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In search of vanishing traditional rice varieties

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Debal Deb

Debal Deb is on a mission to conserve vanishing traditional rice varieties.

In his two-acre demonstration farm in Basudha of Bankura district in West Bengal, Mr. Deb, a biologist with a doctorate in ecology, has cultivated 720 folk varieties of rice in the last 17 years.

India had a rich treasure of over 1,10,000 indigenous varieties of rice until 1970, says Mr. Deb. After that the country lost almost 90 per cent of them.

“The traditional seeds have amazing adaptability to local environmental conditions and endurance to climatic changes such as draught and flood. They even grow in saline water.”

For instance, a flood-resistant rice variety in Bengal – Lakshmi – grows 18-foot tall. Another variety needs only one spell of rain. The folk variety – Sathy – has three grains in a single seed.

After the Green Revolution, these varieties are fast dwindling from fields. Only a handful of folk rice varieties are being cultivated now. With the extinction of these varieties, the gene pool of the Indian paddy will be highly endangered.

The hybrid varieties, grown generally by the farmers throughout the country, cannot withstand the extreme climatic conditions, says Mr. Deb. They need excessive amount of inputs such as water, fertilizer and pesticides.

“It's time we reconsider the existing paradigm of development. The common understanding among natural scientists is that development means unlimited increase in production and consumption.”

He ridiculed the myth that hybrid seeds, fertilizers, and pest-control techniques alone can guarantee good yield. “In my 17-years of farming experience, I have proved that most of the traditional seeds with zero input have given more yield than that of hybrid varieties. External inputs are not necessary for getting a good yield. Leave it to Nature, it will take care of everything,” he says.

“In modern farming, any insect is a pest. We should understand that pests are natural occurrences.”

Mr. Deb founded Vrihi, a non-governmental indigenous rice gene bank, in 1997. Vrihi works for biodiversity conservation, knowledge transfer and non-commercial seed exchange within and beyond India's indigenous communities. Mr. Deb was in Thrissur to take part in a campaign for the conservation of traditional seeds.

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