Desi Beej Mahotsav Highlights Desi Seeds

Pralya Kaly

Bengaluru: An astonishing variety of indigenous seeds was on display at the Art of Living International Center, Bengaluru, when it hosted the very lively Desi Beej Mahotsav, for over 500 dedicated farmers from 8 states of India. They interacted with experts, award-winning conservationists, and with each other, over two days, March 30-31, 2019. Conducted by the Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences (SIRI), the event centred on a near-forgotten aspect of Indian agriculture – the Desi, i.e. indigenous, seed varieties. The aim was to encourage farmers to learn how to grow Desi seeds as a viable business. A reality model in collaboration with some universities and the Heiroom Seed Breeders Association of France, has been planned to help in this.

As part of the Mahotsav, the path-breaking ‘Sustainable Seeds Innovation Roundtable 1.0’ discussed the setting up of an Art of Living Digital Platform. This will benefit farmers wanting to practice chemical-free farming as it helps them to commercially produce and procure Desi seeds in a reliable, sustainable and profitable manner. They can make innovations in neglected Desi seeds and, importantly, get recognition for their efforts. A second Conference 2.0 is planned in July 2019, in collaboration with Leeds University of the University Technical University of Munich, Germany. In a noteworthy project, Art of Living is supporting farmers in Punjab in growing an indigenous wheat variety, christened ‘Sona Moth’ by Gurudev, using natural farming techniques and organic manure. The first harvest of 18 tons of wheat has been pre-booked by the Art of Living itself, assuring growers that their organically-grown produce has a sizeable health-conscious market. It has been said, ‘What we eat is a political decision and unless we take these actions with awareness about indigenous seeds, we won’t be able to influence the corporate control over our lives.’

Youth earning 1-2 Lakhs Per Month After Completing Art of Living’s Solar Skills Training

Mayer Chauthari and Tushar Mahajan, co-founders and proprietors, Sri Sri Solar Solutions, completed the Solar Skills training at the Art of Living’s Sri Sri Kauchar Vihar Kendra, Bangalore, in August 2017. Their average income prior to the training was around Rs. 15,000 per month. Now, their average profit per month is around one to two lakhs rupees. One of their biggest projects till date has been a 6 KW On-Grid Solar System, for which the turnover was Rs. 4,50,000/-.
Sri Sri Says Spiritual Values a Must to Save the Environment

The recently organized Desi Bhai Mahatav at The Art of Living International Center was but the latest in a series of initiatives taken over the decades by the Art of Living under the vision and leadership of Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Hundreds of varieties of indigenous seeds go extinct every single year. Gurudev's latest initiative is bound to positively impact the farmers' business and save native varieties from vanishing forever.

Gurudev's simple but sure approach of positively questioning ingrained environmental practices and then moving on to taking concerted action to bring sustained and far-reaching benefits through the Art of Living Projects is a great contribution to India, and to the planet. He has said that the challenge of the present century is to maintain harmony in the environment, and that this can be done only when we have spiritual values. How can this be achieved? He explains how with his characteristic depth and brilliance:

- The purpose of technology is to harness nature, to bring information and comfort to human beings. When spiritual and human values are ignored, technology brings pollution and destruction instead of comfort.
- Laws alone cannot create environmental sustainability. We need to make care for environment a part of our value system.
- Mechanisms need to be created for participation of civil society, especially the youth, for revival of water bodies, planting saplings and a life style geared towards zero waste.
- The greed for quick and large profits severely disrupts the ecological balance, and not only pollutes the physical environment, but also stimulates negative emotions on a subtle level. We need to attend to the human psyche, which is the root cause of pollution.
- It is not technology and science that pose a hazard, but the waste material generated by technological and scientific processes.
- Have reverence for the planet, revive trees and rivers as sacred, treat people as sacred, and see God in Nature. This will foster sensitivity.
- A happy state of mind is crucial towards a pollution-free environment.

Gurudev's underlying ideology towards all aspects of Planet Earth has always been holistic, inclusive, compassionate and really well-thought through. His ideology ensures that all contradictions of a no-environmental challenge facing us are brought into play while deciding the course of sustainable action in addressing those particular - and allied - challenges. How to bring in sustainability, how to safeguard the profitability of livelihoods, how to save native knowledge and know-how, how to save lives (farmer suicides) - all these have always been at the base of Gurudev's thinking on what action is needed to bring in the required change in existing systems, practices and processes. Gurudev does not believe in mere "activits," but in action. Pioneering, path-breaking, research is the Prime in the Projects.

