

Women guard the sacred seeds of biodiversity

GREEN Foundation, based in Bangalore, Southern India, strives to conserve the agricultural biodiversity that is based on local culture and knowledge. Activities to collect, multiply, characterise, conserve and distribute traditional crop varieties like millet, gram, lentils, finger millet, rice and sorghum take

Vanaja Ramprasad

place in 50 communities. GREEN's Biodiversity Conservation Centre is located in Thalli, a rural area in Karnataka and here subsistence agriculture is researched and documented. Activities include food processing, annual seed fairs, group training, documentation, developing publications such as seed catalogues and strengthening indigenous knowledge. This article deals with some aspects of the complex traditional seed system that is still existing in many regions where subsistence 'agriculture' is dominant.

Wild plants and food availability

An agricultural calendar was drawn during a participatory survey amongst women farmers. This calendar was compared with seasonal food availability, the jobs done by men and women and the rituals performed. The calendar

showed that during the main rains reserves of pulses and cereals were usually low and the entire farming community depended on the biodiversity of wild plants for supplies of fruits, vegetables, tubers, and shoots. For farmers, biodiversity manifests itself in cultivated foods as well as wild plants. Women in particular have a special knowledge of wild plants.

Food diversity is being threatened as traditional genetic materials are replaced and natural resources that act as reservoirs of biodiversity are affected. This trend poses a particularly dangerous threat to people who depend on natural resources for survival for several months of the year.

Women play a major role

The survey clearly illustrated the important role women play in handling and conserving seeds. Seed selection by women is a continuous activity and starts the moment the crop comes into flower. Working in the fields, they observe the plants and decide which seeds to select. They identify plants of good quality on the basis of size, grain formation and their resistance to pests and insects. To cover the risk of drought, women select enough seed to see them through two seasons. They also decide on which method of preservation should be used.

Rituals are essential

Seeds are seen as the sacred carriers of life and are therefore surrounded with ritual. These rituals also have their functional aspects. Before seeds are taken into storage, for example, women ritually evoke the forces essential for a good crop during the coming growing season. This ritual is an important part of seed preservation. In it, water is symbolised by a winnowing pan, protection from pests by certain leaves and soil fertility by cow dung. Weeds are symbolised by grass. Some of the leaves used in the ceremony have insecticidal properties.

Lakkli leaves (*Vitex negundo*), for example, are used when paddy seeds are stored and neem leaves are used as an alternative when lakkli is unavailable.

In some cases paddy seeds are mixed with the seeds of field bean (*Dolichus lablab*) and mustard to

GREEN (Genetic Resource Energy, Ecology & Nutrition) is the bulletin published by GREEN Foundation providing an update on the activities of the organisation, important events and publications.

Cultivating Seed Links is a new CD-Rom produced by GREEN Foundation describing bio-diversity from an ecological, economic, gender and cultural perspective. In a highly informative way, using visual material and traditional Indian music, one can learn about biodiversity and the work of GREEN Foundation. Agro-biodiversity conflicts and on-farm conservation are also explained. Costs US\$30.

help preservation and *Tur* is mixed with sand for the same reason. Sometimes seeds are stored above the kitchen where the smoke helps to keep the pests away.

Ceremonial germination test

Before sowing, a germination test or *Negilu Pooje* will be conducted. In areas where finger millet is grown this test takes place at *Ugadi* or the Hindu New Year. A traditional, sacred combination of nine seed varieties of cereals, pulses and oil seeds are put in a shell together with good manure. These are worshipped and inspected after seven days. If there are only a few shoots or these are too small, the seeds of that particular variety are considered unsuitable for the next agricultural season. The farmer will then exchange or borrow seeds to replace them. It is considered improper to buy seeds with money.

Sowing sacred seeds

Just before they are sown the women take the seeds to the house deity where they are worshipped. On their way to the field, the woman carrying the seeds will visit and make offerings to the seven village goddesses who are known as the 'Seven Sisters'. Women also worship the draft animals and farming implements used in sowing.

None of the above procedures are followed for the seeds of high-yielding varieties bought at the market. Local varieties are considered sacred whereas high-yielding varieties are treated as being impure. They are sent directly to the field where only the men are responsible for sowing them.

For a fuller version of this article see COMPAS Newsletter Vol 1-2, October 1999, pp 24-25. See also http://www.etcint.org/compas_news.htm

Vanaja Ramprasad, GREEN Foundation, 839, 23rd main, J.P. Nagar II Phase, Bangalore 560 078, India. Tel: +91 80 663 5963; Fax: +91 80 665 1729; Email: nanditha@blr.vsnl.net.in

Ceremonial seed germination test

