

Beej Utsav 2025 and Organic Farming Fair

27th and 28th February, Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Bankura, West Bengal

By Rohan Mukerjee



Rangoli being prepared for the Beej Utsav using Desi Seeds

On 27th and 28th the Beej Utsav 2025 cum Organic Farming Fair was held in the grounds of Bharat Sevasharm Sangh, Bankura, West Bengal. The Beej Utsav was organized by Panchal Susthye Krishi Udyog Samiti (PSKUS), Panchal, Bankura and Forum for Indigenous Agriculture Movement (FIAM), Raigunj and supported by Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch, WASSAN, Bharat Agroecology Fund (BAF), Keystone Foundation and Revitalizing Rainfed Agriculture.

This year's Beej Utsav was in **Remembrance of Forgotten Genius**, celebrating the lives and contributions of Dr. R H Richaria, Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov and Satish Chandra Dasgupta. Dr. R H Richaria was one of the most eminent agricultural scientists of India, yet he remains unknown. Between 1971-76 he collected 17,000 indigenous rice from different parts of erstwhile Madhya Pradesh, for trails, with an average yield of 3.98 MT/ha. The collection also had short duration paddy, aromatic rice (237, coarse and fine varieties. Dr Richharia identified 164 indigenous varieties with yields higher than 4 MT/ha. Despite all odds, Dr. Richharia continued his quest and was developing a Rice Encyclopaedia covering 2,000 traditional rices of Madhya Pradesh till he finally rested in 1996. In memory of Dr. Richharia and to celebrate his contribution to the recognition and conservation of traditional varieties the Beej Utsav recognises the efforts of a deserving traditional seed conservator by conferring them with the Dr. Richharia Award.

Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov, born on 25th November 1887 in Moscow, Russia, was an agronomist, botanist and geneticist who identified the Centres of Origin of cultivated plants. He devoted his entire life to the study and improvement of Wheat, Maize and other Cereal crops that sustain the global population. He was the first botanist to grasp the need for a Seedbank, and he was an expert Germplasm Collector. He along with his team also set up one of the largest Seed Repositories – Institute of Plant Industry at Sain Petersburg in 1921, that remains his priceless heritage. However, he was a victim of the stat. His work was criticized by fellow scientist Trofim Lysenko, who believed that acquired traits are inherited, claimed that heredity can be changed by “educating” plants and denied the existence of genes and anti-Mendelian concepts of plant biology. Joseph Stalin favoured Lysenko more than Vavilov and got him arrested in Ukraine sentencing him to death in July 1941. Although his sentence was commuted to twenty years imprisonment, he died in prison on 26th January 1943. By the late 1950s, his reputation was publicly rehabilitated, and he began to be hailed as a hero of Soviet science. In 1955, his death sentence was retroactively pardoned under Nikita Khrushchev. The Beej Utsav has introduced the Vavilov Award which celebrates this unparalleled feat and passion for conserving Indigenous Seeds, which is the need of the hour, offering climate resilience and higher nutrient density.

Satish Chandra Dasgupta was an outstanding scientist and inventor, born on 14th June 1880 at Kurigram village of Rangpur District of Bengal (now Bangladesh). He did his Post Graduation in Chemistry from Presidency College, Kolkata and was closely associated with Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy. He developed medicinal products such as Strychnine and Caffeine from indigenous raw material like Nux vomica. He developed a low-cost Fire Extinguisher and was called Fire King. He was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and responded to his call asking young patriots to join him in national service. He was given the charge of Wardha Institute for research in village industries. He improved Charkha's working efficiency and designed cheaper and simple Ghani for oil extraction. He also found more profitable ways of making paper from Bamboo pulp and safety matches. During 1932 Gandhiji requested him to prepare a Swadeshi ink of use in fountain pens, which he successfully developed, and it was named Sulekha by Rabindranath Tagore, this brand even now produces some of the finest inks. In 1965, at the age of 86, Satish Chandra settled at Ghogra village, located in Bankura District, not far from the Beej Utsav venue. Here he began research on how to make the laterite rich barren uplands of the Rahr region of West Bengal productive by retaining water. He continued his quest at Ghogra till 24th December, 1979, at the age of 99 when he finally rested. Unfortunately, such a great inventor and scientist is forgotten and none of his work is discussed while planning in drought prone areas of West Bengal. Even his research works and books are not traceable. The Beej Utsav remembered this great Apostle of Gandhi at the Bankura Seed festival with a Memorial lecture and dedicating the stage in his honour.

