

Save our



**Empowering communities
for sustainable food security
in the rice regions of India**

Rice Campaign



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Introduction

The influence of rice on human kind reaches far back in time. Rice had been grown in Asia for more than 7000 years ago. Rice, as we all know, is predominantly an Asian staple crop, 90% of which is produced and consumed in the Asian nations.

The year 1966 is considered to be an important milestone year for agriculture development globally. This was the year the world celebrated the First International Year of Rice (IYR1966). The year when India and various other third world nations, supported by global agencies, started the Green Revolution(GR).

The GR adopted the dwarf, High Yielding Japonica varieties, a major outcome from the IYR1966, supplemented by the use of chemical fertilisers, because these were varieties that responded well to them, and then followed with chemical insecticides, many of them later banned globally for its highly hazardous nature. The agrarian landscape was also almost irreversibly transformed. Productivity, for instance of paddy, rose up by more than 50%, more land got transformed into rice producing lands.

Rainfed regions like Punjab became rice bowls, but destructively so for its ground water, soil quality and health of the ecosystem and its people. The impact on the natural resources and ecosystems remains largely unaudited, but generally lamented. The impact on the farmer population rose with the massive debts of farming households, dwindling incomes, and increasing suicides among farmers.

Worst hit was the Bio-Diversity of India, which had some 1.5 lakh varieties of paddy, evolved over 10000 years of its farming history, destroyed for a few HYVs, pushed aggressively through Government schemes. The ones lost have been permanently lost in just 50 years - Extinct, is a better word.

This was also the year India adopted a Seed law, called the Seed Act, 1966, which quite innocently regularised what was notified and certified seeds, silently eliminating those locally specific, adaptable, indigenous varieties, that had withstood the test of time.

The reason for their elimination was too narrow a parameter - productivity. And this reason

came from establishment that probably ignored the findings of such scientists as Dr Richharia. For instance, he had by then found that in his collection of 19,000 indigenous varieties of paddy, 8% of them had High Yielding potential, the total number far outnumber all the HYVs ever developed under GR in India. By 2004, this scene was very clear. India was also losing its farm lands to urban and infrastructure development.

Kerala alone had lost its cultivated paddy land from 8 lakh ha to nearly 2 lakh ha, a loss of 75% in 40 years. Nudged by the World Bank, India's Planning Commission and its Government were contemplating plans to remove 40% of its farming population to other sectors, but were clueless as to which sectors can take such a massive population.

Hit by the agrarian crisis, farmers were now willingly moving out of farming. And literally everything collected from farm lands – water, soil, flora, fauna, crops, eggs, poultry, milk were contaminated with highly hazardous molecules of pesticides. The collapse of the agrarian system was near complete. The last nail on its head was the adverse global trade agreements forced into the farming sector through WTO and the various FTAs that followed from the globalisation of the economy.

In 2004, the world celebrated the second International Year of Rice (IYR2004), an initiative of the United Nations(UN) along with Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The celebrations panned across nations and agriculture institutions at all levels, including the agriculture majors in the private sector. For PANAP, and for organisations like Thanal working on the sustainability aspects of farming, and on safety and sovereignty issues in agriculture, the IYR2004 was not just another celebration.

It seemed to carry a larger agenda of various stakeholders, but much less of the critical aspects of ecology and sustainability of the farming systems or the welfare and returns to the farmers.

The IYR2004 actually turned out to be a celebration among the rice scientists, breeders, major agri-business houses and was nothing short of a Green Revolution II in the making.

Indian Workshop on Rice 2004

Thanal, an organisation working on sustainable farming, decided to launch an Indian version of the Save our Rice Campaign. The launch workshop was held in the agrarian village of Kumbalangi in Kerala, where the centuries-old rice-fish agro-ecological system is still very much the way of farming. The Indian Workshop on Rice, 2004 as it was called had about 140 representatives from more than 50 organisations spanning 10 rice growing states in India. The three day workshop came up with the Kumbalangi Declaration, that formed the broad intention of the campaign. (See Box for Kumbalangi Declaration, 2004)

The Campaign came up with 5 broad objectives for action on the ground

- Conserving Rice Ecosystems
- Sustaining Rice Culture and Diversity
- Protecting Traditional Wisdom
- Preventing GMOs and Toxics
- Ensuring Safe and Nutritious food

This covered aspects from rice ecosystems, seed, knowledge, culture, threats to rice, and safety aspects for farmers and consumers.

