

The Seed Vision and Mission

The 'Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch' (India Seed Sovereignty Alliance) is a nationwide network to conserve and regenerate seed diversity, self-reliance and sovereignty. It urges individual and collaborative action to protect, promote, exchange and share traditional seeds as a collective heritage – a great and urgent need of our times.

Speaker's Note

Jacob Nellithanam welcomed this second gathering of the Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch, held on the occasion of the National Organic Farming Convention, Chandigarh. Introducing the seed diversity and sovereignty movement, he said it is an independent voice of the farmers and seed savers to freely share their views and safeguard their rights. This Manch is not political in any partisan sense, but Seed being a lifeline of agriculture has become political. Seed conservation is important in itself, but at the same time seed saving also has a political angle. Protecting the rich diversity of life through independent seed saving has become an important political act of our times. There is need to understand the threats and challenges to seed saving; and to organize ourselves to conserve, exchange, and do everything it takes to protect and rejuvenate the seed. But at this point, industry is hungry to have absolute control. Controlling our seed means control over our food, and our freedom. The industries will not tolerate even a single farmer to have his own seeds, where he has the liberty to save, exchange or share.

As a result, seeds are becoming the private property of a handful of mega multi-national corporations, transforming the tradition of saving seeds into a political act. In India, farmers everywhere have been saving seeds for centuries, preserving the most suitable ones they need for replanting every season. Seed saving was different until India signed an international trade agreement giving multinational corporations permission to patent, own and sell seeds.

The Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch condemns bio-piracy and calls upon all farmers to resist privatization attempts by corporations that stake IPR claims with royalties over seed varieties that rightfully belong to the farming communities.

Krishna Prasad said that a National level '*Beej Swaraj Manch*' has been formed with 100 dedicated seed committees from 18 states of India. The Manch, constituted in April 2014, named him (Krishna Prasad) as National Convener, and Sanjay Patil and Soumik Banerjee as Co-Conveners. The Manch, consisting of farmers, seed savers, intellectuals, individuals, experts, scientists of several states like Karnataka, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and others is in the process of building and strengthening the network of all individuals and organizations concerned about seed diversity and self-reliance. Maharashtra has already formed seed savers' groups and are organizing a Beej Utsav every year. Uttar Pradesh has started the process of forming seed saver groups. These states have begun the work of identifying the local genetic wealth of crop diversity of each area; and are organizing support for the conservation of seeds.

The main objective is to assess the nature of the need for a national level network of seed savers, breeders, and representatives of farming communities working towards seed diversity revival and self-reliance in seed. Representatives of each state or regional network should formulate plan objectives and create mechanisms and strategies for the network to move forward. Each state could share the experiences relating to farmers and the sharing of crop diversity; and this meeting should then discuss and reach a consensus towards the next steps.

The preservation and spread of traditional seeds has been mostly the work of a few pioneer farmers that needs to be recognized. These seed savers bring a wealth of knowledge and skills with them and have taken up the hard task of saving seed and breeding good seed at their own personal expense, without waiting for any government support. Several examples could be pointed out from different states by individual farmers, who have painstakingly taken up conservation and today have been able to revive our rich diversity.

At the last *Manch* meeting in 2014 in New Delhi, it was decided that the seeds or crop varieties will not be registered under PPV and FRA as it is not the wealth of one particular farmer but belongs to the whole community and the nation as well. During that last meeting, it was proposed that the seed savers must keep a detailed record of seed production and exchange; and also maintain purity of seeds. A national catalogue of seed savers containing the names of the varieties maintained is to be kept.

Following the talk by Krishna Prasad, all the participants shared their experiences and the progress and status of the work they had committed earlier. They also discussed whether we are heading towards the right direction, and what should be the main objectives of the *Manch*?

DISCUSSION ON THE OBJECTIVE

“Hybrids, since they do not breed true, are designed to force the farmer to buy from the market every season. Yield being the only focus, the hybrids offer quantity, empty of quality, and weight devoid of nutrition.” - **Shalini Bhutani**

Imposition of more laws and patents leads to complexities and would undermine the right of farmers to use seeds freely and would promote the privatization of natural resources. There is a need to raise the issue of seed sovereignty on many fronts; number of campaigns in favor of the free use of seeds should be the main task. Saving traditional local and farmer-bred seeds not only keeps control over them in the hands of farming communities, facilitating food security and autonomy, but also supports *in situ* agro diversity conservation and ‘barefoot innovation’, all of which are social, ecological and political imperatives today. The first objective of this network should be to spread the conservation of seeds to all communities and demand recognition, said Shalini Butani

Seed Saver, Maharashtra - The so-called ‘High Yielding Varieties’ (HYV) of the Green Revolution are actually ‘High Response Varieties’ (HRV) that respond only with agro-chemicals.

Beginning with the false assumption that farmers’ varieties are “empty”, industrial corporate breeding gives us seeds and crops that are not only nutritionally empty, but also loaded with toxins. While farmers breed for diversity, resilience, taste, quality and nutrition, the corporations breed for uniformity, and for controlling the farmers. The network needs to work more closely with farmers and seed saving must be a high priority. A national campaign on the right to seed saving should be considered and planned.