Learning from the EXPERTS

Keeper of the Future

Dr. Prabhakar Rao has a PhD in Agriculture. He has over 30 years of specialization in landscape architecture. He has been part of several iconic projects all over the world, including the Palm Island, Waterfronts in Kuwait, and several sustainable architectural projects in the Near East, Africa and the Americas. He presently consults for projects such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel statue in Gujarat, the Green park for the new capital city, New Delhi. His expertise is involved with the Art of Living Foundation since 1990. He set up and headed the Middle East division of the International Association for Human Values in Dubai, as the CEO, till 2010. Currently entrusted with the Sri Sri Institutes of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust, Dr. Rao has been a seed keeper of indigenous native varieties for more than 30 years. He has now successfully stabilized around 140 rare indigenous vegetable varieties.

Dr. Himaji Chakrabarti in conversation with Dr. Prabhakar Rao

Tell us something about Gurudev's vision for agriculture in India.

The Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust was set up by Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar seeing the severe need among the farmers for an alternative to chemical agriculture. With this mission He pitched in with the farmers and created varieties like the Vriksh Karani. Cultivation moves on if a farmer wants to sell Veda and others. They documented a system of agriculture in India that has successfully survived for at least 5000 years. It is known as Vedic agriculture and several other names such as Kadu Kirshi, Dhi Kirshi, Homa Kirshi, etc. Gurudev brought all of them together to make Sri Sri Natural Farming. He took the essence from our scriptures and presented in a form that anybody could adopt.

What is unique about Sri Sri Natural Farming?

It is a technique of agriculture where you let nature do its work, what it has already been doing for millions of years, and not interfere with it by adding harmful chemicals. Sri Sri Natural Farming is unique in many ways.

Monsoon: It is based on the desi cow. If you look into mythology, it is derived from the mythical Kamadhenu that was gifted by God to mankind, saying that this cow will give all the wealth that is needed in life. What is a lesser known fact is that this wealth was not milk, but the cow dung. A desi cow's dung has microbes that act as key catalyst for plant growths; they add in not just the nutrients in the soil which are in a bound form i.e., they are not freely soluble. In a beautiful symbiotic relationship, it gives sugar in return for their survival. We make Jeera Amrita, Pusa Jeera Amrita, Beej Amrita and Rasopoyagava from the dung. These can be prepared by the farmer in the farm itself, at no extra cost, since all ingredients are available in the farm itself. Moreover, the moment you bring this sattva into the soil through the microbes, the earthworms come and do all the work of tillling and loosening the soil and bringing air into it.

Marketing: Our trained farmers come together and form the Sri Sri Kisan March, where they provide direct linkages to the market and consumer, through Sri Sri Tatta. In this way Sri Sri Natural Farming provides the farmers a 360 degree support from training, hand holding to marketing.

What is the core challenge that SSIASST is trying to address presently?

The retail prices are at all-time low in terms of inflation. The farmers are reaching a stage where farming is not even worth the cost of harvesting. The farmers sometimes are driven to the point where they just leave the crop on the filed or dump it on the road. This is why people are unwilling to take up farming. Gurudev understands the gravity of this situation and thus is addressing it at a grassroots level. He wants to give the farmers a profitable, viable and sustainable alternative, which is Sri Sri Natural Farming.

How is this connected with spirituality?

Gurudev says, "what you eat is who you are." Is the food we and our children eating today, conducive for having a healthy body and centred mind? The kind of food that we are eating today is full of chemical residues and other toxins. Our body is not designed to absorb toxins. So eating the correct sattva and does not enable the mind to be centred and develop itself spiritually. A rajasic mind will have its own challenges while processing information. Eating toxin free food itself will be a great starting point for transformation to happen.

What have been the noteworthy achievements of these initiatives?

The very fact that we have 22 lakh farmers who are working with us and adopting this technology, I believe this itself is a huge achievement. We have over a 1000 trainers in India who travel all over the country and conduct training programs.

Has there been any intervention for stopping farmer suicides in India?