The discussions at the Indian Workshop on Rice in Kumbalangi, analysed in deep the problem associated with India's food security and we came to a conclusion that it cannot be ensured through a techno-fix of improved seeds. Reviving what was lost back into the systems, unwinding the mistakes of four decades of Green Revolution to help us grow into sustainable farmers. This was about correcting the mistakes of a short-termed policy and going forward through reviving time-tested indigenous seeds, practices and farmer-level knowledge so that they can continue with the process of experience, adaptation and eventually evolve local adoptable farming practices at the micro-level for their agro-ecological region.

Our localised climate, culture, social relations, natural resources, and its unique legacy of farming, evolved over thousands of years has the solutions to the future as well. Contextually, this was also important in the age of climate change. This was also a continuum from where

it all halted in the 1960's. Wherever there were methods that we could safely adopt into our organic farming and agro-ecological systems, we did adopt them, but on those technologies that were detrimental to our landscape, wisdom and hence survival, we ran campaigns against them to ensure we phase them out of our landscape and policies. The Save our Rice Campaign was launched.

The Save our Rice Campaign

The campaign is now active in Kerala, especially in the northern districts. In Tamilnadu its active in the three Tanjavore Delta districts and in Kanyakumari District, with a multiplier presence in all the districts through seed savers and seed farmers. Its presence in Karnataka spans across most rice growing districts. In West Bengal the villages in Sundarbans is where we worked most. The campaign also has some presence in villages in Chattisgarh, Jarkhand and Madhyapradesh. The campaign team is from three organisations - Thanal, which founded and continues to coordinate the campaign through its National Coordinator Usha Soolapani, and its Policy Coordinator, Sridhar Ramakrishnan, the author of this article.

The other two organisations are Consumer Research Education Training and Empowerment (CREATE) Trust led by its Managing Trustee, R Ponnambalam, a well known consumer activist and a senior government official retired from the Agriculture Marketing department of Tamilnadu, and its Founder Trustee, Prof Duraisingam. Sahaja Samrudha, a prominent organisation from Karnataka whose expertise on seeds and organic marketing is well established is also a partner. Krishnaprasad, the Director of the Organisation has been advisor of the activities related to seed conservation.

In West Bengal, a team led by Alauddin Ahamed, an experienced hand in organic farming and rural development work under the banner of SoR-WB and mentored by Mr Chandan Mukherjee, a long standing name in organic marketing in India, leads the programme.

As consultants Sreedevi Lekshmikutty, a food activist and an entrepreneur helped in the documentation and publications of the campaign, and Soumick Banerjee, an ecologist and farm activist helped spread the campaign in the Eastern regions of India.

14 years hence, Save Our Rice campaign today has grown into a movement towards achieving food sovereignty, local livelihoods and economic and ecological sustainability, and also be able to influence policies for the same. It achieved this through bringing all concerned about Rice together - farmers, consumers, NGO's, traders, millers, students, children, teachers, leaders, policymakers, media, academicians, scientists and in a broader sense, the general public – to explore the chances of sustaining rice and rice culture.

This stemmed from the realisation that most farming programmes in India, both at the formal and informal levels were addressing farmers alone, as if they are the only ones related to farming and food production. But the effort to protect rice and rice culture, its ecology, diversity and identity was the only way to sustain rice, and this needs all of us, everybody related to rice to be part of the campaign.

Our achievements are wide and sustaining because it is at the local and there are stakeholders who need to ensure the continuity because all that has been established are ones that they need to sustain farming and even benefit out of it through better environment or better livelihoods.

Be it the 1500 seeds that were revived and are maintained in 26 seed banks established in the villages across the seven states and run by the farmers, or the 26 Rice Diversity Blocks that cultivate and propagate the seeds among fellow villagers.

Be it the 21 organic rice trading networks that have evolved out of the villages in these seven states and which now sell seeds and rice. Some of these groups have even formed formal producer companies to market their indigenous organic rice. And the many resourceful farmers and seed savers who have by experience and exposure become resource persons and have established formal and informal Rice Resource Centres in their villages.

And eventually at a very conservative scale, at least a lakh farmers who have with passion adopted indigenous paddy into their farming, and some of them have even become conservationists of the varieties. And lastly, the governments and institutions that have responded to the ground swell and changed policies, we surely

have many stories to tell, but shall highlight a few here.

Indigenous paddy inspires farmers

In all the states that the SoRC works we could see the passion among farmers to return back to their roots, not as a romantic back-to-home syndrome, but as a result of the painful experience with the conventional farming and practices, using High Yielding Varieties (HYVs), Chemical fertilisers and pesticides, the mounting cost of cultivation year after year and the need to find ways of sustaining their farming and make a living out of it.

Cheruvayal Raman, a well-known tribal farmer and seed saver from Wayanad, Kerala, once said that he offers rice to his God and hence does not want to poison the rice with pesticides! He was not talking only about the God, but about himself, his family and his land.

