. The campaign has also motivated many young farmers to become seed savers and experts on organic rice cultivation.

#### **The Nel Thiruvizha of Thiruvaroor:**

In Tamilnadu the Campaign that began with multiplication of a few varieties and training on organic paddy cultivation to interested farmers took off in the form of an annual paddy seed festival. The small seed mela that took birth in 2007, from a suggestion from Nammalwar Ayya (organic agriculture scientist) with nine varieties and a handful of farmers has now grown into one of the marquee events of the rice calendar of the kaveri delta . The seed mela in May 2015 was attended by over 5000 farmers who took home seeds for cultivation. Each farmer takes home two kilos of one variety of traditional paddy seeds from over 140 varieties on offer. They sign a pledge to grow the variety under organic conditions and return four kilos of seed the next year. Over the years around 60% of the farmers have been returning the seeds as promised. Many more have been sharing these seeds with their neighbours, friends and relatives thereby creating a multiplier effect, which the campaign hasn't been able to fully quantify.

Most of the traditional varieties are from Tamilnadu but there are also many varieties from Kerala, Karnataka and some other states. These varieties are produced,

multiplied by the Campaign team through the year so that it is ready during the seed festival in May. This annual Nel thiruvizha (which means seed festival in Tamil) has become a prominent event in the annual calendar of the paddy farmers in the kaveri delta. Similar melas are being organized in many parts of the state by other groups after observing how seeds inspire farmers. Not only paddy seeds , traditional vegetable seeds are also being developed and shared among farmers by some groups in the network. The Nel Thiruvizha also received recognition from the state government , with the government department asking officials and farmers to attend the seed mela in the last two years.

#### **Naba diganto paddies of Sundarbans:**

In every state the campaign evolved organically, many times our plans were in line and sometimes we found ourselves following the evolution. More often than not we found that a judicious combination of planning and coordinating at the national campaign secretariat along with being responsive to ground realities and the external situation was the right combination for an optimal approach in each region.

It was in 2010, we ventured into West Bengal, after having worked in the three southern states of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and the eastern state of Orissa.

It is in West Bengal that we found the ground (literally and figuratively) ripe and ready for creating ecologically bio-diverse paddy eco-systems. The southern states where the campaign is working are all highly developed and the farmers have relatively larger land holdings except in Kerala. In the Sunderbans area of West Bengal, the land holdings of the farmers, we found, were extremely small, most

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- Save Our Rice Campaign

people had 1-2 bighas of lands (approximately 33-66 cents). The rice farmers were looking for a sustainable livelihood and viable income from their small parcels of land. This was exactly the challenge the Campaign hoped to address. The farmers were also poor and had low resources. A couple of innovative farmers along with the Campaign team came up with the idea that they need to re-introduce the traditional mixed farming system with paddy vegetables, small farm animals, a pond and fisheries.

Over the last few years over a 100 farmers across three villages have taken up this model. The key here is that in an area where farmers were previously using high amounts of pesticide, with almost no precautions and scarce understanding about the quantity to use, organic farming with traditional paddy varieties under an ecologically bio-diverse system is catching on. Most farmers have reported over all increase in productivity and more income.

**From seed to food:** The journey that began with training farmers in cultivating traditional paddy under organic/natural methods has traversed a long way with many learnings and realizations. One of our first realizations was that farmers were inspired by **seed**. It brought back memories of the seeds their parents or grandparents used, memories of favourite foods - payasams or aval or bhaat made with traditional varieties- and it inspired awe and the desire to revive and promote the varieties.

This theme or motif has repeated itself in state after state, with farmer after farmer, slowly but steadily. Many farmers regretfully don't try traditional seeds citing economic constraints or unavailability of land or fear of taking risks or changing from their current mode. However, most farmers love the idea of



these seeds and the revival. Many, who have grown it without much expectations have been pleasantly surprised with the climate resilience of many traditional varieties. Anecdotal evidence has come in from various farmers about their crops withstanding drought and/or flood whereas the modern HYVs (high yielding varieties) are unable to withstand climate vagaries.

