

A rice, lost and found

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Another threat this niche farming faces is of rising land prices. | Photo Credit: [Hoshner Reporter](#)

The farmers of Ezhikkara, a local cooperative bank and a responsible travel company come together to revive the farming of Pokkali, a rice endemic to Kerala

“If you are ready to buy Basmati for ₹100, why not Pokkali? But why would anyone buy Pokkali, without a story?” asks Gopinath Parayil of The Blue Yonder, a pioneering Responsible Travel company. What is the story? What is this Pokkali rice? To find out we set off on a ferry from Kadamakkudy to Ezhikkara, one of the places in Kochi famous for its Pokkali fields. There I meet Echappan, a Pokkali farmer who says, “What is special about Pokkali is that it needs neither pesticides nor manure to grow.” He explains in detail. There is only one yield of Pokkali rice a year. After four months of Pokkali farming, shrimps are raised in the same fields for another five months. The scales they shed dry up and become manure for the next Pokkali cultivation. Moreover only the grain is harvested, leaving behind the tall stems to decay. This becomes food for the shrimps and also acts as a shelter from predators. Pokkali can stake a claim on the title of being ‘organic’. It is one of those rare varieties that grow in saline and fresh water. Even if pesticides were to be added, as the sea water rose and fell everyday the pesticides would only get washed away. Said to have come from the Western Ghats with the flooding of the river Periyar in the fourteenth century, the rice evolved naturally, over the years, adapting to the salinity of the coastal areas. To survive the tides the plant adapted by growing taller; around 1.5 meters. Hence the name Pokkali (‘*pokkam*’ meaning height). It is grown nowhere else but in three districts of Kerala—Ernakulam, Alappuzha and Thrissur.

In saline water

“Because of climate change and global warming the sea level is rising. Saline water is going inland. And here we have a rice that can grow in a saline atmosphere. This is probably an answer for the future,” says Gopinath. While all of this is true, Echappan says, “There is no profit from Pokkali. But only if we grow Pokkali, do we get good shrimps.” Last year he spent ₹1,57,000 on the crop and harvested grains worth ₹72,000. The government helped him with the deficit. “The problem is that we still use the same technology we used 120 years ago,” says Ranjith of Palliyakkal Service Co-operative Bank, a group that has been working with the farmers of Ezhikkara for over a decade. “Because Pokkali fields exist nowhere else in the world, no foreigner invented any [machines] and so nothing came here... Even none of the agencies under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research have so far been able to help with this.” Another threat this niche farming faces is of rising land prices. Many struggling farmers sell their land for the huge offers they receive, many a time to those with no interest in farming but in building. It is the mission of the Palliyakkal Bank “to preserve a tradition of making a living from Pokkali farming and its related means, while living on one’s own land with head held high.” As a part of the Bank’s attempts to create multiple sources of supplementary income, alongside Pokkali and fish farming they now include Responsible Tourism, supported by

The Blue Yonder

“Creating better places for people to live, so that there is a better place for people to visit.” Gopinath says, describes his company thus “the swimming-pool-tourism concept is over. Travellers are coming to gain experiences and Pokkali has the potential to drive experiential holidays.” They work so closely with the villagers there that wherever we went, we were met with an ear to ear smile. His company’s tourism plans include “cycling for an hour from Varappuzha to the stunning Kadamakkudy; a ferry ride to Ezhikkara, a visit to some of the farms.” They also offer rides on canoes, fresh home-made food, and even a dinner on top of the Chinese fishing nets. Their plans for the locals are even more ambitious, like opening profit making e-libraries in the middle of farms, training in the craft of canoeing and swimming to reduce water accidents and so on. “There is an eight acre model project location now, where you can see Pokkali, fish farms and vegetables, owned, operated and managed by the local community. Tourism is one small step that will ensure that there is a sustainable, consistent source of income for them.” But due to lack of mechanisation, unavailability of labourers, and improper distribution channels, Pokkali rice was lost, except for local consumption. The farmers here attempted to revive it in 2010 and 2011, but failed as the supply chain was not ready. One of the interventions, in 2012, which was to later become an inspiration for many, was when about 300 student volunteers of Palliative Care came down from Kozhikode and Malappuram districts to help farmers facing labour crisis harvest their grains. “Before this very few were willing to get into the water... seeing such well-educated kids from well-off families get into the fields, even old timers here came forward to help, and this greatly helped push the movement forward” says M P Vijayan, the secretary of Palliyakkal Bank. But by 2016 the situation was so bad that when they attempted to revive it again, they could not even find enough grains in Ezhikkara to sow. But these are not people who would let the rice wither away. From the six tons of grains they had to buy that year, they grew 200 tons. A major portion of this has been set aside for an even wider farming this year, partnering with 35 other panchayats. “To successfully bring back agriculture to the now barren fields of Kerala intervention by politicians, departments, or the Government scattered here and there is not enough. We have to make use of all the possibilities of the place, bring them together under [one] umbrella, make everyone who is interested a part of this and solve their problems,” says Vijayan. Alongside the Bank’s attempts to standardise Pokkali farming, by bringing about a standard rating system, similar to the BIS Hallmark for gold, “We wish to make farming cool,” says Gopinath, to bring “pride in saying that he or she is a Pokkali farmer... Pokkali is not just a rice or land, it is a lifestyle, a tradition and a culture.”

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