

Kerala's Leafy Campaign

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Sajeevan Kavumgara has been educating people about edible leaves and shoots

A campaign by Sajeevan Kavumgara, an employee of Kerala's Public Works Department (PWD), has left housewives wondering whether that trip to the market to buy vegetables is really necessary.

For the past five years, Sajeevan has been devoting all his spare time to promoting leafy vegetables that can be grown in a homestead or are sprouting all around but people haven't noticed.

"So far, nobody educated us about local vegetables. But after listening to Sajeevan I am using 15 leafy vegetables that were growing in my homestead since the last monsoon. I saved around `500," says Sabitha, an assistant engineer with the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB).

Through his Eleyariv (knowledge about edible leaves) campaign, Sajeevan has been educating people about leaves and shoots they should eat. He also holds Leafy Vegetable Science Festivals for schoolchildren.

Kerala is today rife with movements promoting traditional foods and diets. There is Bhakshya Swaraj that is inspiring people to grow food. Then there is the organic food movement, the Save the Rice movement and the Prakruthi Bhakshanalaya network (Natural Food hotels). The Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) has also jumped on the bandwagon. All these campaigns have given a fillip to Sajeevan's Eleyariv effort.

"The average Malayali's meal doesn't include even 20 plant varieties today," explains Sajeevan. "Our tradition was not so limited. Even today, you can find about 125 uncultivated leafy vegetables within a one-km walk from your home."

A recent health survey sent shock waves through the state. "Although Kerala has such high literacy you will be surprised to hear that 34 per cent of housewives have malnutrition-related problems," says Prabhakaran V.O., a retired agriculture officer and an Eleyariv activist.

Sajeevan has conducted about 350 Eleyariv workshops throughout the state. At his programmes he displays pictures of leafy vegetables and exhibits plants grown in pots. In some of his programmes he even cooks leaves that were regarded as mere weeds to demonstrate that they are edible.

"Unfortunately, we see an increase in serious diseases like cancer. During all our gram sabha meetings, we mention traces of pesticides in our food. Ninety per cent of our families can eat vegetables without actually cultivating them. Wherever available, housewives have started using such vegetables," says A.K. Ramya, President, Eranheli Gram Panchayat of Kannur district.

Sajeevan's house in Kadiroor near Tellicherry has a lot of such uncultivated leafy vegetables. Take, for example, *Laportea interrupta* or hen's nettle. Called choriyanam in Malayalam, the plant is a small, hardy, slightly fleshy herb with hair that irritates the skin. That's why people keep away from it. Sajeevan makes thoran (stir-fried veggies) with the leaves of this plant.

Another common herb, purple in colour and similar to amaranthus, is called iodine cheera in Malayalam. "The plant somehow got confused with iodine," says Sajeevan. "So housewives were not going near it. Now many of them are cooking it. Iodine cheera has high iron content."

Tamil Nadu consumes more leafy vegetables than its neighbouring states and its markets are well-stocked. The best example is Manithakkali (*Solanum nigrum*), a highly reputed medicinal plant which, says Sajeevan, is now being commercially cultivated around Madurai. In Kalpathy, near Palakkad, a rice additive is made with it.

At his Leafy Vegetable Science Festival, Sajeevan tries to popularise traditional foods among schoolchildren. A plethora of such programmes is organised in the state, with the most number taking place in Kannur, Sajeevan's home district.

Though the main focus is on leafy vegetables, zero-cultivation fruits like papaya, jackfruit and mango that are abundant in Kerala homesteads are an integral part of the campaign. Such plants make your garden edible, quips Sajeevan, showing a sweet potato vine displayed in front of his house.

Other plants he advocates are Chaya Manasa (*Cnidioscolus aconitifolius*) and Sahruda Cheera (*Pisonia grandis*), a hardy plant with large leaves.

The Kerala Agriculture University (KAU) has provided aid of `15,000 to develop a garden of all these edible leaf plants so that students and interested people can visit and become acquainted with them. "So far, we hadn't planted many of these plants. But we have planted them now for the exhibition," explains Seema, Sajeevan's wife.

Farm-fresh vegetables consisting of green leaves and tubers were once common in Kerala's traditional food basket. Certain foods were especially recommended in Ayurveda for women's health. Various plant-based diets or traditional nutraceuticals were recommended for pregnancy, lactation, post-natal care, menopause and so on.

To revive this rapidly eroding tradition, KAU has started promoting cultivation of and products made from green leafy vegetables to combat women's health disorders. "Many women in Kerala, regardless of income, suffer from iron deficiency and osteoporosis. But they lack awareness. They don't realise the need to eat calcium and iron-rich food. This affects their reproductive life," says Dr Geetha Kutty, Professor and Project Coordinator of Ayushmathi Mission, initiated by KAU two years ago.

Sajeevan's demo garden of green leafy vegetables will be used by KAU to promote awareness about cultivated and uncultivated leafy plants and popularise their use. KAU is also thinking of distributing planting material.

The local media too is spreading awareness. People in the state have started rethinking their post- Green Revolution diets. "Everyone fears cancer," says Prabhakaran.

"Kerala has 7.5 million families. Around 5 million families own not less than 25 cents of land. There is water, sunshine and a favourable microclimate. Yet, producing vegetables and other foods for consumption is decreasing. Those who produce for the market use high levels of pesticides," says Sunny Paikada, coordinator of Bhakshya Swaraj.

Bhakshya Swaraj's objective is to inspire everyone to produce food. That won't make us self-reliant, says Paikada, but it will connect people to cultivation and help them understand the importance of safe food.

After joining hands with NGOs to spread awareness, Bhakshya Swaraj has now entered its second phase of direct action. "Rice production has many problems in the state," says Paikada. "The majority of paddy fields are either encroached upon or abandoned. They face shortages of labour and water. With this in mind we have to consciously shift our attention from rice to other alternatives. Tubers are the best option. They require less water and labour, contain all essential carbohydrates and have 10 times the productivity of rice."

Bhakshya Swaraj is now concentrating on developing about 25 models across Kerala. In three years they hope to set up a cluster of 50 to 100 families and help them achieve 75 per cent self-reliance in food, including vegetables. They have started cultivation at their first centre in Konnakkad in Kasaragod district.

The collective effort of all these movements have helped Sajeevan's Eleyariv campaign get a good response. "In the last five years, Eleyariv has created a silent revolution in Kerala. Of course, it has received very active support from like-minded movements," says Prabhakaran V.O.

There are many indications of a very positive impact. Colocasia was earlier grown only for its tuber. Now, its leaves and stalks are used in curries. Housewives perceive it as a dependable vegetable. Earlier, they would wait for the tomato to turn up from neighbouring states. Now, housewives realise they have alternatives within their compounds.

For the first time, during Onam last year, six to eight types of new leafy vegetables arrived in Payyanur and other cities of Kannur district. Ponnanganni Cheera (*Alternanthera sessilis*) was the best example." Of course, these are yet to start appearing in our regular vegetable shops. For that to happen, we have to work a few years more," says Sajeevan, smiling happily.

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