

Chhattisgarh is traditionally known as the Rice Bowl of India. Over 20,000 rice varieties have been recorded in the region. These are a result of centuries of rice farming by indigenous communities through selection and adaptation to a variety of soil, water and micro-ecosystems conditions including predators.

Today these varieties are being lost with market forces promoting so called high-yielding varieties and synthetic fertilizer and pesticide-based agriculture that focuses only on yield, as well as the general but incorrect perception of traditional varieties as low yielding. There has also been tremendous loss of traditional knowledge associated with traditional agro-ecosystems and production practices.

Dharohar Samiti, a farmer's organization has been working in 10 villages of Kondagaon Tehsil of Bastar district for over 15 years now to promote agro bio-diversity conservation and secure livelihood and nutrition to farmers. The UNDP GEF Small Grants Program (SGP) has supported Dharohar Samiti in this mission that is conserving over 260 traditional rice varieties along with other minor millets such as raagi, kodo and kutki.

The activities taken up under the SGP projects advocate organic and high yielding farming, based on successful trials and promotion of the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) for traditional varieties and further adaptation of the SRI technique for profitable cultivation of Raagi. Conservation of agro-biodiversity is crucial to the local nutrition security system. The yield of traditional varieties like Basabhog and Asamchudi reaches up to 7 to 8 tonnes per hectare through SRI, which is as good as any High Yielding Variety in the market. Dharohar's work has demonstrated effective ways of agro-biodiversity conservation along with yield enhancement using organic methods that are critical for the ecological integrity of this agro-climatic region of Bastar.

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Dharohar provides a platform for farmers to discuss issues related to degradation of environment and loss of traditional varieties developed over centuries. Through village level assemblies of tribal farmers, the techniques of preparation and use of herbal pesticides were tried out and integrated into traditional farming practices. Dharohar also helps to strengthen the linkages with govt. department and other

resource organizations.



The community has started bio-diversity documentation through developing people's bio-diversity registers in 5 villages. With focus on non-cultivated food resources, it has documented 47 sources including pot-herb species, tubers, flowers and mushrooms. As many as 8 types of mushrooms were recorded from the area. Efforts are on to document traditional knowledge with appropriate protection measures.



Dharohar sows their rice varieties every year on a 2.5 acre farm in Golawand village and keeps the genetic evolution process going.



System of Rice Intensification is an organic farming technique that requires only about 1/10th seed and less water compared to the traditional method of farm flooding and larger spacing between rows. Attention to soil health balance helps in profuse production tillers and increase in yield.



Thirty nine new rice varieties from remote villages of Bastar have been identified and added to existing collection in last two years. Taking technical support from rice scientist Jacob Nellithanam, Dharohar has started scientific characterization of 49 varieties so that they are recognized legally by becoming part of National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resource Collection.



The paddy farms get many weeds that compete with rice plants for nutrition. Paddy weeders help in reducing time in de-weeding the farms and less tedious compared to manual labour. However the conventional model available in market is cumbersome, and requires the user to bend down and force push it. Shri Bhakturam Kashyap, a tribal farmer, wood artist and a passionate folk lyricist from Golawand village developed a prototype local weeder using discarded cycle rims, which farmers are finding useful and less cumbersome.



In addition to collection, documentation and in-situ conservation of rice varieties, Dharohar is also involved in distributing the seeds to the farmers in Kondagaon and Narayanpur tahsils, promoting exchange of seeds and herbal pesticide development among framers and wider sharing of information with tribal communities through village-level meetings and Madai-Melas (fairs).

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