

# THE HINDU BusinessLine

## Millets Commune shows the way for rain-fed farming

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*Women farmers preserve seed, give it on barter to fellow farmers*



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Hyderabad, July 14:

Paramma, 50, holds the mud-topped bamboo box as she takes it down from the attic, as if she is holding an infant, with a lot of care. For, that 1.5 ft diameter box contains the sorghum seed for the season.

Treated using the processing techniques she learned from her mother and her father-in-law, the seeds would do not only for her own farm but also for a few others.

Paramma is the village seed banker of Bida Kanne village near Kishtapur in Medak district. She would never turn a farmer away when they come for seed.

“I don’t sell them. I just give them on barter or kind of lend them. They will give me back double the quantity next time,” she says.

She is not just alone, who is preserving millet seeds for the next season, using the traditional methods passed on to them by their elders.

### Seed corpus

This has been a practice for majority of farmers in about 75 villages near in four mandals of Medak district.

Though some well off farmers go for expensive commercial crops such as sugar cane, majority of small and marginal farmers are still relying on millets, the crops that are well suited for rain-fed areas such as Telangana. They don’t buy seeds. They preserve them.

“We go around the field and pick some healthy grain for preservation. We top the box with mud, lay a layer of neem leaves and then ash on which we keep the seed. We use a layer of mud and dry grass and seal the whole box with mud, dry it and keep it at a secure space,” Paramma explains.

Chandamma, who heads the Seed Bank run by Deccan Development Society (DDS) at Pastapur, points out that crops of different seeds require different treatments.

The society, which is driving the millets initiative in the State and elsewhere, builds a corpus of seeds to distribute to the needy. This bank is connect to the village level banks, run by the local women committees. These committees would hold an annual meet to draw a strategy for the following season, while reviewing the performance the previous season.

“I maintain a log of who takes what and how much and request them to contribute back to the bank,” she said, taking the reporter around the bank.

### Gene bank

Started about 30 years ago, the DDS is building a network of farmers, mostly small and marginal farmers in four mandals in the district. It sets up village-level gene banks that helped revival of about 80 land races of various crops.

“We now connect with 5,000 farmers with complete focus on millets. We use no chemicals. We give them marketing support, while allowing them to sell their produce on their own. Our idea is to make them self-reliant and don’t depend on others, including us,” PV Satheesh, Development Communicator and Founder-Member of DDS, told *BusinessLine*.

DDS volunteers collect the produce from the farmers in the network, process it and sell it under the brand name ‘Sangam’. It has started selling it to the organic food product firms in Hyderabad.

DDS built an ecosystem around millets in the surrounding areas. It runs an FM radio that produces and broadcasts

programmes on millet cultivation and related culture around it. It is run by children of farmers.

### **Other activities**

They take care of content generation, recording, editing and broadcast. It runs a school too, segregating children based on their IQ level and preparing them for high-school education.

“Each of them would be taught a profession such as book-binding and carpentry,” a teacher at the school said.

Farmers in the area, however, are a bit worried as there are no follow-up rains after the initial monsoon showers. “We desperately need good bouts of rains now. We have sown the seed we have. Where we can find the seed, if it fails now,” Tukkapopa, who sowed millets on five acres, said.

“We have developed a functional model. This is like a pilot. It is up to other stakeholders to scale it up and cover the rain-fed areas,” the 69-year-old development communicator observes.

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