

## GOOD PRACTICES 67: January 2025

### PAATHAPANTALA JATHARA: MOBILE BIODIVERSITY FESTIVAL – A Unique and Effective Extension Education Service to non-literate communities



*In this good practice note, Salome highlights the Mobile Biodiversity Festival, an initiative by the Deccan Development Society (DDS) to promote agro-biodiversity and cultural exchange in Telangana, India. Over 25 years, it has brought together local communities to discuss and celebrate sustainable farming, biodiversity, and traditional knowledge.*

#### CONTEXT

Geographically, the [Deccan Development Society \(DDS\)](#) working area falls under the dryland region of the Sangareddy district in Telangana State, India. Agriculturally and culturally, the region has a rich heritage of community celebrations called “*Jathara*,” where the community gathers at a particular religious place, a common event, or along the banks of a local stream to celebrate life. Usually, these *Jathara* are celebrated over a few days and include activities such as sports, recreation, competitions, exhibitions, sales, worship, and prayers across respective religions. The most important highlight is the food enjoyed during these celebrations.



**Caravan connecting communities on the move**

Observing this tradition, the then Director of DDS, late *Shri P. V. Satheesh*, began organizing *Jatharas* around different local themes—health care systems, crafts and folk arts, early childhood education

(Bal wadi), etc.—as early as 1992. These events drew enthusiastic crowds eager to learn, share, and exchange wisdom. Besides exhibitions, demonstrations and talks by local experts were held, followed by discussions and dialogues.

In 1999, through the South Asia Network for Food, Ecology, and Culture (SANFEC), DDS invited farmers (both men and women), academics, development professionals, and activists from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Canada, and other countries to organize an Agro-Biodiversity Festival. This festival featured discussions, debates, dialogue workshops, and the development of strategic action plans for SANFEC and its members. A mini-farm with 12 crop varieties—sorghum, chickpea, linseed, safflower, mustard, lentil, lathyrus, sesame, peas, coriander, wheat, and bishop’s weed—was created as a replica of a local agricultural field. Local cuisine and culture were celebrated, reviving various folk forms. The festival became a vibrant mosaic of songs, dance, and dialogue, providing equal opportunities for people from all walks of life to share their development perspectives. Visual landscapes were creatively captured by DDS Sangam Video Women.

### MOBILE BIODIVERSITY FESTIVAL

In 2001, DDS undertook the responsibility of preparing the [National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan for the Deccan region](#), supported by the Central Government. As part of this effort, DDS launched the Mobile Biodiversity Festival, which travelled through 60 villages where DDS was active. The festival featured 12 bullock carts decorated with ear heads of different crops and local seed displays. Folk dancers, musicians, and drummers led the procession, followed by the carts. Stalls were set up to showcase local herbal medicines, seeds, foods, and other items.

Villagers were invited to participate in dialogues and provide recommendations for biodiversity conservation in their areas. Local Women Sanghams (women’s groups) hosted the program and provided lunch for guests. The event started on January 14 and concluded on February 13, 2001. The recommendations were compiled and submitted for further action.



Dr Sheikh N Meera, Director, ICAR-ATARI, Zone X, Hyderabad addressing the gathering at the Mobile Bio-Diversity Festival on 14 January 2025

Inspired by the overwhelming response, the Sangham women and DDS staff decided to make this an annual event beginning January 14. Over the last 25 years, the festival has been held successfully, attracting many eminent participants (Box 1).

**Box 1: Participation of Key Stakeholders**

Eminent individuals such as Dr. Rajendra Singh (Ramon Magsaysay Awardee), Dr. Michel Pimbert (UK), Dr. Daniel Buckles (Canada), and Dr. David Bruver (Inter Pares, Canada), along with heads of reputed institutions like NIRDPR, MANAGE, NIN, CESS, NAARM, and ICAR-NBPGR, have participated as chief guests.

Farmers from countries such as England, Canada, Nigeria, Benin, Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Indonesia, and others have shared their experiences, challenges, and triumphs in conserving native seeds, culture, and agriculture.

Local government officials, including the District Collector and Superintendent of Police, are regularly invited, contributing to knowledge exchange. Members of parliament have also participated, pledging support for issues raised at the festivals. The event has grown to include international campaigners, civil society activists, academics, and environmentalists.

**GOOD PRACTICES**

**Recognizing and Rewarding Biodiverse Farmers**

During every festival, approximately 30 farmers—both men and women—are honoured as Biodiverse Farmers (Box 2). They are presented with a shawl, a citation, a memento, and a traditional outfit, along with coconuts and flowers to enhance the auspicious atmosphere. So far, DDS women sangha’s have honoured around 750 farmers.



