

Published on *Down To Earth* (<http://www.downtoearth.org.in>)

## UN heritage status for Koraput farming system in Odisha

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### Issue Date:

2012-1-4

Indigenous knowledge and farming practices of the region's tribal people recognised for promoting food security and conserving biodiversity



Farmers in the region have conserved hundreds of rice varieties

Traditional farming systems in India have received a major boost at a time when Indian agriculture is struggling to come to terms with modern technologies. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations has accorded the status of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) to the traditional agricultural system being practiced in Koraput region of Odisha.

### What is Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)

In 2002, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations launched an initiative called GIAHS. It aims to recognize, conserve and manage best agricultural biodiversity knowledge systems, food and livelihood security and cultures throughout the world. The project aims to identify around 100 to 150 agricultural heritage systems in the world that would be protected and managed for their traditional knowledge. The initiative promotes following:

- Allows farmers to nurture and adapt the systems and biodiversity they have developed while ensuring food security and human well-being
- It supports protective government policies and

The official announcement was made by the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the inauguration of Indian Science Congress at Bhubaneswar on Tuesday. The Traditional Agriculture Koraput System is the first agricultural system in India that been recognised for its outstanding contribution to promote food security, biodiversity, indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity for sustainable and equitable development. The recognition has come following a proposal submitted by Chennai-based MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) to conserve the practice.

### Route to rural prosperity

The proposal stated that Koraput region in Odisha, with over 70 per cent poor tribal people, has significant genetic repository in the global context. As many as 79 plant angiosperms species and one gymnosperms species are endemic to the region. Despite the genetic richness, no significant initiative was taken to use this legacy to help the region overcome acute rural poverty. The MSSRF proposal said the foundation wanted to design a system to provide opportunity for developing efficient people-centric, pro-nature, pro-poor and women oriented programme in the region to usher in rural prosperity.

The Koraput region situated in the Eastern Ghats is a high land plateau with number of hills and hillocks. The tribal people have indigenous knowledge system for their various agricultural practices. For example, they use their traditional knowledge to check viability of seeds before sowing, maintain soil fertility and conserve the landraces (old seed strains which are farmer-selected in areas where subsistence agriculture prevails largely) of rice and other crops. The knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation by families.

Jeypore area in the Koraput region has rich genetic resources of medicinal plants. The place has over 1,200 medicinal plants that are used for curing bone fracture, malaria, gastro-enteritis and other ailments. Besides, Jeypore is also the place where many rice varieties originated; farmers in the area have conserved hundreds of rice varieties. Another important feature of their agricultural system is the tradition of maintaining sacred groves,

incentives while working for in situ conservation of biodiversity and traditional knowledge

- Recognises the right to food and the cultural diversity and achievements of local communities and indigenous people
- Crystallizes the needs for approaches that integrate the in situ conservation of genetic resources with related traditional knowledge and local institutions for natural resource management, as a way to ensure continuous co-adaptation to a changing physical and socio-economic environment, by strengthening the social-environmental resilience and co-evolutionary balance of agricultural systems

#### **Pilot systems and sites selected for GIAHS implementation**

- Andean Agriculture (Peru)
- Chiloe Agriculture (Chile)
- Ifugao Rice Terraces (Philippines)
- Oases of the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia)
- Rice-Fish Agriculture (China)
- Hani Rice Terrace System (China)
- Wannian traditional rice culture system (China)
- Maasai Pastoral System (Kenya, Tanzania)
- Noto, Satoyama and Satoumi (Japan)
- Sado, Satoyama (Japan)
- Koraput Region in Odisha (India – added recently)

#### **Other Indian contenders**

- Soppina Bettas Systems (Western Ghats, India)

which preserve plant genetic resources. Sacred groves are a biological heritage as well as a social mechanism through which a forest patches are protected and treated as deities by the tribal people.

#### **New status can help farmers gain patent rights**

The biodiversity-conservation projects already undertaken by MSSRF include documentation and conservation of traditional knowledge through community biodiversity registers. The registers are now maintained by community biodiversity conservation corps drawn from among the primary conservator communities. The organisation is also taking different initiatives to help tribal farmers gain intellectual property rights over their agro-biodiversity. Under the project, the MSSRF also wants to establish a genetic heritage park.

According to studies carried out by the Botanical Survey of India and the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources, Koraput region is a reservoir of rich floral diversity, comprising 2,500 species of flowering plants, angiosperms, gymnosperms and ferns. The agro-biodiversity recorded in the region includes 340 landraces of paddy, 8 species of minor millets, 9 species of pulses, 5 species of oil seeds, 3 species of fibrous plants and 7 species of vegetables.

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- Traditional Ladakh Agriculture (Northern India)
- Raika Pastoralists of the Thar Desert (Rajasthan, India)
- Catamaran Fishing (Tamil Nadu, India)
- Korangadu Silvo-Pastoral Management System (Tamil Nadu, India)
- Sikkim Himalayan-Agriculture: Improving and Scaling up of the Traditionally Managed Agricultural Systems of Global Significance (Sikkim, India)