

Foremost responsibility: The importance of preserving native seed varieties



Mr. Shankar at his godown in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu with his native paddy varieties.

Agriculture, which was earlier considered a provider of food for the hungry, has got transformed into agribusiness. With that a bit of commercialization has crept in too.

According to Mr. M.G.S. Shankar, an organic farmer and native paddy seed collector in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu, as a result of this commercialization, several native seeds and plants which were commonly found in a particular place have become extinct. In the race to earn more money, several farmers have started adopting modern technologies and moving over to hybrid crops. “The seeds for these hybrid crops are supplied by companies, which also in some cases supply the fertilizer and chemical pesticides for that particular seed.”

External dependency

“The result is that farmers have become dependent on external factors such as seeds, fertilizer, machinery and even manual labour. They find themselves in a bind of debts and crop failure, even resorting to suicide in some cases,” he explains.

Mr. Shankar has been growing traditional paddy varieties such as *Arikaraabi*, *Kotaram sambha* and *Thooya malli* (all Tamil names) in his farm. *Arikaraabi* and *Kotaram sambha* are 150 day crops and *Thooya malli* variety is a 120 day crop. All the three varieties can be sown during October-November only in Tirunelveli.

Mr. Shankar has been using organic inputs such as vermicompost, *panchagavya* and bio-leaf extracts for growing his paddy crops. He has also been practising Systematic Rice Intensification (SRI) technique for planting his paddy seedlings.

Preserve and protect

“No doubt the yield of hybrids may be high, but at the same time farmers should realise that they also have to preserve and protect the native seed varieties,” emphasises Mr. Shankar.

Preserving native seeds should be an important agenda for every farmer. Like self respect, it is the foremost duty to preserve and protect the native flora and fauna (in the form of seeds), he explains. In addition, hybrids do not grow well in all conditions. They require a lot of care and attention compared to the local varieties. Also the pest infestations in hybrids are more compared to the native seeds. When one compares the cost of hybrids with that of native ones a farmer can easily see for himself that hybrids cost more. A small farmer has to spend nearly about Rs.5,000 for buying hybrid seeds, fertilizer and manual labour (weeding and harvest) if he is growing paddy in an acre.

Expenditure

But if he is preserving some native seeds and grows them organically, then he needs to spend anything between Rs.500-700 for an acre. More important, once the crops are harvested, a portion of that harvested produce can be cleaned and stored for using as seeds in the next season. This option does not exist for hybrid seeds.

“As of now there is no clear price table for these native seeds. I sell my paddy seeds at Rs 10 per kg and am able to get a good profit just by selling my paddy seeds to others.”

Sustainable technology

It is high time that our farmers realised that the step towards production does not lie inside labs or fertilizer bags, but in practising natural farming methods that do not harm the planet and those living on it, explains Mr. Shankar.

“For a nation to be successful in food production it is important that its policy makers realise the importance of keeping their agriculture system as close to nature as possible. “Because agriculture is not an industrial activity but a life-sustaining vocation and an interaction between man and nature,” he says.

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