

# Food for thought... and a thought for your food

**P**ooja and Rashmi were not in a mood to go to school! They were just not enthused by the topic of the special lecture. Who wants to sit and listen to an hour's lecture and that too on 'Rice'?

"What's the big deal? I mean, it's like any other food that we eat," said Rashmi.

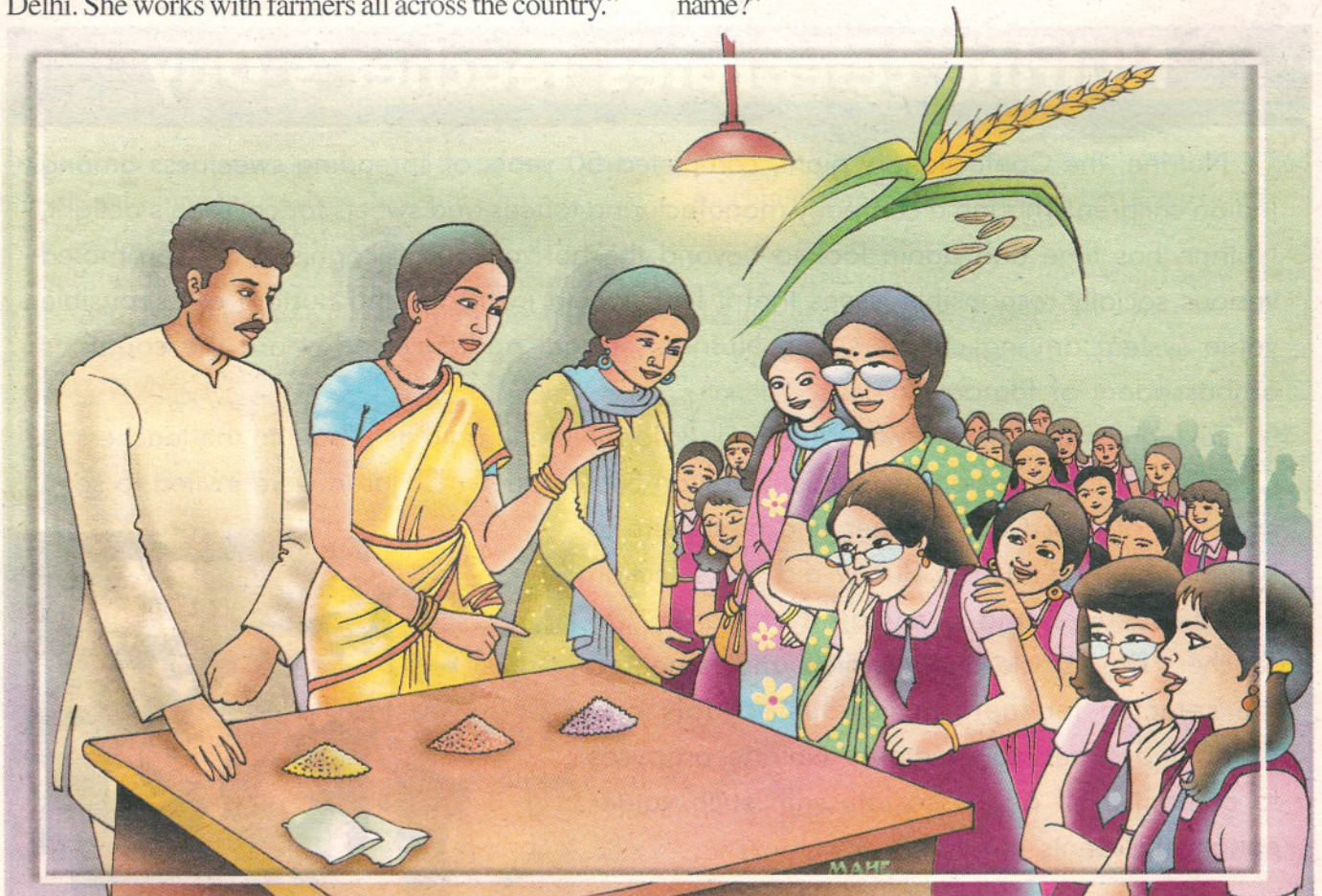
With total disinterest, the two of them entered the school auditorium. They exchanged exasperated glances with their classmates and with a big fat swollen face sat down to listen to the lecture.

The principal Ms. Raman welcomed the three guests of the day, Laxmi Algod, Ajay Negi, and Shaila Rao. "Laxmi Algod and Ajay Negi are farmers from Karnataka and Uttaranchal. Along with them is Ms. Shaila Rao from Delhi. She works with farmers all across the country."

After the usual greetings, Ms. Rao asked the students: "You all must be knowing about this entity called Rice? No matter which part of India you come from, you sure would have seen it in different forms! If you are from Northern India you must have enjoyed eating *rajma-chawal*, or *chawal ki kheer*, and if from the South, among other things you must be relishing either *biryani* or *idli-dosa*!"

Rashmi whispered to Pooja: "Gosh, I'm going off to sleep!" But Pooja had begun to get a wee bit interested. "Shhh. ....It's not that bad." Rashmi could not believe what Pooja said, and turned her face back to Ms. Rao.

By now, Ms. Rao had noticed Rashmi being distracted, and pointed to her and said "Hi, what is your name?"





"Rashmi," she answered in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Okay. Can I ask you a question?" said Ms. Rao and without waiting for Rashmi's response asked, "What do you think is the colour of rice?"

Rashmi looked confused, and said, "White, I suppose!"

