

Growing forty traditional varieties in less than two acres

September 24, 2014



Mr. Raman with some of his rare varieties. Photo: Special Arrangement

What is it that makes a small farmer opt for growing and preserving several native paddy varieties when finding a good market for normal crops is proving to be a Herculean task?

“Probably it is the innate interest to preserve and protect the local biodiversity that spurs some to get into these type of activities. It is a fact that getting a good price for traditional varieties is still not easy in the country because among consumers several don’t know the existence of such varieties and marketing people who buy them don’t know their,” says

Dr. Joseph John, scientist, M.S. Swaminatha Research Foundation (MSSRF).

Varieties

But inspite of all these odds Mr. Cheruvayal Raman, a tribal farmer in Wayanad cultivates about 40 varieties of traditional paddy native to Wayanad in his 1.5 acres.

Having learnt from his parents the need for growing and preserving these native varieties the unique feature about his farm is that unlike other farms he doesn't believe in using modern machines like tractors in his fields to plough or harvest the crops.

"I shun modern implements like the tractor or threshing machines. Seeds contain the life of nature. We should treat them with extreme care. If we use machines to remove the paddy grains from the harvested straw then the seeds get broken (injured) so I use sticks to thrash the straw for separating the seeds," he says.

Selected seeds are dried for a week in the open and stored in traditional vessels called Thumba. By this method the seeds can be preserved for two years without losing their dormancy, according to Dr. K.P. Smitha, Senior Scientist, Agriculture & Natural Resource at the institute.

Before sowing

Before sowing, the seeds are soaked in water for 12 hours to improve their germination. When soaked the well dried seeds start absorbing the water.

Later they are taken out and covered with banana or papaya leaves and a weight is placed on the top. By this method the seeds sprout in one day and are taken to be planted in the main field in the next 2-3 days.

The growing time of seedlings is directly related with the longevity of rice varieties, according to Mr. Raman.

The field is ploughed well. Cow dung and dried leaves are added to the field and thoroughly mixed with the soil and left undisturbed for about for ten days.

During this time the dung and leaves would have composed well thus becoming nutritious food for the several million beneficial microorganisms in the soil. After this the germinated seedlings are transplanted to the main field.

“I follow the biodynamic system of planting. In this system, farmers follow the lunar pattern for land preparation, sowing, harvesting etc and fullmoon days are considered ideal for planting since on that day rodents like rats remain in their burrows do not dig out the sown seeds,” he explains.

Practices

Only organic cultivation practices are followed by him and a native cow is being managed in the cattle shed for the continuous supply of cow dung and urine. Tillering after 20 days and irrigation are the two requirements needed for the growth of traditional varieties. The rice varieties of Wayanad do not need tedious attention or chemical fertilizers and pesticides for growth. There is usually no pest or disease incidence noticed in them.

Free distribution

The seeds are given free of cost to interested farmers on the condition that they have to return it in double the amount next year. Every year Mr. Raman distributes about 150 kg seeds of 30 varieties to 250 farmers and interested persons across the country.

In fact if not for people like Mr. Cheruvayal the traditional varieties of Wayanad would have been long lost to the common people, according to Dr. Smitha.

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