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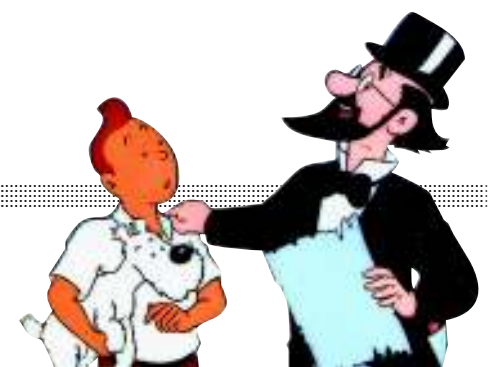


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Rice to the occasion

Add a heritage variety to your *pongal* this year. It will encourage thousands of organic farmers who toil to keep rare and valuable types of indigenous paddy alive

•• SREEDEVI LAKSHMI KUTTY

“Pongal used to be celebrated with freshly harvested, hand-pound rice,” says Ashokan. “I would say *iluppai poo samba* is the best rice to make *pongal*, with its soft texture and faint aroma,” he adds. An organic farmer committed to growing traditional rice varieties, Ashokan know what he is talking about. He adds he has always been partial to *poongar* red rice and *iluppai poo samba* white rice, both of which he grows on his land.



The key lies in knowing how to use each variety, says Ashokan. “We take care of the particular needs of each; be it duration of crop, water requirement, photo sensitivity, seasons etc. Similarly, we also need to be aware of cooking times, methods and flavour profiles of different types of traditional rice. Once we figure that out, it is easy to cook delicious dishes.”

Choices, choices
 Balaji and Muthu Kumar, two other organic paddy farmers, say they prefer *kichadi samba* white rice for *pongal*, while farmer Radha, who also works with organic farming guru Sundararaman, says



Salt of the earth
 Sakkarai pongal made with poongar red rice • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Grassroots movement Seedsavers have grown in numbers across the country • D GOPALAKRISHNAN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

she can turn out a *pongal* with any traditional variety. But, she adds, she is always extra happy if that was *karuppu kavuni* black rice. “Not everyone may agree, as *karuppu kavuni* retains a chewy texture even after cooking. It resembles the *aravana payasam* more than *pongal*, but I still love it,” she says.

There are thousands of farmers like Radha, Balaji, Muthu Kumar and Ashokan who grow, conserve and promote traditional rice varieties season after season. Two people who have been key to bringing tens of thousands of farmers in Tamil Nadu into the fold of organic traditional paddy cultivation are the late G Nammalvar and KR Jayaraman, who

passed away last month. Jayaraman of Adhirangam’s now-famous Nel Thiruvizha festival created a wave of seed revival and an army of seed saviours in Tamil Nadu. The work carried out by these

ONE FOR ALL

In 2015, the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute made its database of rice varieties – the largest in the world – available online for free.

SOME TRADITIONAL VARIETIES

- KICHADI SAMBA** Slender white-grained rice, a favourite of erstwhile royalty, delicious, easy to digest, hardy and easy to grow
- THOYAMALLI** White, as the name suggests, easy to grow and cook
- MAPPILLAI SAMBA** Red and robust, gives strength, requires patience from the cook, but doesn’t scrimp on richness and taste
- SEERAGA SAMBA** Our answer to *basmati*. Requires mollycoddling in the field and is sparing with yield, but rewards with fragrance and taste
- ILUPPAI POO SAMBA** Delicious, fragrant, rejuvenating, small-grained, still rarely grown
- POONGAR** Red and bold, takes time to cook, is said to be a healing grain, especially for women

And many more like *garudan samba*, *kattuyanam*, *karuppu kavuni*, *sigappu kavuni*, *thanga samba*, *neelam samba*, *kullakar*, *karun kuruvai*, *swarna masuri*, *palkudavalai*, *arupatham kuruvai*, *ottadayan*, and *salem sanna*

seed warriors can yield success only if people adopt these varieties of traditional rice in their diet. And what better time to do that than during the *pongal* festival, which celebrates the *samba* harvest with delicious *sakkarai pongal* and *ven pongal*. The freshly-harvested, hand-pound rice strengthens the connection with farmers and farming.

There is also increasing anecdotal evidence that these traditional varieties are capable of withstanding climate vagaries better and have unique nutritive and healthful properties. Therefore, conserving traditional rice varieties is also becoming a survival imperative.

Paddy varieties that belong to this land are tasty and unique. Cultivated without chemicals by the sons and daughters of the soil they are nourishing for the body and the earth. This is a heritage we can proudly gift our children.

Let us grow these rices. Let us buy them and explore recipes. Let us cook, share and gift them, while thanking the farmers for not giving up on precious grains. Sreedevi Lakshmi Kutty is the Co-Founder of Bio Basics, a social venture retailing organic food and associated with the Save Our Rice Campaign.