Ms. Rao then turned towards Ms. Raman, and she said: "I've seen brown rice, too."

At this point, Laxmi Algod and Ajay Negi took out the small bags they were carrying, and emptied its contents. To the surprise of the students and the principal, they saw rice grains in colours they could have never imagined! There was red, yellow, and purple... along with the different shades of white and brown. Each of them was a different variety of rice.

Pooja and Rashmi were dumbstruck! They looked at the rice samples with total fascination. Ms. Rao then handed over the mike to Laxmi. Karan Bhaiyya, the auditorium in charge, came running from behind with an extra mike for Ajay. So it was over to Laxmi and Ajay.

Laxmi asked the students: "Whatever do you think is associated with rice, apart from eating, that is?"

When all she could hear was a murmur amongst the students, she continued. "Let me not tax your brain too much. There are quite a few festivals in India that have something to do with rice. In Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and other parts of South India, *Pongal* is a rice harvest festival. The festival derives its name from a rice

Today rice is grown in almost all States of India. It is believed that the oldest rice specimen in India dates back to about 2000 BC! Its family history can be traced back to our very own sub-continent. Indeed rice was first found to be wild in a field. The family that it belongs to - *Oryza*—has 27 species, of which 25 are wild and two alone are cultivated. Of the two that are cultivated, it is *Oryza sativa* which is grown in the Asian sub-continent. In India alone, there are almost 50,000 varieties of rice that come under the *Oryza sativa indica* group!



preparation, which is made especially on the day the harvest is brought home.

At this point, Ajay interjected and added: "In North India at that time, crisp rice is offered to the fire during the *Lohri* festival. Patterns are made on the floor with rice flour called *rangoli*, so that even insects in the household get their share of the harvest and bless the home and the hearth!" He looked back at Laxmi.

With a twinkle in her eyes, she said: "During the *Onam* festival in Kerala, rice *payasam* is made for dessert."

"Oh yes," said Pooja. "In Orissa, at Lord Jagannath's temple, rice is offered as a *prasad*." Her classmate Jarjum, from Arunachal Pradesh, then spoke about the *Mioko* festival in which the Apatani tribals offer prayers to the spirits for the welfare of their tribe. The priest distributes rice powder to everyone as a symbol of fertility and life after death. Rice is cooked in a common pot to symbolise the idea of community sharing.

"And there's more," said Ms. Rao, with a big smile on her face. In parts of northern and western India, at Diwali time, delicacies are made of pounded semi-cooked rice called *poha*. In Goa, both Hindu and Christian farmers perform the ceremony of *Novidade* in which the local priest



cuts a rice sheaf and brings it to the place of prayer, in a village procession. Have you also noticed that no *puja thali* is complete without a few grains of rice?"

"Phew!" said Rashmi. "Now that's quite an amazing spread! How little I knew of it! Ms. Rao looked at the students and said, "Okay, now let me pose a serious question." The students waited with bated breath.

"By now you must have realised how extensively rice is grown and used all over our country," said Ms. Rao. The children nodded their heads vigorously in agreement. "If that's the case, then do you think it is fair to consider the rice plant and seeds as someone's private property?" asked Ms. Rao. "No farmer in India or for that matter in Asia has ever said that rice belongs only to him/her! In fact, rice seeds of different varieties have been freely exchanged amongst farmers."

Ms. Rao went on to say: "But today, big companies outside India want to change all this. They have been trying to study the traditional rice varieties and farming practices to "invent" new rice varieties. They would,

naturally, apply for a patent (a license) saying such a rice plant belongs only to this company or that and anybody wanting to grow rice would have to buy its seeds from them! The company would thus make private profit from such 'ownership'."

Although the children were learning these facts for the first time, they looked concerned. "I'm sure you are finding this difficult to understand and are perhaps feeling helpless, too," Ajay said. "Maybe you think you can't help, but you can! Next time you hear of someone trying to stake a claim on your very own rice... just turn round and ask them to let it be as it is... free as ever," Laxmi added.

Pooja and Rashmi, now totally impressed with the talk, went upto Ajay, Laxmi and Ms. Rao, and said: "Thank you for all this 'food for thought' you've given us. We had never thought there is so much about the food that we eat!"

- By Shalini Bhutani & Kanchi Kohli  
Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan

## Meet the... Xingu Indians

The Xingu Indians, so called because they inhabit the banks of the river Xingu in Brazil, are actually a group of eleven tribes of different origins who live close together in harmony. A casual observer cannot make out the differences in their houses, ornaments, household goods, weapons, or hairstyles of each tribe. Men of the Kamayura tribe have the tradition of fishing with the help of bows and arrows.

Each tribal village has a bare central space surrounded by four or more *malocas* - huge thatched huts measuring up to 80 ft long and 30 ft high. The families share these, with each having its own section of the hut.

Xingu men are muscular and keep themselves fit by practising wrestling. Their hair is cut in a tonsured fringe and plastered down with a decorative veneer of red and black dyes. For festivals, they decorate themselves with necklaces of shells or jaguar teeth and other ornaments and headdresses of colourful feathers. The Xingu women are less splendidly ornamented. However, on festivals they paint their bodies with vivid geometric patterns.

Although tribal affairs are decided by the council of male elders, women enjoy equality with men. Married life is stable and there is family harmony.

The tribes have a rich mythology in which the animals and spirits of the river and forest play a crucial role. They also have a crowded calendar of festivals to celebrate various events, which serve as occasions for inter-tribe bonding.