However, once the campaign succeeded in propagating, promoting and conserving seeds we realized that (it is commonsensical, however, some things strike us when it actually happens) this shift to traditional varieties of rice can continue and spread only if traditional rice varieties are adopted by consumers.

So, what we need is memories of these rices to be invoked and /or new habits with these traditional varieties have to be created among consumers. An environmentalist had famously said that as forest eco systems are best preserved by leaving them untouched, agro ecosystems can be preserved only by eating the diversity. We will only grow what we eat! So true, after the initial enthusiasm of rediscovering these seeds, the farmers associated the Campaign and the Campaign team realized that we need people to love and consume these rices as the farmers love to grow them.

The campaign in Karnataka, which was way ahead in seed saving took the lead in

organizing rice melas. The melas held initially in Bangalore and then in other cities featured all the rices, raw and cooked. Farmers came for the mela to sell their stock and talk to the customers. Cooking demos and tasting sessions were held. Slowly the traditional rices are being picked up by many urbanites who haven't previously tried these. This is a regular endeavour to create more awareness about traditional rices, thereby generating demand and consequently more farmers growing it.

Similarly traditional food festivals in Tamilnadu and Kerala have generated a lot of interest among students, ordinary consumers, hoteliers and media and the idea is being picked up by many more groups.

### Looking ahead

As we look forward to the tenth year of the Campaign, we realize that much more needs to be achieved. Having said that, we are gratified to note that the campaign has had a multiplier effect and spread beyond the partner groups and first level participants. We are conserving over 1000 traditional paddy varieties across four states. We have tens of thousands of farmers growing these varieties using organic methods. We have a growing rank

of consumers who seek unpolished traditional rices for their regular meals, sweets and snacks. The state governments in the Campaign states are recognizing the work and realizing the worth of conserving these varieties and their importance in these times of impending climate change.

However, there is a long way to go. We need to build a robust brand for our rices so that we can ensure quality and consistency to consumers. We need to convert more consumers to consume traditional rice, thereby, helping their health, ecosystem health and farmer sustainability.

We also need to work very hard to eliminate the rampant use of pesticides in paddy. Rice paddy cultivation does not require pesticides; even the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has unequivocally stated it. However, most paddy farmers continue to use pesticides causing enormous toxin load in the system. Paddy without pesticides should become the prevailing paradigm.

Rice paddy lands in most rice growing states are under siege, from industry and also from farmers, who want to move out of paddy farming, which they feel is un-remunerative.

## AN EXCERPT FROM "PLASTIC SURGERY AND LORD GANESHA"

Claude Alvares

One striking example involves the maintenance of the biodiversity of the rice plant and other domesticated crops. It is without doubt that Adivasis and peasant farmers were responsible for the creation and maintenance of some of 300,000 varieties of rice. This is a phenomenal figure and does indicate a very high level of understanding of seed selection and breeding techniques. I confirmed on a visit to IRRI several decades ago that 72,000 rice accessions in their possession were (without the consent of the farmers who reared them) collected from India. There are likewise at least 60,000 of rice varieties at the Central Rice Research Institute in Cuttack which I also visited. The late rice scientist Dr. R.H. Richharia maintained 19,000 rice varieties in situ at the Madhya Pradesh Rice Research Institute at Jabalpur in MP. Even today, Dr Debal Deb, a single scientist working without any infrastructure, maintains over 900 varieties of rice at his research centre in Odisha.

The breeding of rice varieties is a dynamic process. Dr. Richharia – himself a leading rice breeder – found he had to revise his opinion about adivasis' knowledge of science when he tried out certain seeds which he got from these farmers but which he was unable to reproduce. He discovered that these were male sterile lines. He had no idea of how the adivasis had come to know about the existence of these varieties (which modern breeders are still struggling with) but they knew what these naturally occurring varieties were meant for and how they ought to be used in their rice fields to create new varieties.

Likewise, none of the so called "saline" varieties of rice were created by modern science; they were selected by farmers in coastal belts from varieties that had adapted to those environments. In fact, the International Rice Research Institute has produced after 50 years of research only two major successes, IR8 and IR36. This can be compared with the hundreds of varieties generated by India's peasant and tribal communities, and they served hundreds of different uses. In so far as they are pure sorts, "selections", they represent knowledge or science of the permanent variety or stream. The plant varieties from current science labs are contributions to seasonal science, since they have no staying power but get mowed down by nature and its devices largely because of their narrow genetic base.

