

# Local paddy varieties pushed to brink of disappearance

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IMPHAL, Jun 23: Taothabi, which is one of the 350 paddy varieties found in Manipur and which grows in fresh water, is slowly dying out of the land due to the rapid climate change and as such, most of the fields which were used for planting the said paddy variety have since been converted into fish farms.

Khoijuman village is located around 28 Kilometres away from Imphal, near the shores of the Loktak lake in Bishnupur district and as per the 2011 census, the village has 632 households and a population of 2951 who are mostly engaged in agriculture.

As Thongjaorok river begin from the Laimaton hill which is located just at its back, Khoijuman village used to be really fertile.

However, with the changing time and climate, the Thongjaorok river which used to be perennial, can now be seen only during the monsoon season.

One 74 year old Ingu-dam Jatishwar of the village said that in the past, all the granaries of each and every household in the village used to overflow with Taothabi paddy which grew very well in the area.

But now, times have changed and they cannot find any of the saplings even if they wanted to plant it, he lamented.

About 20 years ago, before the construction of the Ithai dam, people of the village used to plant Taothabi paddy abundantly. However, after the dam was built, farmers began to slowly abandon planting of the said paddy as the fields often got flooded during monsoon or when there were any freak rains in a year.

He explained that the paddy variety which grows in fresh clean water, always dies if it is submerged in water and now the places/fields where Taothabi were once planted, have been converted into fish farms.

Changlei, Moirang Fou, Kumbi Fou etc are not planted anymore and only high yield varieties of paddy are planted today, he added.

Jatishwar also informed that back then, only some paddy like Nungyeng and Marekkumba used to get infected with pests but nowadays, all the high yield varieties of rice attract pests and also require high maintenance.

Another villager, Ching-subam Ibochou (70) said that Taothabi rice used to be planted abundantly near Ngakrapat and Yangoi river but after the area began to get flooded constantly, the farmers eventually abandoned planting the said paddy and adopted fish farming instead.

Another villager, Thiyam Nutanchandra (44) who plants winter crops and vegetables, said that the farmers began to opt out from cultivating Taothabi paddy variety due to the complicated and tedious work required for its proper cultivation.

On the other hand, Joint Director of Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) Lamphelpat, Dr I Meghachandra explained that Taothabi paddy plant is able to outgrow and survive a slow and natural increase in water levels by making its body gradually rise above the water. However, sudden rise in water levels due to floods is a different matter altogether.

Back in the old days, there were lots of trees and plants on the hillsides which helped in absorption of rainwater which then resulted in slow and natural rise in water levels, he explained, adding that the said paddy variety contains gibberellic acid which helped in making its stem grow and rise above the water levels.

He then informed that the only ways to properly plant the paddy variety now is to either raise the area where it is planted or to create a special farm which is surrounded on all four sides by elevated bunds.

Central Agriculture University (CAU) Vice Chancellor Dr M Premjit said that in the past, two varieties of Taothabi, Angouba and Angangbi, used to be cultivated and both of these varieties could even survive at areas where the water level was 2/3 metres deep.

As the said paddy had low yield, it was not favoured by the farmers, Dr Premjit said adding that even now, this paddy is still planted in some areas of the State and added that it is imperative for the State Government to introduce a policy for the long term survival of the said paddy.

He also informed that CAU has provided many paddy varieties, including Taothabi to KVK Andro for proper research under the National Initiative On Climate Resilient Agriculture project and added that the genes of 350 paddy varieties found in the State are also stored in the National Bureau of Plant Genetics Resources, New Delhi.

On the other hand, Deputy Director of the Directorate of Environment as well as Nodal Officer of the State Climate Change Cell, T Brajakumar said that during the last 30-40 years the temperature has increased by 2 to 4 points and the monsoon/rainfall pattern has gone completely haywire as well.

Even this year, the rainfall quantity is less than the normal rate by around 51 percent and the farmers are facing difficulties as there has not been proper rainfall during the cultivation season.

As there is a possibility that the rain might pour down during September when the crops are supposed to be harvested, Brajakumar said that at that time, even floods might occur and all these factors contribute to the gradually vanishing of the traditional farming and agriculture methods of the State.

(This report is filed under the State level media fellowship on climate change)

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