

## How it prevents ryots from going to seed

NAGAPATTINAM, August 27, 2012



As acres and acres of untilled land dotted the tail-end of the Delta this year, there lay a tilled stretch of some 20 acres in Madapuram in Thiruthuraipoondi, bordering Nagapattinam, in the first and only rains that lashed a few days ago.

Seventy-six-year-old Oysul Karunai awaits the second spell to re-till his fields and broadcast the seeds through direct sowing.

A botched PWD revetment in 1980 affected irrigation to his fields and the seed of an idea germinated from that crisis. He toyed with the idea of direct sowing. Until then, paddy had only conjured up images of raised nurseries and their transplantation to the fields, and direct sowing was unheard of.

So, when tiny green specks sprouted four days after the rains drenched the broadcast fields, Mr. Karunai did not foresee his experiment to save the day in the Delta that was then unified Thanjavur region, seven years later, in 1987. By then, he had perfected this system.

For Mr. Karunai, it was smooth until 1983 when rain played spoilsport. "I had ploughed the fields, broadcast seeds, but there was no rain for a month." When it eventually rained, he did not expect the seeds to germinate, but they did. The seeds would survive without rain for up to 35 days, and there would always be that one day's rain to bank on, believes Mr. Karunai, who brings 40 per cent of his 120 acres under direct seeding each year. If nothing, there would eventually be irrigated water.

Today, in the wake of the announcement of a delayed and scarce water release posing a challenge to conventional transplantation, Madapuram is being seen as the reference point for reviving mass-scale direct sowing.

In 1987, Mettur dam was opened on November 9 and shut 20 days later, that is, on November 29. "We toured the Delta, and in Madapuram, there were these green tracts amidst dry lands," says S. Ranganathan, general secretary, Cauvery Delta Farmers Welfare Association.

"Immediately, we convened a meeting and wanted the administration to take it up." It was summarily announced that banks would have to lend for direct sowing. Until then, loans were extended only for conventional transplantation.

"We hold Madapuram as the Mecca of direct sowing," says Palaniappan, who was then a radio specialist for agriculture with the AIR, liaising with the administration and whose booklet on the experiment is the only registry of the 1987 project.

The experiment came to be termed as the "one-million tonne rice project," says Palaniappan. Over 2.10 lakh hectares were brought under direct seeding with a production of one million tonnes.

The earliest stray experiments were in the Pattukottai-Peravurani area, when there was absolutely no water in the Grand Anicut in 1977. "I had recorded them during one of my tours." But, it was in 1987 that the Madapuram experiment was noticed and replicated on a mass scale.

"On the midnight of August 14, I interviewed Oysul Karunai, in a desperate bid to spread hope among the farmers and also bring the administration on board to take direct seeding to every farmer." Mr. Ranganathan believes that direct sowing is the way out in times of the delayed release of water and water scarcity.

While community nurseries are seen as a welcome move, they would still require many times the water for direct seeding. Direct sowing would require wetting of fields and not water stagnation for nurseries and transplanted seedlings.

Water to be released on September 17 would take a fortnight to reach the tail end of the Delta in Nagapattinam.

Farmers here are faced with the possibility of submergence of transplanted seedlings by the north-east monsoon, due to the delay in setting up of nurseries.

However, there is a certain reticence over open advocacy for direct sowing. Farmers and officials fear it could bring down the State's bargaining power with Karnataka. The 1987 contingency experiment of direct mass scale direct sowing had found skewed references to underplay the plight of the Delta farmers by Karnataka, says a source.

"But, why not we see it as perfecting a system of planning a crop with less water and more productivity?" asks Mr. Ranganathan. After all, there will still be water scarcity now even with community nurseries.

The same view is echoed by Mr. Palaniappan. "It is a contingency plan, not an alternative plan."

Mr. Ranganathan adds that "concepts such as direct sowing, used in times of distress, should not dilute the State's case for legitimate share of Cauvery water."

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