

International Seed day

April 25

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Go to any remote village in India, and you would hear farmers saying, 'we never sell or buy seeds, either we borrow or exchange them', and it is this spirit of our dalit, adivasi and agrarian communities that has made India known for its highest agricultural biodiversity and a custodian of rich germplasm.

Traditionally, in India seed are considered to be sacred and of no individuals own, but of collectively of the farmers. Over centuries, farmers especially women have painstakingly selected, nurtured, bred, saved and shared seeds as a collective heritage.

In a context, where commodification of seed is almost complete, new research shows that farmers in developing countries such as ours are losing one of their best hopes to limit the impacts of climate change because of growing corporate control of the seeds. As the diversity dwindles and the traditional seeds perish, it is evident that valuable traits such as drought and pest resistance could be lost forever.

And, with what are these seeds being replaced with? Our traditional varieties are being replaced by a smaller range of "modern" seeds that are heavily promoted by corporations and subsidised by governments. In addition to such anti-biodiversity policies, the new legislations including the New Seed Bill, 2004, Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India, Intellectual Property Rights in seeds, lenient regulations for Genetically Modified Crops are posing a threat to the rights of small farmers to save, sow and exchange their traditional varieties.

The replacement of our landraces with modern seeds, is not only, curtailing the genetic diversity which is the last reign of hope for combating climate crisis, but leads to an increased use of inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers which in turn are themselves, the leading causes for global warming and climate change.

Climate change portends less rain, more heat, reduced water availability and increased malnutrition. It is important to note that with the projected 2 degree celsius temperature rise, wheat might disappear from our midst, since it is an extremely thermal sensitive crop. Similarly, the way rice is grown under standing water makes it a dangerous crop under climate change conditions.

Methane emanating from water-drenched rice fields, is a green house gas, that severely threatens our environment. Millets are all-season crops whereas wheat is season specific. If there is any cropping system that can withstand these challenges, survive and flourish, it is the millet system, where the traditional seed diversity plays a crucial role.

On the occasion on the International Seed Day, today 26th April 2010, on behalf of the Millet Network of India, and People's Group of Nagaland for Ecology, we appeal to and intend to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity based mixed farming system and the high degree of drought tolerance, resistance to pests and diseases, and how Millet such as Sorghum, Pearl Millet, Finger Millet, Little Millet, Barnyard Millet, Proso Millet, Kodo Millet and Foxtail Millet are climate compliant. Millets need very little water for their production and can grow on skeletal soils with attack from pests if grown under traditional methods.

In spite of all these extraordinary qualities and capacities of millet farming systems, the area under millet production has been shrinking over the last five decades and rapidly, since the Green Revolution period. Between 1966 and 2006, 44% of millet cultivation areas were occupied by other crops signifying an extraordinary loss to India's food and farming systems.

K. Khekiho Shohe, Coordinator, People's Group, on behalf of Millet Network of India & People's Group of Nagaland for Ecology.

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