

Saving seeds

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Hands of farmer Ganga Devi of village Ringu in

Pithauragadh, Uttarakhand, showing her rajma seed (by Vinay Nair) The miracle of a seed is that this tiny little thing holds within itself the potential to recreate a whole individual plant or tree. And we humans, like many other beings, can come along and enjoy its pleasures, taste the fruit, smell the flower, sleep in the shade of the tree. It is the seed that holds promise of the things to come. In that way, it truly gives hope. The vast diversity of crops and its varieties that we see in Indian agriculture would not have been possible if it hadn't been for the constant engagement of the farmer with the seed, trying it in different environments. And this enriching diversity is what gives resilience to a way of life. Have you ever wondered what kind of world would it be where any seed to go in the ground might have to necessarily pass through tedious exchanges of money, labels, and an externally imposed system that decides who may or may not let it grow? As absurd as it sounds, there are many forces pushing towards exactly that kind of situation. Luckily, even with looming threats, the world over, as well as in India, there are people that are trying their hardest for us to not have to live in such a world.

Who are these people? I am talking about the seed-savers. They might do it in old glass bottles, in clay pots, in plastic bags or old gunny sacks. The approaches may vary. While some focus on creating seed banks, others feel that the field is the place for the seeds and the only means to save seed varieties is to grow them, use them, keep them in circulation on the land. What they have in common is that they are helping keep alive seed diversity and also making people pause and think about this very significant topic. They are saving seeds. And being part of both a continuation of a millenia old tradition, and a silent revolution. Farmers do it in their own farms or by forming networks. In Jardhar gaon in Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand, Vijay Jardhari of Beej Bachao Andolan has collected 350 varieties of paddy, eight varieties of wheat, four of barley, 220 varieties of kidney beans (rajma), eight of cowpea and 12 varieties of navrangi dhal[1]. In a 2 acre farm called Basudha in Odisha, Debal Deb plants over 1000 rice varieties in an effort started in 1996 to conserve rice diversity[2]. Gangwar Anjamma, a 55 years old peasant woman and a member of Deccan Development Society in Zaheerabad, Telangana runs the village seed bank which provides the farmers with independence from Multi National Companies for buying seed. The women farmers, with facilitation of DDS, organize a Mobile Diversity Festival travelling in 50 villages for 1 month every year to celebrate ecological agriculture [3]. The Timbaktu Collective, spread over 156 villages, in Anantpur, Andhra Pradesh, has been able to document and collect 28 rice varieties, 31 millets, 18 pulses and 7 oil seeds[4]. In Satna district of Madhya Pradesh, Babulal Dahiya of Pithaurabad conserves over 80 varieties of rice, along with Desi Makka, Sama, Kakun, Kutki, Kodo and Katia wheat [5]. This along with documenting folk literature and songs connected to local agriculture and involving children in a practice of such agriculture. In her small garden of 2,000 square metres in Auroville, Tamil Nadu, Deepika Kundaji, who left her PhD and has been farming for twenty years, has 20 varieties of brinjal and about seven varieties of lady's fingers[5]. These are just a few names out of numerous such attempts and initiatives in different parts of the country. There are then groups that facilitate setting up of community seed banks or seed-sharing networks. One example is Navdanya in Uttarakhand which has also set up a learning centre called Bija Vidyapeeth on its organic farm[6]. Another is Save Our Rice Campaign active in the four states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and West Bengal which organizes regular seed-exchange festivals[7]. Then there are also organisers of seed-festivals, writers, and citizen campaigners have had a role to play in this. Since April 2014 a national level Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch (India Seed Sovereignty Alliance) has been formed with 100 dedicated seed committees from 18 states of India. And ofcourse, millions of farmers all over the country (especially women) who remain largely unnamed and unnoticed when talking about seed savers but have been a vital part of this movement by keeping the culture of seed-saving and growing local varieties alive. From whom else do you think all these individuals and groups of seed savers able to collect their seeds? There are some farmers in all parts of our country who continue to save these seeds. This becomes especially true for areas where rain-fed agriculture continues and where market-connections remain low. These areas also need to be considered as conservation centres (or de-centres). With new policies and entry of market this is changing but even now there are corners where these practices and varieties prevail, especially amongst the older farmers!

