PADDY

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE SAVE OUR RICE CAMPAIGN

NO. 1 • OCTOBER 2008

Editorial

SAVE OUR RICE

The first issue of the newsletter PADDY has just sprouted. In its growth towards the vast section of readers we are attempting to reach out, we believe it will spread its grains - of a better understanding of the issues that it seeks to address.

PADDY is an outcome of the Indian Save our Rice Campaign, a campaign that started in the year 2004 with the Indian Workshop on Rice (December 2004) held in the most tranquil wetland village – Kumbalangi near Kochi in Kerala. This workshop which brought together more than 100 people from about 50 organisations in 10 rice growing states of India, was primarily to share the concerns over rice, which are slowly giving farmers all over Asia a kind of deep unrest. We were inspired by the Asian-wide Save our Rice Campaign, which was facilitated by Pesticide Action Network Asia-Pacific (PAN AP). Thanal became part of this regional network, which aimed at protecting rice not only as a staple crop, but as a way of living for Asian communities since centuries.

Rice that belonged to this region of the world, and whose heritage and ownership is shared and placed deeply in the lives, livelihoods, cultures and practices of millions of farmers across countries in Asia is now being threatened with appropriation and distortion. In 2004, when the international agencies – Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) - celebrated the International Year of Rice, naturally the world should have rejoiced. So, here after all was a great effort to address food security and give the worlds' largest feeding crop its due. But when Devinder Sharma, the well-known food policy analyst in his inaugural address at the Kumbalangi workshop asked the delegates "Do you know where the inaugural ceremony of the International Year of Rice was held ?", we did not see the politics in it. The answer came "Switzerland!" But then why not India, or Thailand or any other Asian country where all the rice grows and gets eaten, and why Switzerland, where rice is neither cultivated nor consumed? Switzerland is not home to rice, but it is home to the new owner of rice!! Syngenta – one of the worlds largest agri-business TNCs also happens to be one who mapped and applied for patents for 30,000 genes of rice! So, this whole new science of genomics or genetic science is creating a new breed of owners, armed with a whole gamut of laws and global treaties – TRIPS, IPR regimes, and with their presence in the decision making tables of all major developing countries, they have their way. This is one way the TNCs can be owners of rice. The other way is to simply manipulate rice so that it is no more the rice (or the lakhs of varieties) we had. Rice is genetically modified into some other genetic code to give it some "desirable" property, and then the TNCs would have retained the shape and form of rice, but it would become their own invention – an innovation that can be patented. So, ownership goes into their custody.

Any threat on rice is a threat on the food sovereignty of the region. This everybody knows. But what many of us in India do not realise is that a threat on rice is also a threat on the ecology of the region – this includes its most basic of life support systems – water, air, biodiversity, culture and nature of human and other life forms in the region. And this threat, we shall never comprehend unless the change is made and we head for a disaster – an end of our ways of life.

And on the domestic front, just look around at the state of our food producing lands. For instance, we were so worried at the abysmal state of Kerala's paddy land. From 8 lakh hectare area in 1971 to 2.7 lakh hectare in 2001. Rice sufficiency in Kerala stands at a shocking 12%. And then came the big shock. In one of the Rice Campaign workshops in Tanjavore, the rice bowl of Tamilnadu, it was revealed that this district which had 32 lakh ha of paddy lands lost 8 lakh ha in just 20 years. The loss was more than the total rice

lands in Kerala! It's as if one state is wiped off the food map. It's like saying no more food for a population of at least 2 crore people. What kind of self-sufficiency are we moving towards? Where did all these lands go? Most of the time, the agriculture lands got converted for some so-called developmental needs!

