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Fest to revive forgotten crops begins in AP

JBS Umanadh, HYDERABAD, Jan 15, DHNS:
Continuing past

Inside the beautifully decorated carts are the small baskets with their own glass cases containing millet seeds, a colourful shop-window of biological diversity on wheels.

Locally known as Patha Pantala Panduga (festival of old and ancient crops), the annual month-long mobile biodiversity festival organised by the farmers and farmers' groups under the Pastapur based Deccan Development Society (DDS) began in Rechintal village of semi-arid Medak district in Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh on January 14 and will culminate on February 13, at DDS' Green School, in Machnoor.

In this festival, farmers participate along with their beautifully decorated bullock carts, displaying the seeds of the forgotten millets, which the farmers' groups succeeded in reviving in the Zaheerabad mandal of Medak district. Over the years, this festival has generated an unprecedented energy and has served multiple objectives; it has seen the most vibrant discussions amongst farmers about the status of food and farming in the country, today.

Farmers from different countries including West Africa, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, Canada and Bangladesh are participating in the festival to bring in diversity to this festival.

The festival was first initiated in 2001 as part of DDS' engagement with the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process. Each year, the DDS Biodiversity Festival acts as solidarity, advocacy and awareness generation exercise for the biodiverse farmers of Medak District in Andhra Pradesh.

Festival on Wheels

The festival is basically a colourful caravan of brilliantly decorated bullock carts travelling along with singers and dancers carrying the message of the importance of retaining, reviving and rejuvenating traditional agricultural practices. The procession of bullock carts, decorated with sheaves of grain, flower garlands and colourful fabrics is an overpowering image of bountiful crops and food-sovereign villages.

Every January, the farmers travelling in caravans visit 70 villages in the region and in every village, they exchange their seeds with the seeds grown in those villages. They also spread the message of ecological farming even as other women prepare traditional dishes, thus bringing out the culinary significance of their crops.

In addition, the millet growers in the region take an oath pledging to carry on the work of preserving for the posterity of the old farming systems, and knowledge of biodiversity.

From generations

As part of the festival, the elder generation of women, who have preserved,

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protected and nourished the heritage of agro-biodiversity for generations, and handed over in the form of a seed pot (a copper pot in which a variety of seeds were mixed) to the daughters and daughter-in-laws of their communities for safe keeping, preserving and nourishing in their generation. Seeds for posterity.

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"In spite of the shift to 'marketable crops' everywhere post green revolution, these marginal farmers in Zaheerabad region still grow millets such as Korralu, Samalu, Taidalu etc ; and traditional varieties of red gram, black gram, chickpea among others in a way they were grown since ages," says Periapatnam V Sateesh, DDS director. These practices are even relevant today as they are cost-effective and can be grown even on poor soil without requiring irrigation, fertilizers or pesticides, he adds.

They cultivate multiple varieties of these traditional crops which in turn help to preserve the bio-diversity of the region. Keeping hybrid or seeds grown elsewhere at bay, they depend on only local variety of seeds that were handed down to them by their forefathers and preserve them in 'seed banks' in their villages for posterity.

The festival also desires to remind people elsewhere that there's a need to make these traditional food grains part of the regular diet for their high nutrient values when compared with rice or wheat.

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