

# A farmer saving our heritage of seeds

Author - Translated by Shiba Desor; Original story (in Hindi) by Baba Mayaram , Published on - 7.1.2016

Babulal Dahiya, one of Madhya Pradesh's most innovative organic/natural farmers, has received the Padma Shri. See below links to articles on him written by Baba Mayaram. We are fortunate to have had Babulalji's participation in Food Vikalp Sangams ... Original Story written specially for Vikalp Sangam

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This time Babulal Dahiya looked a little worried. The reason for his worry was the acid rain that had damaged his paddy fields. But he wasn't very disappointed since it was only one kind of rice varieties (the ones requiring a longer time to ripen) that had been affected, while the short and medium term ones still gave a good harvest. This was my second visit to his village. Pithaurabad lies in Unchehra block of Satna district in Madhya Pradesh. About 30 km away from Maihar. It was evening by the time I reached. Next morning we went to the fields where he has been saving traditional seed varieties for the past ten years. Babulal Dahiya explained that smoke from chimneys of cement factories and automobiles is leading to accumulation of fumes in the atmosphere. The recent acid rain is simply a consequence of that. Wherever there is good tree cover, the paddy has survived well. It had been protected by the tree canopy. Everywhere else, it has been damaged. Babulal Dahiya has a total of 8 acres of land out of which only 2 acres has traditional rice varieties. He grows traditional crop varieties without any fertilizers on the rest of his land as well. Along with that he is also growing rice and coarse grains like kodo, kutki and jowar with farmers from 30 villages of Uchehra block. A post-master by occupation Babulal Dahiya is interested in literature along with farming and agriculture. He has been a renowned literary figure of Bagheli language. But ever since he realised that just as the folk songs and culture is vanishing, the local food is also vanishing, he started working on its conservation. He has 110 varieties of traditional rice. He has studied their qualities deeply. Every year he sows these farm-saved seeds in his fields and studies them. Dahiya-ji says that we can confidently claim that rice and kodo millet are local crops. We still have their wild varieties available. The wild paddy is called Pasahi, eaten by women during **Halshashthi[1]** festival after the fast. Pasahi dhaan is found in trenches and ponds. He says that our region used to have numerous rice varieties. There was great diversity. Like Galari dhaan which used to look like the bird

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eye. Some varieties would have a white grain, some red, some black, some purple, some

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- the colour of soil. The grain may be slender or fat, round or tall. The colour of some varieties of rice plants is green, while that of others it is purple. There is not only a diversity of varieties, each has its distinct taste and beauty. Local folklore has many stories about the diversity of traditional rice varieties. Some are fragrant, while others have no scent. Some ripen early, while others take a long time to do so. Shallow soils support varieties such as Saraya, Sikiya, Shyamjeer, Dihula, Sarekhni that ripen in 70-75 days, while there are other varieties like Newari, Jholar, Karagi, Mungar, Senkurdar, etc. which take a moderate period of 100-120 days. Apart from these, there are varieties like Baadal phool, Kerakhamah, Bishnubhog, Dilbaksa, etc. that ripen in 120-130 days. Laila-Majnu dhaan has two white kernels inside. Kalavati has dark leaves. Ganjakali has high yield. Different varieties have their reasons for being sown. Farmers sow those varieties which the field demands. So if the soil is shallow, he will sow a variety that can be harvested early. There are some rice varieties that are sown by the farmer for feeding himself and his family. One such variety is Bajranga, which sits in the stomach for a longer time, rather than getting digested very quickly. Other varieties are sown for the market as they fetch a handsome price. Examples of such varieties are Ganjakari, Nibari, Kosamkhand and Lachai. There are some rice varieties which are sown for honouring guests. Examples are Kamalshree, Tilsaand, Vishnubhog and Baadhshahbhog. To protect crops from wild boar, varieties which have awns (spikes) are sown. There is also a saying connected to it, "[Dhaan bove Kargi, suvar khayee na samdhi](#)" implying that Kargi variety is not eaten by wild boar, nor presented to son-in-law's family. Talking about the qualities of traditional rice varieties, he told us that these are incomparable in taste, which is why we get a good price for these. They don't taste like hybrid varieties. Sufficient yield is obtained for traditional rice varieties by simply using cow dung as manure. In contrast, hybrid and dwarf varieties require chemical fertilizers. This increases inputs and reduces the fertility of the land or soil. Traditional rice varieties ripen simply with the changing seasons. So if a single rice variety is planted at different points of time (say, 1st of July and 1st of August), all of it is still ready for harvest at nearly the same time. Traditional rice varieties don't require regular weeding. Doing it once is enough because weeds don't strangle these plants since these plants grow taller. Pests are controlled by spiders, honeybees, ants and insect friends. Earthworms too help by turning and softening the soil throughout the day, which helps the plant to grow. Our ancestors were experts in interpreting signs like the colour of clouds, wind direction and rainfall. For instance, there is a saying "Purba jo Purbai paavai, sookhi nadiyaan naav chalave" meaning that during Purva nakshatra if there is eastern wind then it will rain so much that dry rivers will have enough water for a boat to float along. Dahiya-ji says that just as our traditional seeds are vanishing, the words associated with these and with traditional agriculture are also vanishing. The entire culture and way of life associated with farming is eroding. Now words like **gehun** (wheat), **chawal** (rice), **dal** (pulses) are sufficient for our conversation, whereas earlier there were so many more pulses and cereals, with names like sama, kodo, kutki, moong, urad, jowar, tilli, etc. Then from sowing to harvesting there were many different steps that had to be taken. These were

