

Save Our Rice

Sustaining Rice; Fighting GMOs; Ensuring safe food; Protecting Community Wisdom

Rice or paddy needs no introduction to us, Asians. Rice is food for us and no other plant has had such a deep-rooted influence on our lives. For, centuries, if not from time immemorial we in Asia have been cultivating rice, which is our food. This single crop binds India, China, Bangladesh, Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam and all other traditional 'rice-nations'.

In South India, Rice cultivation and rice-based systems have played a significant role in the lives of a very large population, influencing our language, our culture and the rural economy. Any change in the status of rice will affect all sectors of our society, directly and indirectly, as rice has become an inherent part of our life, culture and value systems. Rice is more than agriculture and commerce; rice is life for us.

End of the high-tech road

With colonization and industrialization came 'modern' technologies. It was an essential part of the alternate cultural package imposed on us. Then came a flood of revolutions – green, white, yellow – that rocked our agriculture. With 'Green Revolution' came new saviours – High yielding varieties and hybrids, chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The cultural practices, systems and values, which naturally evolved over thousands of years, were replaced by this 'scientific' agriculture. Within a span of 50 years, our agriculture, especially rice experienced more threats and hurdles than ever. Though world food production increased, Green Revolution caused immense loss of varieties and crops, destroyed food security at grass root levels, polluted our soil and water, shattered the social fabric of nations and made farmer dependent on companies and bureaucracy, in every possible aspect. Along with the countless local varieties and systems, the traditional knowledge flow was disrupted, if not completely destroyed. The susceptible hybrids attracted scores of pests and diseases. To control them, tons of chemical toxins were pumped into our fields. Pesticide destroyed our ecosystems and ruined our health. Now we are standing on the cross roads of history where we find it hard to sustain agriculture as a whole and rice in particular. The huge input costs of modern agriculture, mounting debts, immense environmental destruction and also many international, national and local developments have pushed rice farmers to the edge. All roads before the rice farmer are closed and the vested interests are trying to manipulate this crisis-situation.

The looming dangers – WTO, AOA and the GMOs

Two of the impending dangers are already upon us – the WTO-Agreement on Agriculture (AOA) and Biotechnology. Under the WTO regime, Multi-National /Trans National Corporations (MNCs /TNCs) are eager to get exclusive rights over our seeds, through Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) especially patents. IPR endangers the food sovereignty of countries and local communities, because they prevent peasants from planting their own seeds and crops, using their community wisdom and ultimately threatens their existence itself.

Biotechnology is being hyped as "the" technology of this era. In biotech field, research and development is almost fully controlled by MNCs like Monsanto, Bayer Crop Science and Syngenta, which are also the world's biggest producers of agrochemicals. These are the same companies who have been selling us their toxic-pesticides and endangering our lives. The Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs – plants, animals or microbes) are the latest versions of this 'technology – mania.' Indian government has already given permission for cultivating GM-cotton, which has proved itself to be a failure and a trap. Government machinery was a complete failure in controlling the illegal spread of GM-cotton. An average Indian may have heard of Golden Rice and Bt, which are heavily advertised under-cover through articles and news-bits in popular publications. But (s)he is not aware of its impacts (not even the scientific-community has any clear idea regarding the nature or the magnitude of its impacts). After all, in the biotech world, it is not ethics but business that drives the 'scientific' minds. They don't care whether it destroys the earth or farmers. The Task force on Application of Biotechnology in Agriculture, headed by Dr.M.S.Swaminathan, has already submitted a heavily biased report to the Government of India, recommending the use of GM-crops and animals in the country. In a race to protect the interest of the MNCs, national leaderships are risking it all, even after it is clear that the consequences of GMOs may be devastating. The lessons we got from green revolution should not be ignored or forgotten.

The current process of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization has bolstered and intensified the stranglehold of MNCs over our agriculture. Common

Resources & projects held under public trust, are being sold to corporate interests too fast, for one to realise. Even individually owned land is under threat of privatization in the name of contract farming. The transfer of land rights from farmers to corporates is surely one of the objectives behind the pro-corporatisation policies of the governments. On one hand modern agriculture has left us in the midst of nowhere and on the other we are being pressured to open our markets to the highly subsidised agriculture imports from the North.

And at the end of a multitude of such technological revolutions, many unanswered, yet well perceived questions are left – where are our seeds? Where is the clean and unadulterated nature? Where has our health gone? Where are our relationships? Who shattered our community lifestyle? Where have our songs gone? Who will help us out?

Where are we standing?

Speaking of rice we have enough reasons to frown. Rice culture is under serious threat all around Asia. For Asians, rice means everything. (Two billion Asians get 60-70% of their energy needs from rice. Rice supports 1 billion employments in rural areas of developing nations and small-scale farmers produce 4/5th of world's rice.) Taking our case, there is no need to elaborate on what rice means to South and East India. Our culture and our lives are so dearly bound with the crop that we can't even think of getting separated from it. It is our heritage; it is our identity. Unfortunately, all the possible threats we can imagine, are making rice cultivation unsustainable. Cash crops and other high value crops are penetrating their way into the paddy fields. Big projects are destroying our paddy lands. Pro-contract farming policies of the Governments are making it impossible for the farmers from regaining control over their lives. WTO-regime & the worst of all, genetically modified seeds are being pushed into our lives.