The Save our Rice Campaign was started to address these issues as intensively and as widely as possible. We were not going to talk only to farmers. Why should they alone be responsible? Is not the whole society – consumers, teachers, students, millers, traders, food processors, politicians, each one of us responsible? Is not ensuring food security the highest development priority in the country? With this understanding and a holistic approach to the many issues, we shall discuss the various facets of rice in PADDY, every once in three months. We have been in the ground for 4 years now. But all is not said if we are not to say that in the last four years of our work, especially in the states of Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka and to some extent in Orissa and West Bengal, we have been able to raise some of these concerns and each of these concerns have been raised to such shrill and depth that soon we had many organisations, cutting across sectors discussing this and some positive results achieved. The Rice Mandrams (Clubs) and Seed Bank in the Thiruvaroor district in Tamilnadu, the revival of traditional seed conservation in Wyanad in Kerala, the declaration of Kerala as a GM-free state by the state government, the active GM-free campaign taken up by groups in West Bengal are just a few of the movements we have been able to trigger.

Now we felt that a newsletter that reaches out to more people is needed, and more discussions must ensue so that the debate goes on the field and in all sectors and finally makes matters heard in the highest law making bodies – the legislative assemblies and the Indian parliament. PADDY is a humble effort in this direction.

Editors

RICE AND THE FOOD CRISIS

by Sreedevi Lakshmikutty

INTRODUCTION

Since the last few months the global food crisis has held centre stage, with governments, international organisations, the common man on the street, and civil society discussing the shocking and catastrophic rise in prices of staple food grains. Among the staple grains the situation with rice is critical as it is the staple for half of the world's population and of these 2 billion people live on less than $2 per day; therefore even a small rise in price can cause a sharp fall in income for the poorest of the poor. Rice is intrinsically a political commodity, treated as the bench mark of food security in many nations, with economic development and political stability closely linked to a sustainable supply of rice.

STRUCTURE OF RICE PRODUCTION. CONSUMPTION AND TRADE

The world rice production in 2007-2008 is estimated to be 428.7 million tonnes[1]. Interestingly, even though 50% of the rice grown goes to the market and is traded locally, only 7% (29.9 million tonnes) of all rice produced is internationally traded. However rice being a staple food for numerous countries (many of which are totally import dependant) it is yet very critical and prone to high levels of price instability. The top 10 rice producing countries are China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Japan, Philippines, and Brazil and together grow more than 75% of all rice grown in the world. China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Vietnam are also the top rice consumers of the world, whereas Philippines, Indonesia, Nigeria, EU and Saudi Arabia are the major importers of rice. In Asia rice is more than food, it is part of the culture and in many Asian languages the word for rice and food are synonymous, "anna" in Sanskrit being a case in point. Rice is arguably one of the most diverse cereals and it has been claimed that there are almost 1, 40,000 rice varieties[2].

THE GLOBAL SCENARIO

The price of rice has increased by 70% in the last year and since then doubled in the first three months of 2008 (in Asia). Since the crisis has escalated, countries like China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, India and Cambodia have either banned or restricted the export of rice – India has banned the export of all non-basmati varieties since. Therefore, countries like

Haiti, Philippines, Afghanistan, and many others, predominantly rice eaters, but not rice growers due to the strictures of neo-liberal market policies and structural adjustment prescriptions –which was to grow export cash crops and buy food grains - are in a lurch, their governments unable to import rice at the prevailing international rates, thereby facing threat of large scale hunger, and possibly massive civil unrest.

On one hand is this pathetic scenario of rice shortage and excessive price for the consumers, (ironically, 80% of rice consumers are small farmers), while on the other hand rice farmers are reeling under mounting debt and inadequate incomes due to the low price they are earning. However the other players in the rice market : the middle-men, the seed companies, the fertilizer giants, the grain traders, the retailers and finally the commodity traders on Wall Street, are making a killing, most of them have registered record profits during this period.

The Roots of the Crisis

One of the foremost reasons for the current situation is the policies dictated by the neo-liberal agenda which has brought farmers in many countries to their knees, unable to buy seeds, other inputs for farming, and perpetually in debt. Haiti, self sufficient in rice a few decades back, was literally forced to open its doors to rice imports to qualify for an International Monetary Fund bailout package. Cheap rice from the US flooded the Haitian market and the local production was wiped out in a decade. Since the last year the price of rice has risen by 50% and the average Haitian is on the verge of starvation[3]. In Asia a similar story is being played out in Philippines where the World Bank assured the government that the international market would take care of its rice needs, but today the Philippines government is unable to buy rice at the current inflated prices prevailing in the market.