Why bother?

The centuries (and in some cases millennia) old interaction between farmer and crop has led to evolution of seed varieties with different traits like local ecological suitability (drought tolerance, salt tolerance, flood-tolerance) or special characters like particular taste, medicinal property, bigger grain-size or more grass, pest-tolerance or even aesthetic appeal. Such diversity becomes particularly important for food security in the present environment of climate change and associated unpredictability in rainfall patterns and seasons. It is important not just to keep this diversity alive, but accessible to the small farmer. This free flow of seeds is threatened. There has been a sharp decline in the diversity of traditional varieties, which were best suited to local contexts. Now for a long time, policies and processes have pushed and changed agriculture in a direction where a few hybrid varieties of a few crops have replaced the highly diverse and numerous varieties and forms of growing. What is not directly used is gradually lost. So has been the case with our varieties especially since the advent of the green revolution. There are no records of how much we have lost but it seems like it is quite a lot. Take rice for example. At present, we may have a maximum of 6000 varieties (with only a dozen or so varieties being known to most of us in cities). At one point of time India had over 1 lakh rice varieties[8]. To make matters worse, the practice of saving seed by farmers for re-planting, which has been the way in which farming has happened for the past 12000 years, is now under direct and indirect attack. The indirect attack is by policies and programmes of green revolution that pushed and popularised hybrid seed varieties. Hybrid seed varieties need to be bought anew each year for best results. There is also a threat of contamination and invasion of traditional seed varieties by genetically modified crop varieties if and when these get approved (their field trials in many states are presently going on, and it is reported that commercial cultivation of GM mustard is in fact currently being considered for approval. The direct attack is the imminent threat of simply making the act of farmers selling seeds illegal if the Seeds Bill comes in force. In such a scenario the entire seed market will largely be controlled by private players. At a global level the top three agricultural biotechnology corporations – Monsanto, DuPont, and Syngenta – control 53 percent of the commercial seed market

[9]. To add to all this confusion there is the dimension of patenting and intellectual property rights over seed varieties which comes with multiple interpretations and is against the principles of many farmer groups that view seeds as a community heritage. According to Jacob Nellithanam, "A patent on seed implies that a farmer saving seed is an intellectual property theft"

[10] Corporations like Monsanto have taken 1500 patents on Climate Resilient crops[11]. For Indian farmers to remain seed-secure and debt-free, a free exchange of different seed varieties becomes crucial to counter the monopolies of seed-control. In Chandigarh, during the second national meeting of the Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch in 2015, members pledged to regenerate and widely share the enormously rich diversity of traditional crops and crop varieties in India as a collective open-source heritage belonging to all, free of any private/corporate Intellectual Property Rights. It was suggested that every farmer or family should adopt at least one crop variety for decentralized on-farm seed conservation and open-source propagation. An Open letter to Narendra Modi and Barrack Obama (by citizens of India and US) written for the visit of US president to India on 26th January 2015, also gives out the message: Life is not an invention, biopiracy is not an innovation, Freedom to save seeds is a fundamental right[12]. But I suppose nothing articulates the connection between seeds and farmers better than the words of Peruvian writer José María Arguedas in her 'Call to certain academics': What is there on the banks of these rivers, doctor?

Take out your binoculars

And your spectacles

Look if you can

Five hundred flowers

*From five hundred different types of potato Grow on the terraces **Above abysses** That your eyes don't reach.*

Those five hundred flowers

Are my brain. *My flesh.* [1]

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<http://vikalpsangam.org/article/she-runs-the-villages-seed-bank/#.VeFbsPmqkqo> and <http://ddsindia.com/www/pdf/Farming%20Matters.pdf>

[4]http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Vikalp%20Sangam%20Case%20Studies/timbaktu_collective_casestudy_ak.pdf [5]

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[6]

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[7] <<http://www.tehelka.com/2014/06/a-silent-revolution-grows-in-the-farm/> [8]

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/mar/18/india-rice-warrior-living-seed-bank> [9]

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[12] <http://ejfood.blogspot.com.au/2014/12/seed-sovereignty-documents-letter-from.html> First published on the author's blog [Crazy Carrots](#)