bovni, bakharni, nindai-gudai, daaban, udaavni

and

beej bhandaran

. There were different words for different activities. It is true that these words are seldom found in dictionaries but these are present as their common knowledge. The elders still remember these words intimately. But with the changed cropping cycle and monocultural farming these words are fast disappearing. Comparing dwarf varieties with traditional rice, Dahiya said that traditional varieties have the strength to adapt themselves to the local environmental conditions. For instance, the traditional rice varieties, constantly competing with the dwarf varieties, and growing in this land for millennia, have increased the length of their stalk, which helps store more water. Later after the spikes have developed, dew is sufficient to ripen the rice. Imported dwarf varieties don't have that quality. At one time our country had more than one lakh varieties of traditional rice. Now that number has drastically reduced. Out of these, Dahiya-ji has collected 110 varieties, which he is constantly protecting and preserving. World famous agricultural scientist Dr. R. H. Richharia had collected 17000 traditional rice varieties from farmers across undivided Madhya Pradesh (including Chhattisgarh). These included varieties known for their high productivity, fragrance, taste and other qualities. According to Babulal Dahiya, scientists say that for growing 1 kg of rice, 3000 litres of water is required. For this, paddy farmers have to depend on rains. If there is sufficient rain, all is well, but if paddy requires ground water extraction, it is a ghaate-ka-sauda, a bad business deal, since it leads to a constant depletion in groundwater level. Babulal Dahiya says that unlike the rivers in North India, these rivers don't have a glacial source, making them perennial. There the rivers can flow even if it

doesn't rain, because of the snow-melt. But our rivers are daughters of the forest, not daughters of the snow. These will flow only when there are forests. But there will be forests only if we use water in moderation. The earth will dry up if we plant 3-4 water-demanding crops a year. Trees and plants will dry up. If there are no forests, there will be no rain. Just like a plane can't land without an airport, clouds don't land without forests. This means there will be no rainfall. So if we want to grow paddy for a long time, we will have to conserve forests and have an agriculture system based on low-water-requiring traditional varieties. For the past few years, Babulal Dahiya has is running a campaign to save traditional seeds. For this the Sarjana Samajik Sanskritik and Sahityik Manch was formed, which has served as a medium for documenting and disseminating information on traditional seed varieties. He also runs a biodiversity awareness campaign with school children. He is doing farming with traditional seeds with farmers from 30 villages. He travels across the country participating in various workshops to spread the message of conservation of seed varieties. He has also been honoured on various platforms for this. His work is not just admirable but also an inspiration for others.

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[1] A festival celebrated on the 6<sup>th</sup> day during the dark phase of the moon in Bhadrapad month as per the traditional calendar. Women offer traditional crops for worship on this day.

[2] Local name for a bird of mynah (starling) family found in the region.

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