Seed stories: A festival that brings urban youth closer to their roots

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Vijay Jardhari has been conserving seeds in Uttarakhand | Express

CHENNAI: ‘Rasa Kathiri’, a species of eggplant (brinjal) known for its rare taste, is a species native to Chennai. However, in the three years that A Parameswaran of Oddanchatram has been trying to procure seeds for this particular species, he has not come across anybody who knows such a variety even exists.

Parameswaran, an aeronautical engineer-turned seed conservationist, took part in the three-day National Seed Diversity Festival organised by Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), which began at the College of Engineering, Guindy on Friday.

‘Like the ‘Rasa Kathiri’ that eludes us, there are 450-500 varieties of eggplant yet to be collected. We’ve collected around 35 so far,’ said Parameswaran, who started off collecting traditional varieties of all garden vegetables before deciding to focus on conserving egg plant varieties since 2015.

According to Ananthoo of Safe Food Alliance, the programme was aimed at establishing diversity in seeds and bringing urban youth closer to their roots.

‘Nowadays, the urban youth are increasingly showing interest in reviving traditional farming practices and in ensuring continuity,’ he said.

Farmers across the country, like Parameswaran, brought their stories to the forum, along with their seeds, getting to know traditional agricultural practices of other states and comparing them with their own.

Vijay Jardhari of Uttarakhand, one of the founders of Beej Bachao Andolan, was a relatively unknown face to people in the city. However, to farmer-conservers at the exhibition, he was nothing short of a legend.

Known as a ‘barefoot conservationist’, Vijay, who has been soldiering for seed conservation for over 25 years, walked from village to village to create awareness about seed conservation. Today he has about 350 varieties of paddy varieties in his collection, along with eight varieties of wheat and around 220 varieties of kidney beans.

‘Even several years ago, people had mastered the art of storing several varieties of seeds in dried bottle gourds because they knew that even if they die, the seeds must be saved for those next in line,’ he said.

Some species, according to conservationists like Parameswaram, die with certain lines of work like the ‘magudi sora’ variety of bottle gourd which was used to make the snake charmer’s flute. With the dying profession, the species of the gourd also disappear.

According to Krishnamurthy, from Puducherry, the seeds for the traditional Poongar, an indigenous rice variety, were available with just three farmers in 2009 before they were conserved and now made considerably available in the market.

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