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SMALL FARMERS

Debal Deb, the man fighting to reintroduce India to indigenous rice farming

Basudha, founded by the scientist, is a 1.7-acre farm in Odisha that promotes ecological architecture and research into tribal farming

BY **VEDANT KARIA** PUBLISHED 15.06.22, 04:20 PM



From the fields: Debal Deb speaks to farmers
Photos by Debal Deb

In the summer of 1991, ecological scientist Debal Deb was surveying the biodiversity of groves that were considered sacred in southern Bengal. He noticed a tribal farmer's pregnant wife drinking the starch water drained from cooked Bhutmuri rice – a drink they believed could potentially cure peripartum anaemia in women. This led him to extensively research the varieties of rare, indigenous rice and their benefits.

Since then, his life's mission has been to collect, regenerate and share these rare and valuable varieties of indigenous rice with farmers. This effort culminated in 2001, when he founded Basudha farm.

Small beginnings

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Basudha was initially established as a field station in Bankura for the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies, a body Deb founded in 1993 to counter the drawbacks of industrial growth, promote ecological architecture and rebuild the ethos of the farming community. Today, it is a 1.7-acre farm in a tribal village, surrounded by forests and hills in Bissam Cuttack block of Rayagada district in southern Odisha. In addition to being a centre for research, it can also accommodate activists, research students and farmers.



Basudha is a 1.7-acre farm in a tribal village, surrounded by forests and hills, in southern Odisha

According to rice scientist R. H. Richharia, India had over 1,10,000 distinct varieties of rice till the 1970s. Around that time, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) gave the Indian government a few high-yielding varieties of rice and urged farmers to replace indigenous varieties with them.

Going it alone

Deb began surveying the surviving indigenous varieties in 1994, after finding a lack of documentation. Upon completing his research in 2006, he realised that 90 per cent of them had disappeared. After being denied help by the government and several private institutions, he decided to work towards his mission of conservation and restoration alone, manifesting as Basudha, which stands for 'Earth Mother' in Bengali.



Farming at Basudha goes beyond just rice, as more than 30 species of crops are cultivated here

A notable endeavour of his was the first non-governmental rice seed bank for farmers, called Vrihi. Under this programme, Deb promotes the non-commercial exchange of folk rice varieties to establish a culture of cultivating indigenous seeds. Rare seeds are individually germinated in clay pots and irrigated with cow urine, before being distributed to farmers. Any farmer can receive any indigenous rice variety for free from Vrihi's seed bank, by giving seeds for at least one folk rice variety in exchange. The bank started with 21 varieties in 1998, and by 2021, had scaled to 1,440 types. Till 2019, over 7,600 farmers had exchanged 910 varieties of rice from the bank. Deb's vision is to go beyond just promoting the exchange of seeds, and he takes an active interest in motivating farmers to establish their own community seed banks.



Vrihi's collection has some astonishing varieties – sourced from across the world

Vrihi's collection has some astonishing varieties – sourced from across India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Thailand, Korea, the Philippines and Italy. Besides comprising the world's only rice containing trace silver in its grains; there is a triple-grain variety; nine landraces that can grow in 3m deep water; 15 landraces that are salt-tolerant, some of which can even grow in sea water; 12 drought-tolerant landraces that do not need irrigation after transplanting; 68 landraces with high iron content; and 30 with high zinc.

Beyond just rice

As for Basudha, its efforts range from conserving these rare rice varieties to supporting organic farming. It also goes beyond just rice, as more than 30 species of crops are cultivated here. To foster research of ecoforestry practices, Basudha also gives practical training in

the farm are made of adobe, stones, mud and lime mortar with thatched roofs. To ensure sanitation, it has three EcoSan dry toilets, and the compost from them is used to enrich the soil. The entire campus is solar powered.



Deb interacts with farmers

But the journey hasn't been smooth sailing all the way, and Deb admits that obtaining financial support has been a major challenge, as it is crucial to pay adequate salaries to his field and lab staff. He also feels that there isn't enough land to accommodate the ever-expanding varieties grown at Basudha each year. Coupled with private business enterprises that collect seeds from Vrihi for free and sell it at a high price to farmers and academics who pirate his published data, Deb has a lot to deal with. He isn't complaining though, as his mission to promote indigenous farming takes precedence over everything else.

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