Very much, specially in the Vidarbha area. We are first of all taking care of the farmers’ mind through our Happiness Program and then slowly introducing them to alternative forms of agriculture. Today there all happy farmers and attribute their success to Gurudev. Our work continues...
Working for a Cleaner, Healthier, & Happier Sant Nagar

Sant Nagar, Haryana: Recently, a batch of students who completed The Art of Living’s “Dynasty for Self and Nation” (DSN) course, conducted by Sutti Bhagya, were assigned the task of making Sant Nagar, a densely populated slum near Faridabad Railway Station, cleaner and healthier. DSN is a rigorous and transformational course that empowers participants to break through personal Inhibitions and barriers and work in harmony with the local community head who explained the pertinent issues that needed to be addressed.

To handle issues that could not be handled by them alone, the team members took the help of government officials and NGOs. The team used many innovative social media tools to address the sanitation issue in the community. The Swachh app was effectively used to lodge a complaint about the clogged up drain and dirty streets and the municipal authorities immediately took action. The community was educated about using the Swachh app and the people were motivated to use the app to ensure hygiene in their community. The team members used other social media tools like Central Public Pollution Control Board app (CPPCB) – a public forum application to raise the issue of the community to the government authorities.

Sant Nagar is funded under the Smart City program. New sewer lines are being laid in the colony, water pipes, storm water drains and internal roads will be developed in the coming months. What was needed was to create awareness in the community regarding sanitation and hygiene, which the Uttihan team did very efficiently. This is just a small sample of what we can achieve. All of us dream of building a better society but as individuals we achieve very little. The Art of Living provides the necessary platform for individuals to come together and work towards bringing about sustainable transformation.

Volunteers teaching children the importance of hygiene through fun and games.

Nine Couples Tie the Knot at Mass Wedding in Gujarat

Panchmahal, Gujarat: On the occasion of Hunsur Dyant on April 19, 2019, Yo-yachantras led by Art of Living faculty, Prathamesh Joshi, had organized a mass wedding in Ranewa Village, Panchmahal District, Gujarat. Nine girls from the surrounding villages were married at the ceremony. Parents of the girls were jubilant that they could get their daughters married without being burdened by heavy financial expenditure which they could ill afford. Nearly 3000-3500 guests who attended the wedding were treated to a sumptuous feast. Elders of the village who attended the ceremony remarked that they were attending a ceremony of such grandeur for the first time after independence. Each of the brides received household items as part of the ceremony: one set of almirahs, fans, mixer-grinders, and kitchen utensils, worth Rs. 25,000-40,000 as a gift. All these gifts were arranged by the villagers, Yo-yachantras, and Aashah Dham Mandir.

Bengaluru Karnataka: 200 rural children from the North-East of India and Kamataka are sharpening effective professional skills this summer at The Art of Living free school in Bangalore. Under the project “Shiksha & Krideos” in H&K Bank’s H4H CSR Campaign, studying in classes 5-9 are learning to work on presentations, Excel Sheets, and other computer skills. Boys and girls are being coached in football, volleyball, and other sports to gain sporting as well as life skills.

When Life Is a Challenge, That’s When All The Skills Are Needed From Within You

Being calm and peaceful when everything is calm, everything is peaceful, has no meaning. Being peaceful when everything is falling apart, then being calm and peaceful – that peace has value. A bottle of water has more work to do in a desert than when you are surrounded by water. When you are sitting by a spring, then a bottle of water is of no value to you. One handful from the spring is good enough, and your body is satisfied. When there is chaos, there is confusion, when there are problems all around you, then calmness is needed most; wisdom is most valuable then. When life is a challenge, that’s when all the skills are needed from within you. When people blame you, when they don’t understand you, that’s when you need the inner strength to smile. When things don’t go your way, you have to handle the loss of your strength. And you are the only one who knows your eyes. Whether I am equanimous or not, today is the testing day. Yoga brings that balance, so that an event doesn’t shatter you.

There is an incident about Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi’s life companion, Kasturba Gandhi, was on her deathbed. Doctors had given up hope. They said, “Just a few hours or minutes – that’s it, for her to live.” At that time, Mahatma Gandhi came out of his kutia and told Pandit Sudhirak Patel, “Read that verse from Bhagavad Gita for me.” When he recited the Gita, Gandhi said, “Today is your Bapu’s test. Today is my examination. I will know whether I will be able to handle the loss of Kasturba.” As he recited, tears rolled down his eyes. “Whether I am equanimous or not, today is the testing day, Yoga brings that balance, so that an event doesn’t shatter you.”