Quoted from the paper delivered by Dr. Claude Alvares, at the 38th Indian Social Science Congress, AP University, Vizagapatnam, 29 March-2 April, 2015

Sourced from : <http://www.typewriterguerilla.com/2015/04/plastic-surgery-and-lord-ganesha/>

Paddy lands are not only agri-eco systems they are also wetlands and our precious water reservoirs. Most Indian states including the erstwhile water and rain rich paddy growing states are faced with depleting water tables. In this scenario , converting more paddy lands into non paddy use and destroying the wetlands is seriously detrimental for our water security. We need serious and immediate policy attention towards this.

We are also hoping to bring the eastern India paddy growing states into the Campaign. This region of India is the cradle of rice , with rich diversity that is dwindling at a rapid pace. Seed and wetland conservation to preserve the rich rice heritage is an urgent need. As mentioned in the editorial, more than anything else it is for the future generations that



the Campaign exists. These varieties and agri-systems are their heritage and we owe it to them to protect and hand over that legacy to them.

*Sreedevi Lakshmi Kutty with inputs from Usha S*

### **KOLE WETLANDS BIRD STUDY - A GLIMPSE**

The Kole wetlands is one of the largest and highly productive wetlands in Kerala. The International Convention of Wetlands recently designated Kole wetlands as a critical one and prioritized it under category one. Water birds are the most important component of any wetlands and they represent one of the most obvious bio-indicators of the health and diversity of these critical ecosystems.

A study on the diversity and abundance of the avifauna in different rice ecosystems (which are wetland ecosystems) in Kerala & Tamilnadu carried out in 2013 focused on assessing the birds depending on these unique rice ecosystems in the farming seasons as well as in non-farming seasons. Kole wetlands were one of the regions selected for the study. Farming seasons recorded maximum number of species from the regions. A total of 246 species of birds were recorded from the study area during this season. Kole wetlands alone recorded 159 birds during the season. The total count of the birds from the Kole wetlands was 52649 in number, where as the total count of birds from the different regions selected for the study was 65230 in number. This result shows the biological richness of the wetland to accommodate and sustain birdlife.

The study also witnessed the threats faced and changes happening in the wetlands, such as reclamation of the land, changes in land use pattern, problems related with unplanned development without considering the richness and species diversity of the area, use of chemicals and pesticides in farming and poaching of the bird species. A project is being conceived to create awareness about this rich eco-system among the young and to conserve its biodiversity.

( The full article will appear in PADDY next issue )

### **FARMER WEAVES SAREE FROM PADDY STRAW**

Muvva Chinna Krishnamurthy of Venkannapalem of Parchur mandal in Prakasam district wove an entire saree only with paddy straw and weeds. Belonging to rice farming family he had always struggled to dispose off straw. Then he learnt that by dipping the stalks into water he could get them in the form of strings and then the strings could be rolled together. Then he discovered that adding weeds made the thread stronger . After which he began weaving the saree; it took him 30 months to weave the complete saree. The saree which was displayed during an event conducted by Indian Council for Agriculture Research wowed the audience. Mr.Krishnamoorthy plans to weave other accessories like a blouse etc with paddy straw.

Adapted from: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/farmer-weaves-saree-from-rice-straw/article7096659.ece>.

## THE NINTH NEL THIRUVIZHA AT ADIRENGAM!



The annual 'Nel Thiruvizha' in Adirengam, Thiruthuraipoondi, Thiruvārūr took place on May 30 and 31. This was the 9<sup>th</sup> consecutive year that the paddy festival was organized by the Save Our Rice campaign, CREATE and Thanal.