Problems are diverse and innumerable. It varies from region to region and even district to district. Nevertheless, the question of how to sustain rice farming has emerged as a common concern for our farmers and for all of us.

Where traditional rice systems were destroyed, for example in the State of Kerala, it has shattered the social fabric of the State. Her paddy area plummeted from around 8.8 lakh hectares (in the 1970's) to about 3.1 lakh hectares (2003), turning the green state into a totally food dependant state. The destruction of the wet (paddy) lands, which were one of the major water reservoirs of the State, has led to acute water scarcity in this land of 44 rivers. Food security and sovereignty is out of question. In spite of the much-hyped developments in education and health sectors, Kerala is crumbling fast and how.

Most of the other South Indian states, West Bengal, (which tops in rice production), Chattisgarh and Orissa are bound to rice for aeons. The vast diversity of paddy systems in these parts of the world, has contributed to the brilliant cultural pattern of the region. Now it is on the verge of being destroyed. Farmers' hopes are dwindling and they are not able to survive in the changed circumstances. Suicides are increasing among farmer community and there are no serious attempts to correct this malady. Governments, over the years, have rebutted every report regarding the plight of farmers and have tried to mask them. For our cultural integrity, rural stability and ecological balance, and for the future generations, it is important that rice be sustained. The immediate need of the hour is to analyse the situation and find ways for retaining our rice-heritage.

In many parts of Asia, farmers have started realizing their problems and are trying to find solutions. They have started critically analyzing the factors behind the present crisis. From green revolution to WTO and from gender issues to genetically modified crops, every problem is being scrutinized. There is an urge for uniting and working together for alternatives. In India also, such movements are gaining momentum. Let us strengthen this movement, come together and build relationships. It's a matter of our survival, our ecology and our future.

International year of rice – IYR 2004

The year 2004 has been declared by the United Nations General Assembly, as the International Year of Rice (IYR 2004). The IYR is endorsed and supported by 43 nations and 17 International organizations and is coordinated by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). The mission statement of IYR is

“ The IYR promotes improved production and access to this vital food crop, which feeds more than half the world's population while providing income for millions of rice producers, processors and traders. Development of sustainable rice based systems will reduce hunger and poverty, and contribute to environmental conservation and a better life for present and future generations”

The mission statement admits that the present system of rice cultivation is unsustainable. The rhetoric of the Green Revolution- period about food security and high productivity has already lost its audience. In 2004, the FAO is emphasizing on managing water resources, environmental protection and traditional rice based systems (all of which were jeopardised or destroyed by the Green Revolution), apart from the usual slogans - food security and enhancing productivity. **Before this, 1966 was also an IYR; that was the year in which the first 'miracle rice'- IR-8 was launched, which triggered the destruction of**

traditional farming and rural-life styles and rice in particular across Asia. Learning the fact that FAO is also pushing for the spread of GMOs, we can rightly suspect that IYR 2004 may be the inaugural ceremony for GM-rice, the latest “miracle technology”.

This international year of rice is the right occasion for the rice-societies to realise the dangerous situation in which they are in and act together, independent from the dogmas and rituals of ‘modern agriculture’ and also from the governmental food policies, to make it sure that rice and the cultural values related to it are sustained.



Save our Rice Campaign

This campaign is an attempt to bring in and network everyone interested in sustaining rice cultivation - *farmers, consumers, NGOs, students, children, teachers, leaders, policymakers, media, academicians, scientists and in a broader sense, the general public* – to explore the chances of sustaining rice and rice-culture. Rice and rice-culture is just not an agricultural affair. So the whole society, whose culture and identity is linked to the rice-systems, should come together, talk, experiment and find ways to save rice from being pushed into oblivion. The campaign covers the whole of Asia, connected and coordinated by various organizations and groups. We at THANAL propose to introduce the campaign in South India, West Bengal, Orissa and Chattisgarh.

THANAL and rice campaign.

Thanal is a public interest research organization working based in Kerala. We have been working since 1986 on Natural History studies, conservation education, anti toxic movements, organic agriculture, zero waste and reviving traditional values and community living. We are concerned about the descending agriculture of our state and the country. Through an attempt to coordinate the “ **Save Our Rice - Campaign**”, we intent to reach out to like-minded people – from farmers to consumers, policy makers to media and scientists to students - in the struggle to save rice systems. We invite you all to be a part of the network and work together for sustaining rice and our future.

What all can we do?

There are many individuals and groups who have been working on sustaining rice for a very long period. But the threat faced by rice in the country cannot be fought back by the efforts in isolation. We need to join together to stop wrong policies and biotechnology from destroying our precious rice heritage. To come together and act, we request you to,

1. Identify individuals and groups and form regional level networks. Hold local and regional level meetings to discuss, analyse and explore ways for sustaining rice and rice-farmers in your region.
2. Build up a campaign addressing various sections of the society, especially consumer groups, farmers and students on the needs to sustain rice.
3. Identify and conserve paddy fields, related systems, traditional varieties and cultivation practices, traditional knowledge, culture etc. Also document the same.
4. Join the “**Save Our Rice - Campaign**” and form a part of a regional, state wide, national and international movement to conserve rice.
5. Pressure the local, state and central governments to sustain rice and rice farmers
6. Write to us about the status, concerns and scope of rice in your area, region and state. Also write to us about your work in related aspects and about your campaign. We can work together to sustain rice.



Write to us:

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