At the global market level a couple of factors have contributed to significant instability in rice prices; one is the increased commodity trading in rice thereby leading to soaring futures prices; for example in the Thailand exchange the speculation on rice has tripled the number of contracts traded. The agro fuel boom is the second reason that is led to increase in price of rice (along with that of other grains).

Decreasing acreage under rice cultivation (in many countries) due to industrialization is forcing rice farmers to cultivate marginal low productivity lands reducing yields, income and food security. China alone has lost 3 million hectares of rice land to urbanization in the last decade[4]. Another phenomenon has been the transition to plantation agriculture displacing traditional rice farmers, in the name of achieving high productivity. Decreased rice procurement by the governments of Asian countries under the directive of the World Bank and IMF has led to considerably diminished rice stocks. Consequently, now when price of rice is shooting through the roof, these governments neither have sufficient buffer stock in their granaries nor are they able to buy rice in the market at the prevailing prices.

Yet another phenomenon that has occurred in Asia, as part of the green revolution, is the undue diligence with which hybrid rice has been promoted with the farmers and the consequent fall outs. Hybrid rice has been far from successful, however this has not deterred the companies selling hybrids seeds and with the current rice crisis they have renewed their efforts to influence governments in Asia. China, the main supplier of hybrid rice seed in Asia, is pushing this to grow its seed companies on one hand and on the other to ensure increased rice supplies to add to its diminishing rice stocks. This has also become a means for China to acquire new paddy lands in the neighbouring nations, ironically through buying out paddy farmers who have become indebted due to growing hybrid rice[5].

Situation in India

Behind China, India is the second largest grower of rice, which is the staple food of 65% of our billion plus population. India has had a record rice production at 96.43 million tonnes in 2007-08[6]. In spite of this we have also been impacted by the food crisis as the price of rice has risen considerably, however we are not as badly off as other Asian nations. We have been saved because of not being fully integrated with the global economy and, this is a pointer to us in the WTO talks to continue to maintain this stand. Since last year, India has also banned commodity futures trading in rice and wheat. However, the problems of replacement of paddy with plantation crops, degradation of soil and the economic un-viability of high input agriculture, scarcity of water due to over use of ground water in the last few decades, low procurement price of paddy, decreasing availability of land for paddy due to industrialization and urbanization continue to plague Indian paddy cultivators.

Way ahead

It is true that small-scale farmers in Asia have been ensuring the food security of their nations, even while they were loosing economically in recent years. The recent hike in price of rice has also not benefited the farmers. Nevertheless, they continue to produce paddy because rice is their life and livelihood. But if the present scenario continues, farmers will be forced to move out of paddy cultivation, and either sell off their lands or shift to more remunerative crops. This will be disastrous for the food security of the region. This calls for urgent state policies to support the small-scale farmers economically. Subsidy support equivalent to those offered to other cash crops is needed, ensuring remunerative price for paddy, giving direct income support and ensuring that big agri-business and industrial houses do not take over the control of agriculture land. It is also important to maintain the natural resource base as well as ensure production of rice which is safe and nutritious. The International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), an inter-governmental panel consisting of 400 scientists, international organisations and world governments has recommended that efforts to alleviate food insecurity should be directed towards small farmers in diverse eco-systems and should focus on making food more nutritious and cheap without degrading lands and eco-systems.

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[1] http://www.panap.net/uploads/media/The_Global_Food_Crisis_-_Hype_and_Reality.pdf

[2] Future of Rice 2006, Greenpeace

[3] http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=39

[4] http://www.safehaven.com/showarticle.cfm?id=10253&pv=1

[5] http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=551

[6] http://www.forbes.com/afxnewslimited/feeds/afx/2008/07/09/afx5197569.html

Sreedevi Lakshmikutty is a food and agriculture activist who volunteers with Thanal and the Association for India's Development (AID).