**Biodiverse farmers honoured during the 24<sup>th</sup> Mobile Biodiversity Festival 2024**

**Box 2: A biodiverse farmer is recognised by the criteria set by women themselves:**

1. The number of crops grown simultaneously in the same space and season.
2. Diversity of crops and varieties within them.
3. Use of local seeds and rejection of genetically modified (GM) seeds.
4. The presence of edible uncultivated greens on the farm.

5. Use of homemade manures, FYM (Farmyard Manure), decoctions, vermicompost, etc.
6. The number and diversity of animals, including buffaloes, cows, oxen, goats, sheep, and chickens.
7. The number of plants along field bunds and the presence of fruit trees.
8. The presence of live hedges.

### Public Meetings to Promote Biodiversity

In every village the festival visits, public meetings are held to discuss the importance of biodiversity and local seed varieties. Topics include the value of food crops, chemical-free pest control practices, markets for organic products, and government schemes. The points raised during discussions are documented and shared with relevant departments, institutions, and the villagers to facilitate actionable outcomes.

### Encouragement for Local Folk Artists and Non-Farm Livelihoods

Over time, the festival's artistic and aesthetic aspects have evolved significantly. Once a simple procession, the event now includes singers, dancers, and drummers, adding novelty and creativity each year. The decoration of the bullock carts has also transformed, featuring sophisticated designs and motifs that enhance the festival's overall visual appeal.

The festival encourages local folk artists, many of whom face economic challenges, by providing them a platform to showcase their art. Additionally, it creates work opportunities for various non-farm livelihoods, including basket weavers, earthen pottery makers, carpenters, musicians, and other artisans. The entire village, irrespective of age or background, participates actively—not just as spectators but as part of the joyous learning experience.



**Kolatam by DDS Women and Tribal Dance**

### Exchange of Knowledge

The Mobile Biodiversity Festival has earned the nickname "Festival of Exchange," encompassing seed exchange, knowledge exchange, cultural exchange, and cuisine exchange. Participation has expanded from local to global, with farmers from various countries contributing to debates, discussions, and cultural enrichment through songs and dance.

### Taste, Nutrition, and Diversity

Villages hosting the festival serve a delicious millet-based welcome drink, typically ragi porridge enriched with peanuts, jaggery, and ghee. For lunch, a diverse and nutritious meal featuring 8–12 items are served, including millet rotis (sorghum, pearl millet, finger millet), dals with greens, curries made with greens and vegetables, chutneys with niger seed, spice powders with linseed, snacks like chili bhaji and millet murukku, sweets like polilu (wheat and jaggery), millet papad and curd.

The meal is a reflection of the village fields, showcasing nutrition-sensitive agriculture. It includes all three food groups: energy-giving, body-building, and protective foods, presented with original taste, colour, and flavour.



**Seed pots for display from their seed wealth**

### **Promoting Biodiversity Among the Next Generation**

The festival serves as an engaging learning platform for children, both local and from other regions. School children participate in quizzes, with winners receiving prizes. Children also explore exhibits on seeds, grains, food, herbal medicine, manures, soils, tools, and machinery. Colleges and schools often send students to the festival to experience this joyful educational environment.

### **Film Show**

A unique feature of the festival is the evening film show by DDS Sangham Women, showcasing the day's proceedings. These screenings bring great joy to the villagers and reinforce their commitment to the discussions and decisions made during the public meetings.

### **END NOTE**

A striking feature of the festival is its grassroots ownership by the Sangham Women, guided by a dedicated DDS team. This year, the festival began in Waddi village, Nyalkal Mandal, Sangareddy district, Telangana, about 130 km from Hyderabad.

The year 2001 marked a turning point for the Mobile Biodiversity Festivals, with over 50,000 farmers participating in discussions across 60 villages. These communities created an action plan for the region's agro biodiversity, which became part of the Government of India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, reflecting India's commitment to the International Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Mobile Biodiversity Festivals have continued for 25 years, gaining momentum, enthusiasm, and recognition. This year, the silver jubilee edition included the release of a book titled [Harvest Heaven](#), documenting the experiences of two prominent DDS women seed keepers.

In an era dominated by social media and artificial intelligence, the enduring presence of *Jatharas* remains a time-tested mode of joyful learning and a celebration of culture, cuisine, and agriculture.

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