Seed Saver, Odisha – Hybrid seeds have been developed with only yield being the focus. But traditional seeds are being neglected though they have nutritional qualities and could be saved from the farm harvest and shared among farmers. Most importantly, such traditional seeds are rarely bought. “Seeds are related to our culture, health and social and national sovereignty. Once you lose seed sovereignty, you lose these rights as well. In Odisha, many of our tribal communities have shifted from growing millets, pulses and oilseeds, all attuned to local needs and are now growing corn, which is for export only. Today, economic benefit takes top priority in agriculture, and for this, we have lost our culture and tradition. In this context, we (in Odisha) have been able to revive some of the rice varieties that have proved to be a challenge to the hybrids. This network should focus on unifying the efforts of individual seed savers and handle the issue of purity of seed varieties through capacity building workshops across the country. Sabarmati feels that even non-farmers should contribute and be a part of the movement which can also contribute to revival and conservation of indigenous seeds. She urged a popular campaign in which each farmer/family adopts, conserves and shares at least one seed variety. This, she said, is the best way to protect seed diversity and seed freedom.

“Seeds are our future; we have to keep them alive.” -

Ramgulam Sinha, PRERAK

Seed Saver, Chhattisgarh - Conservation as well as traditional farm practices needs urgent attention. Unless we document the practices and put our traditional knowledge into practice, we may leave nothing for the future generations. Current agriculture system saps soil nutrients, we need to come out of this vicious circle of monocultures and monopolies. Instead, we need to create virtuous cycles of diversity and reclaim our biological diversity and the knowledge associated with our seeds.

Seed Saver, Madhya Pradesh - Seed is the first link in the food chain. Free exchange of seed among farmers has been the basis of maintaining biodiversity. Such an exchange mechanism should be developed in this network. This network should work for revival of the free exchange of seed, the seed supply system that was traditionally followed by the farmers. Seeds were exchanged free, along with free exchange of ideas and knowledge. This helps strengthen traditional knowledge, resources and skills. Introduction of hybrids has wiped out this traditional knowledge. We need to pay attention to all these aspects, and this network should urge all organizations and farmers to adopt community based agriculture that encourages conservation of genetic resources and traditional knowledge. We need to fight against the current form of seed bill and the anti farmers policy of the Government.

“Emerging threats to our agriculture, crop diversity and our farmers are the field trials of Genetically Modified (GM) crops that the Central Government has allowed.”

“The GM crops, even at the stage of field trials, can widely contaminate our traditional varieties; and such damage would be unstoppable and irreversible. This network should fight from all corners of the country in a single voice for our seed sovereignty.”

Bihar - India's rich heritage of traditional seed varieties is now in the custody of national and international agencies. These vital resources, collected from our farmers, must be returned to us. We thus demand the return of our traditional seeds to our farming communities; and we call upon our government to facilitate and simplify such access to our heirloom varieties from national and international germplasm banks; and to support conservation of crops in the regions of their respective origin. Unless our farmers can adopt bio-diverse farming with our own local seeds, we will face severe agrarian problems, and the threats to our seed sovereignty will loom large over us with IPR claims, biopiracy, and GM crops. Our priority must be to guard ourselves against the GM crops that pose a problem to human, animal, soil and eco-system, by enriching our local diversity and protecting and preserving our seeds. The national seed savers' alliance should widely campaign among people, and call upon the government not to allow field trials of GM crops.

Seed Saver, West Bengal - The seed is the source of life, and the rich diversity of crops has evolved with natural seed collection and selection. The traditional varieties have a stronger root system and a natural resistance to pest/disease infestation, and to climate fluctuations of floods and droughts. We need to protect this traditional diversity. In order to bring back and re-popularise our traditional seeds, conserved *in situ* in farmers' fields, the Manch should work at each regional level.

“We need to have a silent revolution; and must conserve our own seeds.”

We have lost the understanding of our relationship with seeds and consider them as commodities to be sold, tampered with and changed at will, without considering the long-term impacts.

All the organizations and farmers associated with this Manch should conduct:

- a) *Regional Seed Festivals, all over the country*
- b) *Conduct Organic Seed Production Workshops for empowering farmers and seed savers*
- c) *Document Scientific Characterization of seed varieties.*

We are worried about the emerging new technologies, such as genetic engineering, that would endanger our crop diversity further towards extinction and tighten the corporate grip over the farmers.

Seed Saver, Andhra Pradesh - We need to have a network that voices the farmers' problems. This network should be a platform for farmers to fight for their rights. Our millet seed savers and farmers are deprived from receiving any benefit from the Government. When a cyclone occurred in our area, all the farmers' fields were destroyed. The Government visited the area to survey the destruction of crops and compensation was paid only to big estates that have plantations of coffee or pepper, but not to the small/marginal farmers. So, poor farmers were not considered, as their crops are not seen as significant. This network would help fight for farmers' rights.