Grow Paddy and become Pauper

by Pandurang Hegde

Paddy farmers everywhere are facing the crunch and want to quit in favour of cash crops.

Recently, the minimum support price (MSP) for paddy for the kharif season was increased from Rs 745 to Rs 850 per quintal.

Though the Commission for Agriculture Costs and Prices (CACP) had recommended a revision in the MSP to Rs 1,000 per quintal, the Union finance minister did not pay heed to this proposal. Several state governments and political parties also had raised the same demand as it was essential to provide a remunerative price to the farmers.

But, the finance minister's adamant stand is an indication of a deeper malaise and prejudice against paddy farmers in the country. Rice is the staple crop for more than 70 per cent of Indians. It is grown in an area of 44 million hectares with a production of 90 million tonnes per year. India is the second largest producer of paddy in the world after China. Unlike wheat, paddy is grown in almost all states from Kashmir to Kerala, in different agro climatic zones.

Small and marginal farmers, who contribute 78 per cent of the total food production, cultivate paddy. These farmers have evolved numerous paddy varieties that suit dry lands and water logged saline regions. The country boasted to have had 30,000 varieties of paddy crops. Unfortunately, our failure to recognise the part they played in ensuring the country's food security has made many of the varieties to go extinct. Now, just 3,000 of them are said to be existing.

A look at the history of our agricultural policy in the last five decades indicates the gross neglect towards paddy cultivation. Because of this, the area under cultivation as well as the production has stagnated. In fact in some states like Kerala, the area under cultivation has shrunk from eight lakh hectares to two lakh hectares over the last three decades. The paddy fields have given way for cash crops and plantation crops. The high cost of paddy cultivation and the non-availability of agricultural labourers are the main reasons for this, but it is also essential to link these to the policy interventions from the state as well as Central governments that have systematically discouraged paddy cultivation.

The prejudiced attitude against paddy farmers is too glaring in the national agriculture policy. Under the National Food Security Mission (NFSM) the

government has allocated Rs 70 crore to increase paddy production for 2007-08. But, allocations for horticultural crops for the same period is Rs 1150 crore! Obviously, the policy of providing subsidies for cash and horticultural crops is bound to have a negative impact on paddy cultivation. Why should the farmer grow paddy when he can get subsidy of Rs 20,000 per acre to grow banana?

The paddy farmers in the country except from Punjab and Haryana are incurring heavy losses. According to the estimates of CACP, in Bihar the net income from one hectare of paddy cultivation was Rs 60 in 1981-82. In the year 2003-04 the farmer has incurred a loss of Rs 1,264 per hectare. Though the costs of paddy cultivation may vary from region to region, it is a common phenomenon that paddy farmers are facing the crunch and want to quit in favour of cash crops. This is a clear indication of how systematically the government policies have forced the paddy farmers to quit farming.

Ironically, the paddy farmer who is responsible for growing the staple crop to feed the country is penalised in favour of those who grow cash crops. This, coupled with the increasing input costs, has been the major reason for the stagnation in paddy production and yield.

It is doubtful whether our political leaders would initiate steps to rectify the policies that have led to the present dismal scenario.

But, both the Central and state government need to intervene in the agricultural sector to rectify the problem. They need to take steps to build the confidence of paddy farmers. The marginal and small farmers from underdeveloped states like Chhathisgarh and Bihar are the backbone of the country's paddy sector. Instead of concentrating on states like Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh to produce the staple paddy crop, authorities need to involve farmers from underdeveloped regions, including those who grow diverse paddy varieties in rain-fed lands, in the process.

In this context, a decision to provide a higher MSP of Rs 1,000 a quintal will go a long way in ensuring food security of the country.

The writer is a paddy farmer from the Western Ghats, Karnataka. Sourced from Deccan Herald, Bangalore, June 24, 2008.

CHARULATA AND HER PUFFED RICE

Dr Balaram Sahu

"Charulata" an old wise lady
Loves to eat much rice.
Rice is her staple food
That keeps her health nice.

