

Millet revolution in drought-hit TS

Women farmers across 70 villages in Zaheerabad rewrite history, celebrate 'Patha Pantala Panduga'

VIVEK BHOOMI

Jharasangam (Medak Dist): At a time when farmers across Telangana are succumbing to severe drought conditions, about 5,000 women farmers spread across 70 villages in Zaheerabad constituency are paving the way to conserving biodiversity by millet farming in an organic way. What was started two-decades ago by a small group of like-minded people who founded the Deccan Development Society (DDS) has now created a millet revolution of sorts among farmers in the area. Interestingly, farmers in these villages continue the tradition of holding 'Patha Pantala Panduga', celebrating their agro biodiversity, ecological agriculture and millet farming every year.

The inaugural ceremony of the month-long celebrations began at Edakulapally village in Jharasangam mandal on Thursday. The farmers, mostly women, arrived at the venue with caravans decked with diverse millet seeds produced by them using organic methods of farming. Folk music and dances filled the air that reflected a sense of rural enlightenment.

There were stalls promoting millet farming, soil health preservation, improvement and other organic methods of achieving high yields. This is the 17th such festival organised by DDS, which will carry on until the next month, where caravan would move from village to village, interacting with and empowering villagers to take up millet farming to protect biodiversity. It is interesting to know that in this unique festival people do not offer prayers to any particular God but treat the 'seeds' they produce as their God. They beautifully decorate the carts with millets, offer prayers to the seeds and parade the carts (temple of seeds) in villages. The carts are decorated



A foreigner dancing with villagers during 'Patha Pantala Panduga' in Jharasangam village in Medak district on Thursday

with great millets/sorghum (jonna), finger millets (ragi), kodo millets (arikelu), common millet (variga), spiked millets (sajja), Italian millets (korra), lit-

tle millets (samalu) and barnyard millets (udalu), among several other varieties.

Women farmers of DDS grow up to 52 crop varieties in Kharif

(monsoon) using no irrigation, no hybrid seeds, no external inputs or chemicals. In Rabi (winter) season, they grow up to 27 crops. Though currently there



are 5,000 regular members in DDS, about 1,00,000 are slowly converting themselves to millet farming, according to P Satish, Director of DDS.

Millet farming is an age-old tradition in Telangana, which faded away with the advent of commercial farming. What was spread across 50,000 hectares in united Andhra Pradesh has shrunk to less than 15,000 hectares in the recent years. Crops like cotton have been taken up of late. Millets are still grown in parts of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

Millets can be grown in rainfed conditions with a rainfall of 300 mm to 500 mm, whereas crops like paddy need 1,200-1,300 mm rainfall. Millets require no irrigation and they can grow on almost all soil types. They are also a storehouse of nutrition. According to Satish, climate change may not allow the use of water for agriculture purposes by 2050, as the temperature would go up by 1.2 or 2.5 per cent by then. He believes that when water becomes scarce, malnutrition would shoot up. Hence, by promoting millet farming, he hopes the State and the Central governments will provide the same benefits to farmers growing millets, as they treat other farmers.

"Rice in Public Distribution System (PDS), which has been predominantly occupying as the food for the poor should be replaced or combined with millets. According to Food Security Act, out of the 25 kgs, 7 kgs should include millets costing Rs 1 per kilo," he said.

Women farmers, who are currently growing millets in as little as 1 or 2 acres, have been using 30 per cent of the produce for their household consumption and selling the rest. They are hoping the government comes up with a way to encourage them technologically and financially, so that they can grow more.

Mobile biodiversity festival flagged off

OUR BUREAU

Jharasangam (Medak): Institute of Millet Research (IMR) Director TG Nageshwara Rao has announced a series of steps being taken up by the institute to promote millet farming among the people of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

He was the chief guest at the 17th mobile biodiversity festival being organised by Deccan Development Society (DDS) at Jharasangam mandal on Thursday.

Speaking on the occasion, Nageshwara Rao said that the institute had released 30 hybrid and 30 improved varieties of millet seeds into the market. He felt that Jowar was not getting into the market as desired because of low demand and lack of awareness among the public.

He said that the institute has come up with Jowari roti-making machines keeping in mind the difficulty people may face in preparing them as it can be time consuming. The institute has prepared 20 food items from Jowar and certain ready-to-eat foods using Jonna, Raagi and Sajja like Vermicelli, biscuits, pasta, puffs and heat exuded products using Jowar.

Calling upon the millet farmers of DDS to not only produce millets but also learn to make these food preparations and market them, he announced that IIMR was also offering free training to the farmers every month so that they could become more self-sufficient, earning higher profit margin for their products.

Elaborating on what more could be done using millets, he said that by using sweet sorghum varieties, jaggery and bio-ethanol could also be produced using Jowar, which according to him was a better alternative to sugarcane farming, as it takes only 3-4 months to get the crop, whereas sugarcane takes more than a year to grow. He said Jowar could be used as fodder for cattle and that it could increase

the milk output by 5-10 per cent.

He added that the institute has also come up with 'Attracting rural Youth for Agriculture' (ARYA) programme and introducing Reapers and Millet Processing Mills on community basis.

He disclosed that tribal sub-plan funds and front-line demonstrations (giving seeds and economic support through bank loans) were also being facilitated by the institute.

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Rukmini, founding member of DDS requested Nageshwara Rao to consider IIMR training certificates given to the farmers after the completion of training as consideration for giving bank loans instead of property pass books which are usually sought by the banks while giving loans. She said that usually the property would be in the name of the husbands, due to which the women farmers were being devoid of financial assistance.

Seeking bankers' help, she hoped women going in groups for loans could be given loans in a liberal manner. Pointing out the huge discrepancy in the farmers' sex ratio (only 13 female farmers per 100 male farmers), she hoped that the government should recognise women farmers as farmers as well, who should be extended all kinds of support by the government.

Deccan Development Society (DDS) Director P Satish, Director, DDS, expressed hope that Nageshwara Rao would act as a link between the farmers and the government.