



Tamil Nadu Women's Collective founder Sheelu Francis (middle in green) presiding over a seed exchange festival between members.

PHOTOS: Sohel Sarkar

In India, Women's Seed Conservation Practices Are Making Them Climate Resilient

by SOHEL SARKAR

Tamarai is unsure of her age but she can name every single one of the 30-odd varieties of heirloom millet seeds she's saved over the years. She started nearly three decades ago, when she took charge of the family's two-acre farm following the death of her husband. She utilized a practice she learned from her mother and aunt who would always grow a few varieties of millets, pulses and vegetables in their backyard, regardless of the crops being cultivated in the commercial fields by the men. After every harvest, they would carefully select and preserve the healthiest seeds, and exchange some with the rest of the community. "For every seed they saved for the family's use, two were given away", Tamarai explains.

For generations, women in India's agrarian and indigenous communities have saved heirloom seeds as a de facto form of biodiversity conservation, safeguarding heritage crops from extinction.¹ In turn, the easy availability of diverse seeds enabled them to grow a variety of food crops and claim nutritional security for their families. In recent years, their seed saving practice is also making them climate resilient.²

Millets, in particular, can grow in poor quality soil with very little water and care.³ They also grow best in a polyculture system, combined with nitrogen-fixing pulses and oilseeds.⁴ Historically, these qualities made millets a staple crop, especially in the drier parts of the country.

However, millets began to disappear from farmers' fields following the Green Revolution of the 1960s and '70s, when the Indian government incentivized farmers to switch indigenous seeds for high yielding varieties of rice and wheat.⁵ It was only in the late 2010s that policymakers realized that heirloom millets held huge potential in a climate insecure world: being drought resistant and heat tolerant, they could grow well amid higher temperatures and poor rainfall.

During a devastating drought that struck Dharmapuri district between 2016 and 2018,⁶ as the rains continually failed, millets were one of the few crops that survived, allowing women to put food on the table, Tamarai says.

Such climate uncertainties set in motion a movement to revive millet cultivation across India, and this is when heirloom seeds saved by women came in handy for farming communities. Tamarai is part of the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective which helps small and marginal women farmers practice sustainable farming and reclaim nutritional security for themselves and their families. When the collective started in 2013, it was women like Tamarai who supplied the seeds they had been saving for years, teaching newer members how to conserve them.



Tamarai (extreme left) on her farm with other members of the women's collective.



Heirloom seeds of millets and other companion crops displayed during a seed exchange festival.

“Today, we have more than 10,000 women who save different types of seeds. Many save anything between five to thirty varieties depending on the size of the land they have, and the different types of crops they grow,” says the collective’s founder Sheelu Francis.⁷

These women are following in the footsteps of many generations of seed mothers, women who have historically been responsible for identifying, collecting, multiplying, conserving heirloom seeds, and encouraging community farmers to use them. While the tradition is dying out in some regions, seed mothers are still an integral part of agrarian and indigenous communities in certain states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Odisha.⁸

Some of these communities have seed conservation and exchange as part of their rituals. The indigenous Kutia-Kondh people of Odisha’s Kandhamal district, for instance, celebrate a post-harvest seed festival called Burlang Yatra. Burlang is defined as a bamboo basket used to store seeds. The festival is an occasion for farmers to display and exchange heirloom seeds as well as share the knowledge of how to conserve and grow them with others in the community. Honoring their role as traditional custodians, it is women who carry the heirloom seeds in brightly painted clay pots to the host farmer’s house in the same or a nearby village. The exchange of seeds takes place only between women farmers, and the ceremony is presided over by a woman priest.

These knowledge systems are now being restored by agri-based grassroots nonprofits and farmer producer organizations across India. The Tamil Nadu Women’s Collective organizes annual seed festivals to facilitate exchange between members and women farmers elsewhere in India. While the collective depends on decentralized seed saving by members, the Andhra Pradesh-based nonprofit Sanjeevani has a seed bank that collects seeds freely shared by farmers and distributes them among other participating farmers.

“Preserving indigenous seeds has been a way of life for our elders,” Tamarai points out. “We are only taking it forward.”

TAKE ACTION

Saving seeds is a great way to conserve agrobiodiversity and safeguard plants against extinction. Beginners can start by saving seeds of crops such as tomatoes, lettuce and beans. These are annual, self-pollinating crops that require little to no isolation, and only a few plants are needed to reliably produce seeds.

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