But one will not be able to see this kind of logic or reasoning prevailing among the mainstream farmers who have adopted High Yielding Varieties (HYVs) and chemicals in agriculture, and who cultivate for the Public Distribution System (PDS) or for the markets. When the SoRC was started there were questions that came up - how to bring culture back into rice, how to invoke the passion of the farmers for his paddy and how to inspire the young to move into paddy farming. So, one of the main pillars of the rice campaign was to respect and revive farmers wisdom and rice culture.

And that evolved over the years through revival of indigenous seeds. When farmers started cultivating these seeds one could see the rejuvenation of knowledge and the resurgence of confidence in many of them. xFarmers who came to see the seed caravan that we organised in Kerala, farmers who thronged in thousands to the Nel Thiruvizha in Tamil Nadu, those who travelled to attend the farmer field days in Karnataka, farmers who attended the trainings in Sundarbans in West Bengal were all looking for that elusive something that would take away the pain of cultivating paddy.

The Seed and the experience they had with it, year after year, have ensured it is revived and stays with them. It was not just a matter of food security, but sovereignty as well – both at farm level and community level.

Farmers become knowledge bearers and seed saviours

Leneesh, Pradeesh, Illias, Saneesh, Priyanka were all young when they joined the SoRC during various phases of the campaign in Kerala. Pradeesh and Leneesh went far and wide into the deep farmlands of the State to see what was left of the 3000 or more indigenous varieties of paddy that Kerala is once known to have had. They collected whatever they could and in 2006, this was just 25 in number. Like the experience in Tamilnadu, many of these varieties like Thondi from Wyanad, or a Thavalakannan from down South were also good yielding varieties.

The famous Navara or the Valia Chennellu were medicinal and Gandhasala and Mullankazhama, the variety of the royal among the tribals were scented varieties. Dr Leenakumari, then Head of the Regional Agriculture Research Station (RARS), Mankombu gave immense guidance to the young team to understand these varieties, learn their characteristics and even conduct field studies. Priyanka and Saneesh were involved in such work, doing many a study of flora, fauna and even the uncultivated leafy vegetables that paddy fields give to the locals. Their studies conducted at Thanal's AgroEcology Centre in Panavally, Wyanad have given the campaign immense understanding on paddy fields, as an ecosystem that provides not just rice but such a diverse range of other food and non-food crops and even for the sustenance of animals and birds etc, that play important roles in the agrological systems.

Illias, who led the Agro-Biodiversity Restoration Programme, a State-Government funded project in collaboration with the SoRC at Palakkad, later captained a seed caravan of the SoRC that went with the message of indigenous seeds to 7 districts in Kerala, covering it in 14 days. That was the beginning of the seed revival work in Kerala. The caravan had 10 young farmers who later on joined various groups and are leaders of the organic farming and indigenous seeds revival efforts in Kerala.

In this endeavour of exploring seeds, the campaign realised that farmers had deep embedded knowledge on farming and the ecosystem which they shared even though they had shifted to HYVs believing that these modern seeds would solve their economic woes. We could also see

the revival of such knowledge among the new generation farmers who adopted these seeds. Leneesh, for instance, who does not even have a background in farming, by 2018, was cultivating and maintaining more than 300 indigenous varieties in the Rice Diversity Block at Thanal's AgroEcology Centre. In a decade, he grew into an expert on seeds and farming.

This has happened to many farmers like him. In Kerala, farmers like Jayakrishnan from Kunnamangalam or a Johnson and Rajesh Krishnan from Thrisslery, and in Karnataka, Syed Ghani Khan who at one point conserved over 1000 varieties painstakingly on his fields and Bore Gowda who bred a couple of new varieties based on his observations are only a few among the many others. Sriram Ramamoorthy from Kadhiramangalam, Tanjavore who converted over 100 acres of his land to indigenous paddy and Thenampadugai Bhaskaran from Kumbakonam, who is a rice and climate farmer-scientist are among the many in Tamil Nadu who have become leading local experts.





Children and the Future of Rice & Food Security

What does farming hold as a future for our children? For the leaders in the Campaign – Thanal and its members, this happens to be the most important question. The SoRC had specific programmes like “Biodiversity and Food Security” programme in schools and colleges to bring children and youth into farming. In many places this led to even schools leasing land for paddy

cultivation and engaging with local farmers and fields to cultivate paddy. The campaign even ran a vocational course on organic paddy production and seed conservation.

Today amidst the din of the new generation jobs, a generation of rice growers and seed savers, young and dynamic, and innovating newer and sustainable ways are growing up, giving the Rice Campaign a great hope for the future of farming.

to be continued.....