She gets her rice puffed
"Murhi" is the local name
It is the popular countryside snack
The brand has its own fame.

She often puffs the rice
Her product is claimed as best
It is also salted a bit
To give it a special taste.

Puffed rice are light
Eating them is easier.
She explains her research
How she uses "Murhi" further.

"Murhi" is the grain saver
Useful in many other ways.
She shares her innovations
How "Murhi" preserves grains
For long many days.

She stocks her dried grains
In jute bags she made
Maggots often invade them
A lot of loss on her trade.

Simple solutions she finds
To preserve rice well.
A layer of "Murhi" in every bag
Describes her novel tale.

Insects eat the soft "Murhi"
Never touch the grain
Rice grains are left intact
What a beautiful brain!

(Mrs Charulata Biswal lives in village Lodhani, in Kamakhyanagar subdivision of Dhenkanal district in Orissa. She uses "Murhi" or "puffed Rice"- a very low cost, ecofriendly technique to preserve her scented rice from pests. She does not use other leaves like neem or negundo to preserve scented rice lest it should mask the original flavor of the rice.)

Genetically Engineered Rice - Part I

by Karsten Wolff

Rice is the world's most important staple crop, growing in over 100 different countries. More than 90 % of the world production comes from Asia. Rice is the basis for the livelihoods of more than 2 billion people in Asia; more than 1 billion farmers across the region make a living out of rice cultivation, most of them small-scale farmers.

However, for Asians rice is much more than a commodity or staple crop: "Rice means life to us in Asia. It is the cornerstone of our food systems, our languages, our cultures and our livelihoods for thousands of years." The spiritual significance is also expressed in the Sanskrit term for rice as "the one who supports humankind".

Rice is a cereal with an extraordinary number of varieties: the Vedas mention 500,000; recent statistics talk about 100,000 varieties. Traditional varieties are adapted to their respective local conditions and serve multiple purposes: besides the basic use as a food crop, rice is also known to be a medicinal plant – useful for pregnant and lactating women; in addition it is also used to relieve rheumatism, headache, lung diseases and epilepsy.

The traditional, multi-functional agricultural systems in Asia changed with the introduction of so-called "high-yielding varieties" (HYV) of rice during the Green Revolution. In order to realise a higher yield, these dwarf varieties have to be cultivated in monocultures with high inputs of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and irrigation, therefore they should rightfully be called "high-input varieties" (HIV).

The massive introduction of HIVs led to an increased adoption of industrialised agriculture, and subsequently leading to the erosion of biodiversity in the rice fields as well as the farmers' wisdom about seeds and agriculture. Farmers who couldn't afford to buy the expensive seeds and inputs every season ended up in a cycle of indebtedness and eventually many lost their lands and livelihoods. The Green Revolution opened up huge business opportunities for agrochemical Transnational Corporations (TNCs), selling fertilisers, pesticides and increasingly seeds. The developments did not stop with the HIVs; the companies who profited have begun experimenting with genetically engineered rice. GE rice is the next frontier that the corporations are targeting to conquer, riding on the rice farmers of Asia. *(To be continued)*

Karsten Wolff is working for Thanal since early 2007, with a main focus on genetic engineering, food sovereignty and intellectual property rights.

Events

SIRSI Rice Festival

Farmers from different parts of Karnataka met in Banavasi, Uttara Kannada district, under the banner of Bhatta Utsav (paddy festival) in the first week of June. For the first time, its distinct deep water rice varieties were revered as farmers from different parts of Karnataka gathered to exchange knowledge on native paddy. River Varada is the lifeline of Banavasi, which had 67 varieties of rice three decades ago. Now only 10-15 varieties of local paddy are grown.

The two-day convention on paddy cultivation was organised by Sahaja Samruddha in coordination with Thanal, Kerala and CREATE, Tamil Nadu, Gram Vikas and BAIF along with local help. The festival which was organised as part of 'Save our Rice Campaign' was a resistance to the entry of genetically modified (GM) crops. The meet focused on three factors - distinctiveness and importance of native varieties with all their farmer-friendly features and health benefits, building pressure against GM varieties which degenerate the ecological balance and biodiversity, and finally networking farmers, scientists and seed journalists to make sure that food sovereignty is regained.