Seeds of change

Remembering Nel Jayaraman who touched the lives of hundreds of farmers by reviving traditional paddy varieties

His was a festival with a difference. Every farmer who participated, walked away with seeds of traditional rice varieties, with the promise of returning double the quantity the next year. At the 10th Seed Festival held in May 2016, Nel Jayaraman (‘nel’ is paddy in Tamil), distributed 156 seed varieties to over 7,000 farmers across the State. Jayaraman died in December 2018 battling cancer. Ananthoo, founder of Chennai-based reStore and Organic Farmers Market, who has worked closely with Jayaraman, remembers his times with the organic farming visionary.

It must have been eight years ago. I was at Thiruvavur to attend the Nel Thiruvizha (Seed Festival) organised by Jayaraman. I went there to volunteer; I’d heard about him from organic farming pioneer G Nammalvar and wanted to see if we could bring the varieties Jayaraman revived, to the market. It was just a small affair then; some 500 people attended. But the festival grew exponentially from then on; from 500, the number of participants went up to 1,500 next year; and then to 2,500, 5,000... There was no

looking back. When I entered the village of Adhirangam where the festival took place, I saw men carrying sacks of paddy; they came with five kilograms and returned with 10 kilograms the next year. That was how the seed exchange worked. I remember how Jayaraman cycled across villages to find traditional paddy seeds and distribute them. I asked him how he planned to carry his vision forward; what would he do for funds? But he replied, “What do I need funds for? I have seeds and my cycle will take me everywhere. Or I’ll take a bus.”



If people called him asking for any number of varieties of seeds, he went directly to see to it that they got what they wanted. I participated in the planning of his seed festivals. But the man didn’t believe in going by a strict plan. He was always cool when those around him panicked. For instance, if I told him there were many people coming for the event and that we had to plan for meals and plates, he would respond unfettered, “Thambi, it’ll fall in place. If there are no plates, we can buy banana leaves; if there’s no food, we can cook and serve rice; we have it in plenty, don’t we.”

What if the sound-systems don’t work, I insisted and he said, “Then we might have to speak louder.” I joked that I would refuse to come for planning meetings, because anyway, he didn’t need them. On a serious note, all the festivals he organised went on smoothly, like he believed. During floods or droughts, he took the collector of Nagapattinam to show him how our traditional paddy withstood the forces of Nature. He visited collectors to submit petitions against genetically-modified crops wherever he encountered them. Later in life, when his popularity grew, he spent more time at meetings and less time in the field; but that’s where his heart was. Hundreds of people called me from India and abroad, enquiring about his health during his final days. He showed that if you worked selflessly for society, it will give back. As told to Akila Kannadasan

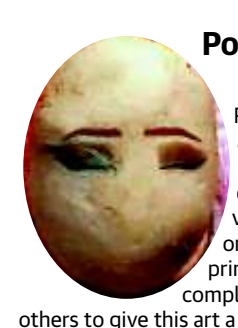
REASONS TO BE GRATEFUL

- Rare varieties he revived and went on to popularise:
- Madu muzhungi
- Milagu samba
- Aanai komban
- Kattu yanam
- Kuzhiyadichan



One night only

We hear Gaggan will be back in India soon. But you better move quickly if you want to snag a seat at the table. Clearly, all the press about Gaggan Anand closing down his multi-award-winning, eponymous Bangkok restaurant has been good for business. Last September, when the brilliant, and unapologetically temperamental chef, did a four-city tour with Taj hotels, it created such a buzz that tickets (priced at ₹19,500 plus taxes for Delhi and Mumbai, and ₹15,000 plus taxes for Chennai and Bengaluru) sold out rapidly. Now, the ITC Grand Chola in Chennai is hosting what is being called ‘Gaggan’s last meal’, collaborated in India – and it may very well be the last chance Indian diners get to experience the maverick chef’s current style of cooking, before he closes his Bangkok restaurant and moves on. You may have to break open your piggy bank though. Gaggan’s menu, which will be served at Avartana on January 23, is priced at ₹25,000 per head. There are two seatings, from 6.30 pm to 9.30 pm and 9.30 pm to 12.30 am. For more information, watch this space.



Potatoes get a makeover

Potatoes – mashed, fried, baked or added in gravies – seem to be a hot favourite amongst foodies – children and adults alike. Of late, potatoes are in the news: not for the innovative way they get cooked in, but for being used as a specimen for make up. The virtual world is going crazy posting videos of people doing make up on potatoes. Some make-up artists started right from applying a primer to this stem vegetable, and even go on to adding a wig to it, to complete the look. These videos are called ‘potato art’ and encourage others to give this art a shot.