

Thousands of Farmers Participate in Seed Festival Aimed at Protecting Diversity of Indigenous Seeds

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Nearly sixty villagers are sitting on an open floor covered by a roof for shade but otherwise open on all sides. Women and men are present in equal numbers but the visibility of women is higher because of their colorful dresses.

These are mostly bheel tribal community members from India who have gathered here to be a part of a seed festival (beej utsav or beejotsav) that is aimed at strengthening the efforts of many rural and tribal communities to protect the diversity of their indigenous seeds.

In the front on a few tables various diverse indigenous seeds, particularly of millet crops, are displayed. Farmers, particularly women farmers who are even better informed about seeds, have brought these seeds with them. The seeds they brought will be taken away in small amounts by others who need them, while they will take away those seeds brought by others which they lack but need. Then they will in turn also tell other farmers of their village about what they heard and learnt at this meeting, and share a few seeds with them. Hence in a very nice way indigenous seeds as well as information about seeds gets exchanged at a meeting in which typically 40 to 80 farmers from 3 to 15 villages may participate. At the end of the meeting these farmers also take a pledge regarding their determination to protect and save indigenous seeds.

This is a scene from a seed protection community meeting in Sera Nagal village located in Banswara district (Rajasthan) which this writer attended recently on June 20. However this could have been a scene from any one of the nearly 90 seed-protection village meetings that were organized recently from June 18 to June 22 in the tri-junction area and meeting point of three states in India—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. A significant part of

the population of this region consists of tribal communities who are known for their rich heritage of indigenous seeds, particularly of millets.

These seed-protection meetings were organized by a voluntary organization Vaagdhara and various community-based organization linked closely to it.

These 90 meetings could achieve the participation of nearly 1000 villages and hamlets where Vaagdhara voluntary organization works.

At these meetings various farmers and those with specialized knowledge of various seed varieties took turns to speak, giving useful information about these indigenous seed varieties as well as regarding the urgency of protecting indigenous seeds.

This is widely seen and understood by these communities as an important time and opportunity for bringing back to these communities something of great value that has been lost to a significant extent in recent decades.

These rural and particularly tribal communities traditionally cultivated a wide diversity of indigenous seeds but after the advent of the green revolution this diversity of indigenous seeds was rapidly eroded. Hence the invaluable heritage of farm bio-diversity and indigenous seeds, the great achievement of the combined efforts of several generations of farmers continuing for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years was very badly eroded and substantially lost, at least on the fields of farmers. Incredibly, all this took place while officially celebrating the 'achievements' of the green revolution.

However once communities realized the extent of the loss they had suffered, several efforts started to protect the heritage of indigenous seeds on the fields of farmers (not just in gene banks). The efforts that Vaagdhara organization has been making for indigenous seed protection have been widely appreciated, particularly as these have also been accompanied by efforts to spread natural farming practices and to improve the self-reliance and resilience of rural communities, particularly tribal communities. The concept of largely self-reliant rural communities, called gram swaraj, which was emphasized a lot by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom movement, has been adopted by Vaagdhara as one of its leading precepts and the concept of seed self-reliance and protection of indigenous seeds is an integral aspect of this.

Hence while Vaagdhara has been working with continuity for protection of indigenous seeds for several years, the recently organized festival of indigenous seeds and the related bio-diversity is being regarded as a very significant step forward on this path as about 90 village assemblies could be held on this issue within just five days and the response of farmers, particularly women farmers, was very enthusiastic. The demand for annual organizing of such a seed festival has also been raised. One hopes that such indigenous seed festivals will become a symbol of hope and determination to protect the vast diversity of indigenous seeds.

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