

Women at the core: the story of Aamon

State Sabala Mela 2019 provided one stall to Aamon, a women farmers' collective from Nayagram, Jhargram district. PRADAN, a renowned civil society organisation has been working in Nayagram Block for quite some time. All their activities have the self-help groups of women at the core. Over the years they could organise the 'SHG Didi's' for activities around land, water, vegetation - with the central thread being livelihood augmentation. Several hundreds of SHGs have been trained and empowered for taking up livelihood activities.

There are several projects facilitated by PRADAN for the women of the area. Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) with the Rural Livelihood Mission, Usharmukti with Mahatma Gandhi NREGA are some such activities. The initiative to promote organic farming using only



indigenous rice varieties was a movement that PRADAN started promoting in Nayagram in 2018. 3200 women farmers of 320 SHGs in six gram panchayats of the block were mobilised for this environment friendly farming. Only weather resistant varieties were chosen through 17 patch tests. The species varied for the upland and lowland areas. Focus was on the production of 'black rice' and 'brown rice', two high-end varieties having several health benefits. The production process is completely organic and no chemical fertilizers or pesticides are used. Brown rice is rich in copper, calcium, riboflavin, manganese and phosphorus and is known to be good for control of intestinal diseases, blood sugar, obesity and heart ailments. Black rice contains antioxidants, anthocyanin, phytonutrients, iron, zinc, magnesium and potassium. It is good for asthma patients and diabetics. There are elements in black rice which reportedly reduce LDL Cholesterol and prevent cancerous growth. The women





farmers of Narayangarh are also producing traditional varieties like Karichampa, Mugaisal, Kabiraj sal, Jota, Badshah Bhog etc. The most popular variety for the villagers is 'Kerala Sundari', an indigenous variety originating from Purulia and taken to Kerala.

PRADAN only played the role of facilitator. Once on the go, the women themselves are mentored to manage the project on their own. Preparations are at an advanced stage for the formation of a farmer producers' organisation (FPO). For this thirty representatives involving all six gram panchayats have been identified. PRADAN is in constant touch with the market to ensure that demand for black and brown rice increases. The products are presently sold at Kharagpur, Medinipur and three regional outlets in Kolkata. Sabala Mela is a new opportunity for Aamon and the Aamon people are enthusiastic about the fair. At this Mela, they have sold close to seven quintals of rice and could get very good interface with the urban buyers. Aamon promote one serving of black rice with the main meal every day. For this they suggest different recipes like 'black rice salad', 'black rice fried pancake', 'black chicken rice', 'black rice kheer dessert' etc. A pamphlet with some of the recipes was being distributed to the interested customers. One could also taste some of the dishes inside the stall itself.

Amineeta Pal, a research scholar on Economic History at Kalyani University was talking about the growing loss of trail of the native rice species in the country. India used to have 1,10,000 varieties of rice out of which presently some seven thousand varieties are available. She was talking about the efforts to regain the lost seeds. The concept of a specialized seedbank, as developed by Debal Deb might revive the fast growing trend of loss of indigenous seeds.

Sabala was the first venture in a city fair for Aamon and the response that the rice brought by them received, especially the black rice was very encouraging. The women actually could not give any commitment to the Kolkata customers as to where they would get this rice variety after the fair concludes. They are searching for a relatively permanent outlet in Kolkata.