Just observe how your mind goes, how it flares up, for nothing! How it creates a mess all around. One moment it’s high, another moment it’s down. Bipolar is an extreme condition, but those who are not doing yoga, they are all, in some manner, in a bipolar state. Yoga is the answer for these psychological troubles. Sanatann yoga ucyata (2:48) Yoga is the equanimity that wells up in you, that comes up in consciousness.

Excerpta from Guruji’s commentary on Bhagavad Gita

25 Gram Panchayats of Haryana Confer Title of ‘Choudhari’ to Gurudev

Hisar, Haryana: During his recent tour of Haryana, Gurudev was conferred with an honorary Doctorate degree by Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology. He was also decorated with the title of honor, ‘Choudhari’ by 25 Gram Panchayats of Haryana as a special ceremony organized by The Art of Living family in Hisar. According to Sanjeev Goyal, this title is conferred on a person who upholds justice and righteousness and works for the upliftment of the downtrodden without discrimination between caste, creed, rich, poor, etc. This move was lauded by the Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar.

Project Bharat Gains Momentum

Buldhana, Maharashtra: Prathisedh from 65 villages in Buldhana district, Khargarni Taluka, Maharashtra, got together and created a big momentum as they went about organizing 40 Nav Chetana Shivas that saw an average participation of 500 people in each village. Taking it a step further, Seva Yodhda, with the help of volunteers and Prathisedh successfully organized Happiness Programs in a cluster of 40 villages and around 350 participants experienced Sadhan Shiva.

Learning New Ropes in Summer Camp

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Embodyment of Selfless Service

"I have always set my own targets & achieved them."

Dr. Sujata

Tapan Rehabilitation Society, a nonprofit organization in Nellore, Karnataka, that caters to special needs of differently abled children and young adults, is the brainchild of Dr. Sujata. Dr. Sujata holds a doctoral degree in psychology and a postgraduate degree in guidance and counseling and is among the Art of Living faculty. The second of three daughters, Sujata comes from a highly educated family. Her father, a doctor in Vypinabudi and History, is a Class One Officer in the Education Department. Her mother is a highly intellectual homemaker. Her family has always been very supportive of her and encouraged her to pursue her dreams. After completing her studies, Sujata wanted to become a counselor. A little shy and introverted, Sujata says she was never a career woman. Focusing on the needs of specially abled children and young adults was never on her cards. She started her career as a project officer in UNICEF for 3 years. For a short while she worked with Metro Group of Hospitals when she came across patients with anxiety, trauma, phobias, and other emotional distresses. Perhaps she would have remained content as a counselor had it not been for a group of differently abled children that approached her for guidance. The seed for Tapan Rehabilitation Society was laid. Sujata very philosophically says, "We don't choose our occupations, they choose us."

Sujata started Tapan Rehabilitation Society in 1994. Initially it served about 25 children providing services such as speech therapy and vocational training. In 1995, a team of doctors, educationists, social workers, and businessmen joined Sujata in her mission and today the institution has reached the heights international repute. It now has a Vignana Shiksha Prasarak Kendra, a residential institution for children and young adults ranging in age from 3 to 30 years old. There are now 200 students including those with learning disabilities, speech and hearing impairments, mental challenges, autism, and cerebral palsy. The center is in educating these children and teaching them daily living skills that will help them to integrate into the day-to-day life of their communities. It also offers DEDs in Special Education for those who are interested to equip themselves as teachers for the specially abled. Additionally, it also has a training center for parents for medical and physical challenges children are overcoming. It is not an easy task, especially for sensitive people like Sujata. Handling psychiatric cases would have a deep effect on her and leave her feeling disturbed. In 2001, she took a leave from Art of Living program. When asked what impact the program had on her, she said, "Before this course I used to smile very rarely but now the smile is rarely missing from my face." She found a better vision of life and the people and she was ready to take on all the challenges that her occupation offered. In 2002 she became the first Art of Living teacher in Karnataka and started conducting programs for children in the Hubli center, for destitute women in Kolam, for nursing personnel at the Police Training Center, and for inmates in prisons. She has helped thousands find joy in life, including the children at the rehab center. As a self-motivated woman who believes in setting her own targets and achieving them, Sujata has become a role model for the woman of today. She has been conferred the "Woman of the Year" Award twice by the Aarushi Legal Services Authority, Government of Haryana. She has also been nominated by the Government of Haryana as the ambassador from Karnataka to the Belt Bache, Belt Paddho campaign. Giving 100% to the task at hand and at the same time remaining detached has helped Sujata to remain motivated towards her work. Her philosophy and lifestyle project are inspiring to the people. It is a story that is a combination penned by her for Tapan Rehabilitation Society, "Every individual is unique and can contribute to society in a meaningful way by giving right input at the right time."

