



Visitors at a Rice mela

# Return of the Desi Rice

**Seema G Prasad**

Sahaja Samrudha, an organic farmers' collective began a decade ago as a farmer initiated group to exchange ideas, seeds and knowledge on sustainable agriculture. From its modest beginning, it has grown today into a vibrant organization spearheading a thriving movement for the regeneration of Indian agriculture system through the revival of indigenous seeds.

It was a hectic day, after two consecutive days of talking continuously during the rice mela, our voices were strained and none of us had any energy left to speak. By the second day the different varieties of rice, sold by farmers themselves, were out of stock. The mela had one more day to go. Many buyers were returning very disappointed, with empty bags, without getting even a kilogram of rice, curiously looking at the nearly 100 varieties of rice on display, the rice information posters, leaflets and talking with farmers.

## Organic is life

Sahaja Samrudha an organic farmers' collective has been organising melas to help spread awareness on traditional rice varieties and create a platform for sharing seeds and knowledge on sustainable agriculture. Consisting of small and marginal farmers, women groups and seed savers, the collective started a decade ago. The organization has a certified group of 750 farmers and 15 farmers groups, primarily engaged in the promotion of organic farming. Along with our work in organic agriculture, we became involved with conservation of rice through the Save Our Rice Campaign, a pan-Asian people's movement, with the objective to protect traditional rice cultures and knowledge across Asia. Sahaja Samrudha leads the movement in Karnataka to revive traditional rice heritage through the on-farm conservation of rice diversity, participatory crop improvement, and the popularization of organic rice.

## Save Our Rice

Organic rice cultivation is gaining momentum in Karnataka. Many farmers have discovered that organic farming is a viable alternative

### Sahaja Organics - A farmer owned company

Sahaja Samrudha has developed a network of consumers and producers for procurement and marketing of organic food under the brand name "Sahaja Organics". Sahaja Samrudha Organic Producers Company Ltd was formed to market organic produce. The producer company is facilitating the direct procurement of produce from the farmer and supplying it to the outlets in the network. This chain has been created for the produce to reach the consumer directly and to provide a good price to the farmers.

Sahaja Organics markets a wide range of products – thirty different varieties of rice, fifteen varieties of different millets, wheat, pulses, fruits and vegetables, baby foods, processed foods like – pappads, health drink, multi grain flour, value-added products and ready to eat foods. Sahaja promotes only organic and traditional crops of rice, millets and pulses. These crops are in great demand in the urban areas due to their nutritional value and medicinal value, especially the millets and red rice.

Presently the company has 786 organic producers from different parts of the state and over 2000 farmers in 'organic conversion status'. It is supplying wide range of organic produce to 26 outlets, in major cities of south India, on a regular basis.

A major success factor of this bio-enterprise is a result of the civil society partnership that has been created. Farmers' groups, women's groups and consumer groups are working together in a like-minded organisation to revive the dying farming culture and community in South India.

to conventional farming. Many of these rare varieties are still being cultivated in remote villages for their excellent taste, special characteristics, performance (drought resistance, disease resistance, salt-tolerance), health benefits and cooking qualities. Among the medicinal rice varieties, *Karibattha*, *Kalame*, *Karikalave*, *Doddabaira nellu*, *Kari gajivili* and *Sannakki* are some of the prominent ones.

However, marketing traditional varieties of rice has remained a challenge, especially in the urban centers as it is not a preferred choice by urban consumers owing to the size and colour of the grain. Farmers were also reluctant to grow the traditional varieties without an assured market.



*Desi varieties of rice*

On an average, around 4000-5000 consumers visit and around three-four lakh rupees worth of traditional rice varieties are sold during each Mela.

So we began the task of marketing different varieties of rice. We gathered indigenous knowledge associated with these traditional rice varieties and lab tested for their nutritional content. The reports established that these varieties have greater nutritional content and properties beneficial to health compared to popular polished rice varieties available in the market. We gave a wide coverage on these results through our posters, leaflets, and articles. The media coverage and melas helped spread this information and it has influenced many people to move to traditional rice.

### Rice Melas act as harbingers of change!

Rice melas were organized in different regions to create awareness among consumers about the health benefits of consuming these forgotten treasures and also a glimpse of their unique and unusual flavor. We held a series of melas in Bangalore and other cities with different themes like Organic mela, Desi rice mela, Red rice mela, Biodiversity mela and Safe food mela. Delicious recipes were prepared using these rice varieties; they were attractively displayed and were offered for tasting during melas. Through these the healthy, nutritive and forgotten food grains were reintroduced into the market.

On an average, each mela attracted around 4000-5000 consumers. Around three-four lakh rupees worth of traditional rice varieties were sold during each Mela. In 2012, annual sale of traditional rice varieties crossed 100 tonnes.

The media also played a major role in creating massive awareness and by giving coverage to the Melas and the products. Various newspapers and magazines carried special stories on red rice and the health benefits of organic rice. We collected visitor data to continue our outreach with them later.

Together with 30 other organizations including consumer and farmer groups, Sahaja Samrudha has built a movement that today includes more than 2000 rice-conservers, farmer-breeders across the country, and is associated with conserving more than 600 varieties of scented, medicinal, deepwater, saline-tolerant and dry land rice. However, this is only a beginning. Our aim is to draw many more people into the fold of healthy eating through popularizing organic food and indigenous grains. World over there is a shift towards traditional grains and foods and we will work towards bring that change in our state.

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