

Diversified Farming

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Sabarmatee has changed the face of rural odisha with organic farming. The Mahabharata happened due to envy, says eminent Odia environmentalist Radhamohan to this writer at his home in Odisha. "Awards and recognition are a burden. It turns friends into enemies," he says. It is with such upbringing that Sabarmatee got from her father that she has been working for the last 28 years to develop a forest using organic farming, without any promotion. It started as an experiment in 1988, when Sabarmatee, her father and other likeminded people wanted to rejuvenate barren land using organic farming. They zeroed in on wasteland in the interiors of Nayagarh district (earlier Puri). People from surrounding villages came, and one elderly person said: "You from cities don't understand farming. It's impossible to grow anything here." The land was eroded, and the soil gravelly. "We accepted the challenge and stayed committed to the cause. We call our journey Sambhav, from the impossible to the possible," says Sabarmatee. What started on one acre of wasteland is now a sprawling 90-acre forest with three rainwater harvesting ponds, over 1,000 species of plants and 493 varieties of rice. Fondly called Tiki apa (Tiki means small and apa means elder sister), the irony of her name is evident when one juxtaposes her work and the humility with which she refers to herself as a volunteer at Sambhav. There were two aims - to practise organic farming to rejuvenate the land and work on gender issues in agriculture. She explains the ethos of organic farming is soil and water care and biodiversity, which means growing several species of one plant. The aim was to bring back indigenous foods that were vanishing from plates. It has larger environmental benefits - plant diversity replenishes soil nutrients that other crops withdraw reducing the need for fertiliser. Also, in case of a natural calamity such as a pest attack or a drought, if certain species get destroyed, others might survive. So, it is extremely important from food preservation and food safety perspective. Sambhav has been successfully growing many vanishing food crops such as clove bean, jack bean, black rice, sword bean amongst others. Several studies have shown women put in more manual labour than men in agriculture, but are considered unskilled and paid less. Using traditional means, women spend 1,000-1,500 hours to grow one hectare of rice. "They are perpetually in pain and often get bent backs," says Sabarmatee. From her research in Odisha villages, she found that by using System of Rice Intensification (SRI) technology they are able to work in healthier conditions. An agriculture scientist by training, Sabarmatee found that this method allowed women to be in upright position, and reduced the hours required, reducing drudgery and pain giving them more time to rest. The biggest hurdle was that in 1990s not much research was happening in organic farming. "So, we were learning ourselves and it took us years to come up and promote best practices," Sabarmatee says. Sambhav is now a resource centre where farmers visit to exchange seeds and learn about organic farming. "Whenever people come, we request them to bring indigenous seeds so they can take something in exchange," she says. They also have an "adopt a seed" initiative. If people adopt 1,000 different seeds, 1,000 different varieties get conserved. The biggest achievement is that through Sambhav "we have disproved the popular belief that indigenous varieties and organic farming reduce production. First published by [Business Today](#)