

Tribal crops find a haven

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A tribal farmer in the seed farm of Thoppicheera (a spinach species) at Thayannankudy inside the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary in Idukki district. Photo: Giji K. Raman

Hamlet in Chinnar sanctuary sets aside space to cultivate traditional variants

This little known tribal settlement inside the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary has turned into a treasure trove of traditionally grown crop varieties of tribespeople, which are fast disappearing in the influx of hybrid seed varieties. Now, Thoppicheera, an endemic species of spinach, is a highly priced vegetable in the exclusive tribes' market at Marayur.

Thayannankudy has an area marked for cultivating traditional crops which were facing threat. Ragi, locally known as keppa, was their staple food and there were vegetable and crop varieties exclusively cultivated by the tribespeople. To protect these varieties, a seed farm was created here under the initiative of the Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary. The tribespeople of Thayannankudy are maintaining the seed farm.

Chandran kaani, the tribal chieftain, told

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that with the advent of outside seed varieties, the many traditional crop varieties were lost. Through this initiative, those seed varieties could be protected for future cultivation.

Crops cultivated

The crop varieties at the farm include thoppicheera, pachamutti cheera (spinach varieties) sirukeppa, neelakanni, (ragi varieties), vellavaraku (kodo millet), malapoondu (garlic) maize, coriander and pumpkin.

He said that when the forest officials convened a meeting for protection of traditional seed varieties through the model farm, the tribal settlements deep in the forest responded. A woman brought a three-year-old seed variety from the last stock of it in the settlement. This variety too is grown in the seed farm, said Mr. Chandran kaani. Tribespeople abandoned traditionally grown seeds primarily because the crops were small though highly resistant to pest attack and climatic changes (Thayannankudy is in the rainshadow area). However, the new crop variants decayed and dried easily, forcing many farmers to abandon cultivation.

Much support

Munnar wildlife warden G. Prasad said they got immense support from the tribespeople in the endeavour to save endemic crops.

"Our aim was to supply the seed to the tribespeople on condition that they would return the same quantity when harvested. This would be a cyclical process to protect the traditional crop varieties," he said.

Arya Gopinath, a sociologist in Munnar forest division, said malnutrition was found a major issue among tribespeople and the change in their food habit from ragi to ration rice had an impact on their health.

The endemic crop varieties are highly pest-resistant and protein-rich. They need to be protected for the tribes' healthy living. The remedy is to make the tribespeople self-dependent in food production through protecting the traditional seeds, she said.

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