SEED SAVERS OPINION

Afasar Jafri – *Locally, farmers, seed keepers and communities, networks and organizations are working to protect their seeds, and to fight laws that undermine our seed sovereignty. However, at the global level, it is the corporate control that is shaping the future of the seed. This Network should change this by joining forces through creating, strengthening and becoming a movement to keep seed free of any interference. The prime objective should be self empowerment of farmers who are aware that they have the power to liberate the seed and themselves. The heritage that they have should be preserved for the future. For this, farmers need to be aware, and not share their seeds indiscriminately with whoever approaches them.*

Deepika Kundaji – *“The seed conservation movement is growing steadily. More people need to work on reviving traditional varieties of vegetables. Curbs on labelled sale of traditional seeds seriously impinges on the rights of farmers. The dilemma between protecting traditional varieties from privatisation on one hand and spreading them widely on the other hand, needs to be discussed within the Beej Swaraj Manch. GM contamination is a very serious threat to the seed conservation movement.”*

Jaiprakash Singh – *the Manch needs to concentrate on seed breeding and encourage breeders who are working towards the enhancement of our crop biodiversity. Multiplication of farmer bred seed/crop varieties on a large scale, and establishing farmer field schools in each block of the state should be priority tasks.*



Seed Savers and Farmer Breeders

Jacob Nellithanam - *Patents allow corporations to claim ownership over seeds and any life forms. They allow corporations to define the acts of saving and sharing seeds as “intellectual property crimes”. But they allow the crime of corporate biopiracy – the theft of traditional knowledge treated as a private property right.*

A patent on seed implies that a farmer saving the seed is committing an “intellectual property theft”. It means complete corporate monopoly, a system of enslaving farmers, where the freedom of seed disappears, the freedom of farmers disappears. Further, new technologies in agriculture, in combination with patent monopolies, are being pushed that threaten the sustenance and livelihoods of small farmers.

The Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch spearheads the movement to protect the farmers’ rights of biodiversity, rights of seed saving and seed exchange. We need to organize several *yatras* regionally to create awareness amongst the farmers.

Krishna Prasad - Farmers always conserved seed from the current harvest for planting in the next season. Saving and conserving seed means that farmers have self-reliant, independent access to seed resources. But if the farmers do not save their own seeds, there is great danger of losing forever the seeds, and the knowledge and culture associated with them. Farmers in our country have developed special techniques to store their seeds. The maintenance of the landraces requires special skills, and farmers still remember that their forefathers knew how to collect ear heads and how to select good seeds that have the ability to produce a good crop.

ACTION PLAN

The general body meeting of Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch convened on 02-03-2015 during the 5th National Organic Farming Convention held at Chandigarh. Representatives from 20 states attended the review meeting. Krishna Prasad requested the members to take up planned activities for this coming season. Soumik Banerjee, Ammaji, Shivaprasad Sahu, Sohan, Saroj Mohanty, Vishal Goendke were nominated co-conveners of the Manch.

State-wise Activity	Responsibility	Time frame
Dharwad Seed Festival, Karnataka	Dr. Sanjeev Kulkarni & Krishnaprasad.G	April (or) May
Seed Status Report, Madhya Pradesh	Shalini Bhutani & Harish Pawar	By this year
Bhopal Seed Festival, Madhya Pradesh	Harish Pawar, SAMPARK	30-31 st March 2015
Workshop on Ecological Agriculture, Madhya Pradesh	Harish Pawar, SAMPARK	September 2015
Seed Festival, Telangana	Shivaprasad, Hyderabad	June or July 2015
Seed Savers Meeting & Seed Festival, Kerala	Leenesh, Trivandrum	10 th April 2015
Vegetable Seed Saving Training, Kerala	Leenesh, Trivandrum	Before year end
Training program on Crop Improvement for Plant breeders, Uttar Pradesh	Jaiprakash Singh	September 2015
Release of Seed Savers Guide, West Bengal	Dr. Anupam Paul	November or December 2015
Training on Rice Characterization -Two visits to Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh	Dr. Anupam Paul	May/June 2015 (Bef. sowing) Sept/Oct 2015 (Aft. harvest)
Organic Seed Production Workshop, Maharashtra	Vishal Goekha, Naturesgram, Thane	September 2015
Seed Savers Guide publication in Orya	Saroj Mohanty	Before year end

language, Odisha		
Organic Seed Production Workshop (by Sabarmatee & Deepika Kundaji), Odisha	Saroj Mohanty	By this year
Seed Festival, Vizag, Andhra Pradesh	Ammaji, Sanjeevini	1 st May 2015
Seed Saving Training for Women, Araku valley, Andhra Pradesh	Ammaji, Sanjeevini	June 2015
Seed Festival & Promotion of seed art, West Bengal	Bishnu Padh Mridha, PSJKS	October 2015
Training on Legalities and Policies, Maharashtra	Shalini Bhutani	August/Sep 2015
Round-table conference with ministers and officials, West Bengal	Team work	By this year
Seed Festival, Bihar	Team work	April 2015
Translation of seed saver guides in Bengali, Oriya, Hindi and Malayalam languages and training materials on seed saving and seed production, Tamil Nadu	Deepika Kundaji	Over the course
Designing & Photography Support, Karnataka	Jagadeesh	Over the course
Support in Documentary & Photography	Anu	Over the course