Making Way for a Better World

This entire journey is learning

Pankaj Yadav

Dr. Hampa Chakrabarti

Although born in a family where education was worshipped, studying was not a favorable thing for young Pankaj. Nevertheless, growing up in Uttar Pradesh, the heartland of public school aspirations, he was required by his family to follow the traditional path. Thus, after completing his graduation, he tried his hands at business. When that didn't work out he gradually took up the next best job option. But his heart failed to be interested. Unknown to his conscious self, Pankaj Yadav had grown up admiring the efforts that his family elders made towards the development of their village and people. He succinctly says, "people from more than fifty villages would come to my eldest grandfather with their problems. Later on, my father carried forward that tradition." Observing the seeds of the same passion in him, one day his father guided him to study for Master in Social Work. That was it. After years of restlessness, for the first time, Pankaj found a home for his heart. But the exhilaration couldn’t last long. In his first job he soon realized that all his time was spent dabbling in papers and he hardly ever got to participate directly with the communities. Dejected, he went back home – where the misfortune of his life was about to knock at his door. Directionless, as he passed his days, a friend largest volunteer-based NGOs and was a frontline worker in social development initiatives. Unsure of what to do ahead, but devoid of many options, Pankaj took a leap of faith and travelled the distance between Mau and Bangalore to find himself suggested to visit The Art of Living International Centre. It hosted one of the world’s at the Project Management Unit of the organization, Pankaj knew the moment he stepped into the office that his life had finally brought him to the place where he was to share the "Stand Up and Take Action" campaign was just wrapping up and the Mission Green Earth was taking shape. There was no looking back for this wide-eyed lad. More than a decade later, Pankaj has made significant contribution to managing social development projects in The Art of Living. Some projects under his belt are ‘Mission Green Earth Stand Up Action’, prevention of child marriages in Bihar in partnership with religious functionaries, behavioural change through spiritual action for preventing diarrhoea and gastroenteric infections in Assam and Naga. He has also worked extensively for sanitation projects through activities like toilet construction and behavioural change workshops. Today he is associated in Integrated Village Development initiatives. Pankaj points out that every project brought along a set of unique challenges. When he was working in Bihar towards eradication of child marriage, each day they were required to fight against a deeply entrenched institution and powerful local individuals who stood in their way. They couldn’t even take recourse to law or police action as that would be detrimental to their objective of behavioural change with a spiritual approach. Each day they had to walk the thin slippery line of not hurting sentiments and the same time waging a war against those very sentiments. The journey has been arduous. In another instance it so happened that he was travelling on a bus in Baranagar with a group of young volunteers for a project, and the bus met an accident. Several passengers were seriously injured, which also included few of his volunteers. As the bus was stuck, people had to get out and rush to help the injured. After providing the basic medical aid, Pankaj was offered to stay in one of the local houses for no rhyme or reason pointed fingers at him for putting those young people’s life in danger! That moment he knew that he will have to rise as a responsible leader and not bow down to the false accusations. Of course, as he says, “I know Guruved was there with me” with this faith he decided to take whatever came up. When questioned on what has been his biggest learning, Pankaj says, “This entire journey is a learning.” Both challenges and success have had their messages, mostly to reveal the possibilities that you are capable of tackling them. His team completed the construction of more than 700 toilets within 90 days! He himself was pleasantly surprised. The biggest magic however un- added. Pankaj says with a smile, “When everything fell in place so smoothly for me, a boy from the Hindi heartland, to be able to marry a Kannada girl!” Varsha, his wife, a senior project manager with the organisation, smiles along.