The inauguration of the Beej Utsav 2025 was anchored by Dr. Anupam Paul. Dr. Paul has a vast experience of conducting / imparting training and promoting folk rice and traditional seed varieties. He is also an author whose works have been published extensively with his articles and books covering a variety of topics that include Traditional Rice, Food Politics, Corp Biodiversity, Anti-colonialism, Millets and other related subjects. The Welcome address was provided by Chinmoy Das of the Forum for Indigenous Agriculture Movement (FIAM) is a grassroots organisation in West Bengal that works to conserve indigenous varieties of

seeds. He highlighted the dream behind the Beej Utsav and the movement as a whole which was moving away from chemical intensive farming and ensuring that the whole of India moves towards organic and natural farming.



Targeted at highlighting the benefits and positives of traditional crop varieties and natural farming practices and spreading awareness about the efforts being carried out for their conservation and promotion a series of publications were launched at the Beej Utsav.



The Publications launched included –

- Rainfed Realms by Shyamoli & Bhairab Saini, V Swaminathan, Anupam Paul & Soumik Banerjee – which highlighted Rainfed farming systems that offer hope of reviving India's diverse Seed and Cropping Systems that can bring in resilience, sustainability and health for People and Planet in the Rainfed Realms of India. It

covered indigenous varieties of 24 upland rice, 14 finger millet, 13 cotton, 10 maize and 6 pulses varieties.

- Banglar Begun, *Glimses of some Brinjal varieties of Bengal* by Arun Ram, Anupam Paul & Soumik Banerjee – which highlighted the diversity of Brinjal in West Bengal in the face of increased spread of monocultures of hybrid brinjals which have only resulted in profits for the companies, but distressed farmers as well poisoned the environment and our food. Many farmers are reviving the traditional varieties as they offer hope to bring back the richness of our traditional food while also being economically viable.
- Posters –
 - Heirloom Wheat and Barley of India (English)
 - Brinjal varieties of West Bengal (Bengali)

The Beej Utsav involved over 180 participants comprising Farmers, Seed Conservators, Academicians, Researchers, Individuals and organisations working in for the promotion and revival of traditional food systems and promotion of natural farming practices. There were a diversity of stalls comprising both commercial and those of farmers and groups who were displaying their seeds and products. The stalls were from various parts of West Bengal as well as from different states of India like Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujrat, Haryana, Jharkhand, and Odisha. A few of the stalls were as follows –

Anna Bhandar / Panchal Susthaye Krishi Udyog Samiti – who had jointly organised the Beej Utsav and brought a variety of organic produce from organic farmers of Panchal village, Bankura district, for sale at the event. Their products included Traditional rice – Sathia (red rice) Chaal, Lalji Super, GobinMuri / Puffed Rice – Hinch Leby Muri and Khanakchurer Khoi, Sathia and Gobindobog Chira (Flattened Rice), Kodo and Little Millet, Madua (Finger Millet) Atta, Multigrain Flour, Til (Sesame), Millet Laddu, Arhar dal, Masur Dal and Chola dal, Khejur Gur / Date Jaggery, Patali Gur.



Manihori Integrated Farm, Agaratoli village, Bokakhat Block of Golaghat District (Kaziranga), Assam – represented by Monohar Pegu, Hemanta Pegu and Mahalal Chinty of the Mishing community.