Adapted from Anita Pailoor's article in the Deccan Herald July 1, 2008, the complete article can be read at http://www.deccanherald.com/Content/Jul12008/spectrum2008063076220.asp

Events

IMPLEMENT THE KERALA CONSERVATION OF PADDY LAND AND WETLAND ACT – 2008

Kerala, the state rich in biodiversity and highly developed in terms of education and health care facilities is facing acute shortage of food. Since thee last few months the state government has been chasing the central government and state governments like AP and West Bengal to get some rice for the state. Mr.Sharad Pawar, the Central Agriculture Minister told Sri V.S. Achuthanandan, the Chief Minister of Kerala to purchase rice from the open market if the state wants to feed its people. The price of rice has gone up to Rs. 25 in Kerala and the common man is not able to purchase rice from the open market.

Kerala has reached a tragic situation in terms of its paddy production. The production has come down to 6 lakh tonnes per annuum while the state needs at least 40 lakh tonnes of paddy for annual consumption. The area of paddy cultivation has also come down from 8 lakh hectares to 2 lakh hectares in the last two decades. One of the main reasons for this change is the un-remunerative nature of the crop. Although rice is the staple diet of the people, farmers are not able to meet the escalating cost of cultivation and the reducing profitability. In the nineteenseventies, paddy was so remunerative that, farmers were competing with each other to bring in more land under paddy cultivation. There were cases of teachers, bank employees etc quitting their job to take up paddy cultivation. It was really 'Rice Utsav' in the villages of Palakkad and Kuttanad, the two rice bowls of the state.

However, that has changed and now even the agriculture policies of the state favour plantation and horticulture crops and naturally farmers have also shifted to more income generating crops and this happened in Kerala without any forethought. Paddy wetlands apart from getting converted for cash crops have also found another use – mining for clay and sand. It does not bring much money to the farmers, yet the contractors and brokers are able to lure them. This has changed Kerala's landscape and ecology so much so that, the government had to think of bringing in some legal control over this kind of permanent conversion of paddy lands and wetlands of the state. In February 2007, the revenue department came out with a draft bill for the same. But the construction lobby in the state has become so powerful in the last 5-10 years and, with both, people and the government, treating construction activity as an investment opportunity, the bill is still waiting to be discussed in the assembly. Although policy makers and government talk about food security, conversion is going on unabated. This is a great lesson for other state governments. It is in this context that the meeting in Thrissur took place on 5th July 2008.

The meeting decided to create a charter of demands which would be sent to all the farmers groups, environmental groups, and various other socio-cultural groups around Kerala for discussions and endorsement. The major points of this charter of demands were:

- The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act - 2008 should be implemented immediately, without delay at a special session of the Assembly.
- All paddy fields of Kerala should be declared as rice sanctuaries and should be governed by laws similar to that for forest protection.

When the bill is passed and implemented as proposed, as a follow-up action to ensure the continuance of paddy farmers and to also guarantee living wage/ income, the following actions (among others) should be implemented:

- Every paddy farming family should be assured an annual income of Rs.100,000.
- All the current subsidies being given to paddy farmers should be clubbed and handled through a single window system and paid to them directly through the banks.
- The minimum support price of paddy should be enhanced to Rs12 per kilo and this should be enhanced every year according to the wholesale price index.

Note: On 24th July 2008 the Kerala Legislative Assembly passed the "Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act - 2008". On 12th August, this was finally given the Governor's approval and the act was notified. A copy of the act is available with us.

BOOK POST – PRINTED MATTER

Editors' Note: **please send us poems, stories, rice traditions and other material. If you have a rice related event coming up or if you have an interesting report on rice events already conducted or on policy or new practices. Please do send us the same in word format with pictures, at paddyeditors@gmail.com.**

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Tel/Fax: 91-471-2727150

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