

SEED Mother Rahibai gets Padmshree

Rahibai Soma Popere, popularly known as SEED Mother for conserving indigenous seeds who is also associated with BAIF Development Research Foundation, a Core Support Group of Department of Science & Technology (DST), has been conferred fourth highest civilian national award Padma Shree for her contribution in the field of agriculture.

She has worked for conserving hundreds of native varieties and encouraging farmers to grow traditional crops. She has also made it a motto of her life to spreading awareness about organic farming, agro-biodiversity, and wild food resources.

Popere is a 52-year-old tribal farmer from Mahadeo Koli Tribal community from Komblne village of Akole tribal block in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. She could not attend school due to poverty and started supporting her family in agricultural work in agri labor and cow rearing since she was 10 years old. She got married with Soma Popere, who was also uneducated, at the age of 17 years. The whole family was dependent on agriculture. Although she had not attended school, she learnt about agrobiodiversity, wild food resources, and traditional culture through practice and experience.



Through her experiences, she realized that the conservation of agro-biodiversity and wild food resources is the need of the hour to achieve seed sovereignty and nutritional security. She started a nursery of Blackberry and distributed them as a gift to members of the Self-Help Group (SHG). She then established a nursery of hyacinth bean seedlings, rice, vegetables, beans landraces and shared them with 210 farmers in 7 villages of Akole Block. She also conserved and multiplied about 43 landraces of 17 different crops (Paddy, hyacinth bean, millets, pulses, oilseeds, etc.) by establishing an *in-situ* germplasm conservation center. She has also established a perennial kitchen garden for house-hold consumption and year-round use.

Popere is an active member of Kalsubai Parisar Biyanee Savardhan Samiti, Akole, and has established a community seed bank in her small house for conservation and revival of crop diversity and wild food resources. At present, about 122 landraces of 32 crops are under conservation. She has the zeal to learn new agronomic techniques. She developed expertise in the SRI method of paddy cultivation, improved cultivation practices for tomato and hyacinth bean, introduced participatory seed selection, organic farming techniques (vermicomposting, vermiwash, natural pest repellents), nursery establishment and trained about 3500 farmers across Ahmednagar district.

She leads 5 Self Help groups in Kombhalne village and is creating awareness among women for participation in the Self Help group movement, village sanitation, clean kitchen, seed conservation, and wild food exhibitions. Her work has drawn a lot of visitors-agriculture officers, scientists, farmers, students from different parts of Maharashtra who came to see her *in-situ* conservation centre, hyacinth bean diversity centre, kitchen garden, etc.

Her association with BAIF, a national NGO involved in the implementation of pioneering development programs in different parts of the country, is a long one. BAIF Development Research Foundation has been working with disadvantaged rural communities and stakeholders for more than four decades and is now spread over 85,000 villages across India. Their main focus is on developing sustainable livelihoods by applying technology and research to farming and livestock to raise productivity while conserving natural resources. BAIF is operating in the areas of cattle development (particularly dairy husbandry, goat husbandry), silvipasture development, feed and fodder management, water resources development, improved agriculture, agri-horti-forestry and drudgery reduction of women.