They practice and promote integrated farming in the flood plains of Kaziranga and they brought a diverse range of local seeds and produce that included –

- o Paddy varieties (35) – mostly wetland varieties, several of which were sticky and aromatic rice varieties.

- o Roselle (2)
- o Pumpkin (1)
- o Small Assamese Potato
- o White Gourd (2)
- o Ahu Yam
- o Mustard (2)
- o Turmeric
- o Black Pepper
- o Songe Gourd (2)
- o Long Bean
- o Lapha Cheesweed
- o Spinach (2)
- o Coriander
- o Black gram (1)
- o Masur Dal
- o Pigeon Pea
- o Cucumber (1)
- o Papaya (1)
- o Bhindi (1)
- o Bottle Gourd (1)
- o Flemingia – which is used as an insect repellent for cattle
- o Long bean (1)
- o Jhinga / Ridge Gourd (1)
- o Long Pepper

In addition, they had brought handlooms and handcrafts of the Mishing community.





Ann Swaraj Kisan Sambardhan Samiti, Chotiadadar, Magarlod Block, Dhamtari District, Chhattisgarh – represented by senior seed conservator Nakchara Ram Kashyap.



Nakchara Ram Kashyap has been conserving 325 traditional paddy varieties and has been promoting the cultivation of several of these varieties by over 500 farmers to meet their own consumption needs. He had several of the paddy varieties on display which included scented varieties like Til Kasturi, Kali Bhog, Bishnu Bhog and Nagri Dubraj; medicinal varieties like Maina Gauri, Aalcha, Chepti Gurmukhi and Nagpuri Gurmukhi; and varieties of cultural significance like Aandiya which is the rice that is consumed during the Nawa Khai festival.



Keystone Foundation, Jharkhand - represented by Community Resource Persons (CRPs) and farmers from Keystone Foundation's Using Diversity and Eastern India project areas in Musabani Block of East Singhbhum District and Seraikela-Kharsawan district of Jharkhand. Keystone Foundation has been working with Adivasi communities to promote Agroecology approaches, traditional seeds and practices, and natural farming methods in order to ensure health and nutritional security along with additional incomes from sale of the produce.



The produce on display included traditional paddy varieties (4), Maize (2), Gangai / Sorghum (1), Pulses – Moong and Kurthi, Vegetables – Lauki / Bottle gourd (2), Nenua / sponge gourd,

Jhinga / Ridge gourd, Potol-Jhinga, Sim / Hyacinth Beans, Barbatti / Cowpea (2), Bhindi / Okra; Tuber and root crops - Aalti / Taro, Laal Mitha Aalu / Red Sweet Potato, Saada Meetha Aalu / White Sweet Potato, Kham Aalu; and Behra / *Terminalia bellirica* a wild fruit.

Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti (PBKSKS), Purulia, West Bengal – represented by CRPs and staff.



PBKSKS works with the Kheria Sabar Adivasi community in Purulia and Bankura districts of West Bengal providing legal aid and promoting sustainable livelihoods, conservation and management of forests and natural resources, and natural farming approaches. They had a variety of handicrafts made from *Kashi Ghas* (a wild grass) and *Khejur Patta* / Date palm leaf for sale and displayed a variety of forest seeds. PBKSKS works jointly with Keystone Foundation in several blocks.

Sahoday Trust, Kohbari, Banshchatti, Gaya Bihar – represented by Anil Kumar and Sanjay Mondal. Anil shared that he along with his wife Rekha have been promoting Alternative Education which includes environmental education and they have received a Forest Education grant from Keystone Foundation.