The festival featured 153 varieties of traditional paddy seeds. Farmers from all districts of Tamilnadu attended the paddy festival to collect seeds, to return seeds into the pool, meet fellow farmers, to listen to the various sessions on sustainable paddy farming to insect management to marketing to genetically modified crops. The total no of farmers who registered were about 5182. Of this about 4800 farmers carried back two kilogrammes of seed to grow and multiply and many will come back to return four kilos next year. Approximately 70% of the farmers come back the next year to return the promised four kilos of seed. In addition many of them share these seeds with their neighbours, friends and extended family, thereby creating a multiplier effect which far outstrips the initial sharing. This annual event has become a not to miss occasion for many traditional rice farmers in Tamil Nadu .

This year's Nel Thiruvizha had as its guests the Planning Board Vice Chairperson Shanta Sheela Nair, actress and director Rohini, herself a crusader for safe food and Kavitha Kuruganti the Convener of the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA ), Dr.Narasimha Reddy from Chenetha Weaves, AP, and many other farmer leaders, farmers

and people from all walks of life and the campaign team .

The increasing realization that traditional paddy rice varieties are a solution for the many crises we are facing today with food, farming and climate change is dawning upon farmers and the lay public, slowly but certainly. This is reflected in the increasing popularity of traditional rice varieties like Mappilai samba, Kattuyanam, Kavuni and numerous others. Many farmers have also branched into producing value added products with these rices like beaten rice ( aval) , puffed rice ( pori) , puffed rice ladoos ( pori urundai) , rice flour etc. Finally, keeping the spirit of using traditional rices the Thiruvizha, on both days, featured delicious curd rice, sambar rice, puliyogarai and variety rice with traditional rices like mappilai samba and jeeraka samba. A beautiful festival, embodying the spirit of the ever-regenerating seed, the Nel Thiruvizha will come again next year!

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## **SAVE OUR RICE – PADDY FARMERS OF SUNDARBANS NEED YOUR HELP URGENTLY!**

All of us love our rice and many of us would like to support our farmers. This is a critical time when the paddy farmers of Sundarbans, a climatically fragile zone, have suffered catastrophic damage due to continuous and heavy rains. There has been enormous damage to paddy seeds and seedlings in Jogeshgunj area of Sundarbans. An estimated 2650 farmers, in 24 villages and 5 gram panchayats have lost seeds/seedlings across more than 2710 acres; most of these were traditional paddy varieties. Paddy is the only crop in the area and this loss will jeopardize the entire livelihood of the affected farmers. The Save Our Rice campaign is raising support for these farmers. At least Rs 50,000 worth of seeds need to be procured for the distressed farmers.

This is an URGENT appeal from the Save Our Rice Campaign to one and all to help, any amount will come in handy and the situation is urgent. We need the assistance ASAP. We will send you a full report of where and how the funds were used. If you would like to know more about the situation or how to transfer funds please inbox us or contact Manju of Save Our Rice campaign at 0471-2727150 or email at [indianricecampaign@gmail.com](mailto:indianricecampaign@gmail.com).

### **JHUMKA BASMATI CAN WITHSTAND HEAVY RAINS**

Bareilly based farmer Anil Sawhney has developed a variety of basmati rice through organic farming, which can withstand heavy showers. The roots of the plant are strong and can withstand rains and are quite pest-proof. He has been working on the crop since 2010 and claims that he has used no external inputs for developing this crop and that the rice is delicious.

Adapted from : <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bareilly/Rain-has-no-effect-on-this-Basmati/articleshow/46587179.cms>

### **CLIMATE FRIENDLY GM RICE ?**

Recently there was a report that GM rice which can reduce methane emissions may be ready for commercialization. Atmospheric methane the second most important greenhouse gas and rice paddies are supposedly a major source of methane emissions. The scientists who have developed this GM rice claim that this rice genetically engineered with barley gene produces low levels of methane emissions, while retaining its productivity and yields.

However, a commentary in Nature journal by Paul L. E. Bodelier of the Netherlands Institute of Ecology says that long term and frequent measurement of the impact of methane reduction should be estimated to compare with other methane reduction strategies. Also he added that the long term consequences of lower carbon emissions on soil composition and microbes needs to be assessed. Over and above that concerns regarding GM food, access to seeds should also be examined.

Adapted from <http://gmwatch.org/news/latest-news/16322>

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