

Plateful of rice

Paddy farmers come together under one roof to showcase and conserve hundreds of strains of this staple crop

Indulekha Aravind / Bangalore April 08, 2012, 0:37 IST

It is a genocide no one talks about." The "genocide" here is something we know by another name, for what Debal Deb is referring to is the Green Revolution and the effect it has had on the variety of rice species now available. Deb has his rationale. "Before the Green Revolution, India had around 110,000 varieties of rice but now we are left with only around 6,000 species," says the ecologist and academic who now devotes all his time and energy to the conservation of rice. On his two-acre plot in Orissa, Deb has managed to conserve 720 varieties. "This extermination of species is what happens when you switch to monoculture," says Deb who has dropped in at the Desi Rice Mela in the city.

If 720 varieties is a bit hard to digest for people like you and I who live on polished rice we buy from supermarkets and the occasional basmati for biryani, a walk through the mela might help put things in perspective. The fourth edition of the mela is showcasing over 200 varieties, arranged in small bowls and in sheafs, of different hues and sizes, while the ones for sale are in sacks. The variety is fascinating. "This rice used to be favoured by the Wodeyars, the royal family of Mysore, and used to be cultivated extensively in the state but is now restricted mainly to Mysore," says B Somesha, the CEO of Sahaja Organics, taking a fistful of brown and white Rajamudi rice from a sack. The cooked rice will not spoil for 48 hours. Sahaja Organics markets the produce of Sahaja Samrudha, an association of organic farmers and one of the organisers of the mela. The others are Nabard, Pristine Organics and Arya. Next to it is a sack of Burma Black, indigenous to that country, which crossed the border to Nagaland and eventually reached Karnataka. There is also joint pain rice, which is supposed to alleviate the pain, and special varieties for diabetics that are rich in fibre at the mela.

Sahaja Organics used to be an informal group of farmers in Nelamangala, near Bangalore, founded by retired BSNL engineer NR Shetty with the aim of conserving and promoting traditional varieties of seeds and methods of cultivation, as well as organic farming. Finding that there was no sufficient marketing platform for organic produce, Sahaja Samrudha Organic Producers Company was floated, where the farmers themselves were the shareholders. The rice mela is one of their efforts to familiarise city-dwellers with their efforts.

"Over 4,000 farmers are now part of our efforts," says Seema, one of the project coordinators. During harvest, the group brings together farmers, scientists, agriculture officers and researchers. The farmers are asked to go around a field with different varieties of rice and asked to tag the ones they are interested in — invariably, they tend to favour the traditional, local varieties. These preferences are stored in a database and Sahaja then sends them the seeds. "If one farmer in a village grows a traditional variety one season, this becomes 10 farmers by the next," she says. Experience has also shown that farmers themselves are interested in shifting to organic methods, because the yield is higher and also because Sahaja offers them a ready marketing and sales platform. There are nine agro-climatic zones in Karnataka and Sahaja promotes local varieties suited to each, says Seema. The farmers are quite happy to grow the local varieties as they tend to be drought- and pest-resistant, she adds.

Syed Ghani Khan is one of the farmers actively involved in rice conservation and promoting local varieties. The 36-year-old grows 250 varieties of rice on one-and-a-half acres in his 20-acre farm in Mandya, near Mysore. His interest

was stirred in 1994 when he came across 40 gram of grain he had never seen before, and cultivated it. "Others suggested I name it after myself since it seemed new but I persisted in researching and found that it was Rathnachudi," he says. He has also developed 10 varieties on his own, through cross-pollinating traditional varieties. The archaeology and museology graduate had another burning ambition — to establish a paddy museum at home! "When I succeed, it will only be the second rice museum in the world," he says proudly, adding that funds are a problem at the moment.

With people like Khan, Deb and the folks at Sahaja Organics on the job, rice conservation is evidently far from a lost cause.

The Desi Rice Mela, ongoing at Basava Bhavana, Chalukya Circle, ends today