They also practice and promote natural farming and conservation of local seeds in what is principally a residential area in Gaya. The produce and products they had on display included – Desi Tomato, Desi Bair / Jujube fruit, Desi Gajar / Carrots, Ool / Elephant foot yam, Ratalu / Purple yam, Ginger, Turmeri, Sponge and Ridge gourds, Suchni Aalu which is used in Chatth Puja, Palm root, Beans, a variety of greens, Banana, Finger Millet, Kodo Millet, Sawa millet, wild mushroom. A variety of seeds and spices were also on display and these included Penchi, Sauf, Kurthi, White Sesame, Sword bean, pumpkin. Multani mitti soap cakes were also on display.

In the course of the Beej Utsav several sessions were conducted on a variety of issues that included –

- o Organic Farming – Challenges and Opportunities
- o Modern Agriculture and Food Politics
- o Food Politics and MSP
- o Marketing of organic produce
- o Ecological Farming and the Honey Bee

These sessions involved participants with expertise in the particular subject, grassroots practitioners, activists and representatives of different organisations working with these issues. The sessions involved active share and interactions with the audiences with multiple points of view shared and discussed and potential solutions explored.



The evenings were dedicated to Cultural performances with artists celebrating the rich cultural heritage of Bankura and West Bengal through song, dance and poetry.



The efforts of several individuals and organisations to promote the cause of Natural Farming, Traditional seeds and food systems was recognized through the distribution of several Awards.



The Dr. Richharia Memorial Award was presented to Salia Bibi by Sudhanshu Dey. Salia Bibi hails from Durbachoti village, Pathorprotima Block, South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal.

With the support of Pradip Das and Sudhanshu Dey she has been carrying out conservation of traditional paddy varieties. She played a vital role in the establishment of Durbachoti Beej Bhandar through which over 400 farmers have accessed Desi paddy varieties and are now cultivating around 30 such paddy varieties on their lands.

This year marked the introduction of the Vavilov Memorial Award. The Consul General of the Russian Federation in Kolkata, Maxim V Kozlov had been invited to present the Award. Despite being unable to be present physically Mr. Maxim shared a heartfelt letter which was read out during the Award ceremony. He felt that it was “especially heartening to know that, as part of the Festival, the Vavilov Award – named after the world-renowned Russian botanist and geneticist Nikolay Ivanovich Vavilov – will be presented to a traditional seed conservator.” He went on to share his thoughts on Vavilov and his contributions. He pointed out that “Nikolay Vavilov’s groundbreaking contributions to science are reflected in his fundamental works, including *The Law of Homologous Series in Variation*, *Centers of Origin of Cultivated Plants*, and *Linnaean Species as a System*. He was among the first to recognize the dangers of excessive inbreeding in crops, which limited genetic diversity and weakened new generations. By studying the relationships between wild and domesticated plants, he pioneered new approaches to plant breeding and conservation.....Nowadays, he is widely regarded as a visionary scientist whose establishment of the first global seed bank has helped to safeguard food security for future generations. His pioneering work in biodiversity continues to inspire scientists and conservationists to protect and preserve plant diversity.” He concluded by extending his sincere appreciation to all participants of the festival for promoting and cultivating traditional crop varieties in India and wishing them every success in their endeavors and hope the Bankura Seed Festival 2025 inspires many more to join this noble cause.

The inaugural Vavilov Memorial Award was presented to Deepika Kundaji from Aurroville, Tamil Nadu. She has been carrying out conservation of Desi vegetable seeds since 1994 in 8 acres of barren land in Peeble Garden. Peeble Garden is an eco-restoration effort that has

completely transformed a severely eroded land - stripped of all vegetation and topsoil by past deforestation – into a thriving biodiverse forest and a productive seed conservation and food garden. Deepika along with Bernard has been conserving around 90 varieties of local vegetable seeds from various parts of India. As Deepika could not be present at the event the Award was received on her behalf by Jacob Nellithanam.

The success of the Beej Utsav was ensured by the tireless efforts of the Bharat Sebashram team and many individuals who included Bhairab Saini, Biplab Das, Dhananjay Banerjee, Ramrisha Chand, Santabrato Sen and other volunteers.