



Go Organic !



Beej Bachao Andolan is as much a philosophy as a movement.

Raju Gusain profiles this unique movement that conserves seeds as well as local knowledge traditions.*

Women going to collect fodder, children playing on courtyards, and elderly males smoking hukkas—Jardhargoan village in District Tehri, Uttarakhand, appears to be an ordinary hill village, with people busy in the drudgery and happiness of daily life. But beneath the humdrum, a unique movement is simmering, bringing the village to the notice of outsiders—the *Beej Bachao Andolan* (Save the Seeds movement).

This movement, which began in the late 1980s, is not only a crusade to conserve traditional seeds but also to promote agricultural biodiversity, sustainable agriculture, and local traditions. Launched by a local farmer – Vijay Jardhari – along with his friends, the movement thrives on the fact that it is a people’s campaign and flourishes without any financial or any other aid from the government.

What prompted Jardhari to start the *Beej Bachao Andolan*? The 53-year-old farmer replies, ‘After the Green Revolution of the 1960s, farmers in the hills also adopted high-yielding varieties of seeds. After initial success, the Green Revolution fizzled out as the yields began to decline. This made the villagers realize that the so-called modern agriculture was unsustainable. Low production despite increased investments on pesticides and fertilizers, as well as decline in soil fertility, forced us to think of corrective measures.’

With this, the movement to save traditional seeds got off the ground. Now the search for the seeds began—Jardhari and his friends travelled from village to village to collect traditional seeds. To date, they have collected some 200 varieties of kidney beans, 100 of paddy, and 7 of wheat, to name just a few. The huge collection of local seeds, which had been presumed ‘lost’ in the region, clearly indicates the toil put in by the movement activists.

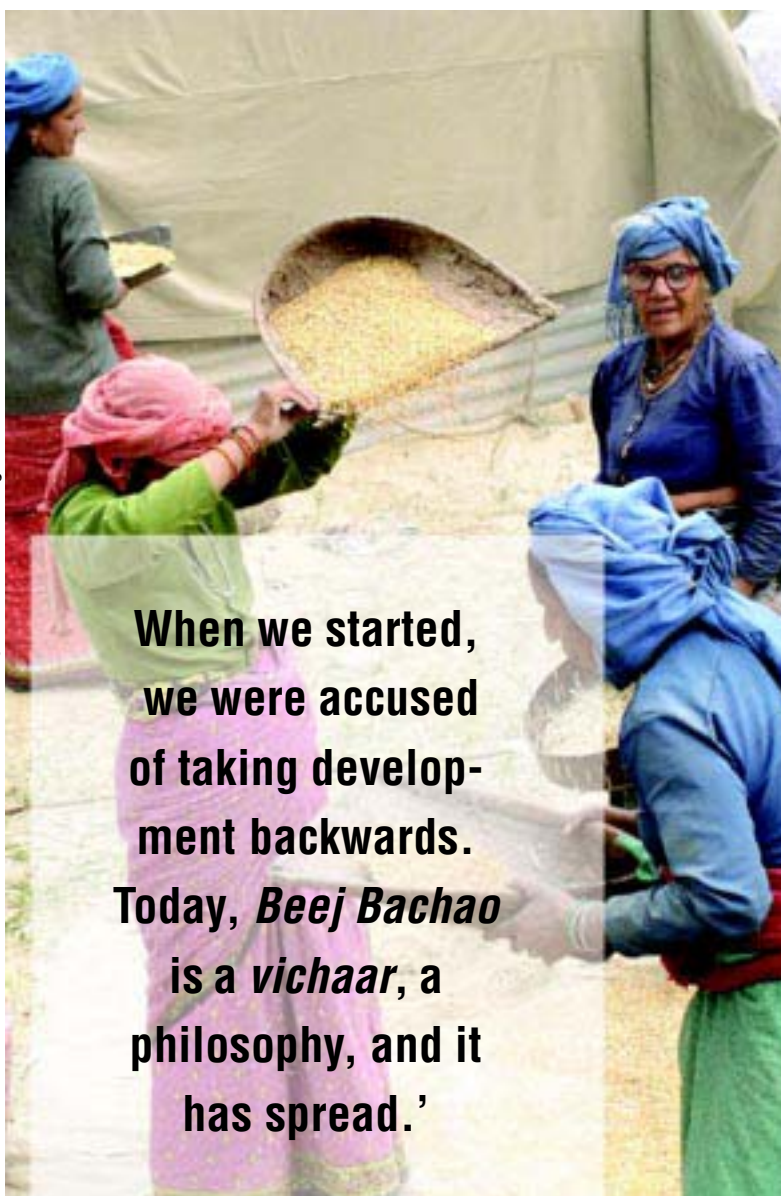
After collecting the seeds, a detailed document was prepared. To make the farmers aware of the importance of traditional seeds, a comparative chart, based on high-yielding-variety as well as traditional seeds, was drawn. This comparative study helped farmers realize the importance of traditional farming. And now, more and more farmers are opting for organic, traditional farming.

‘About 20 years ago, when we started,

we were accused of taking development backwards. But today, that is not so. People understand the issue. *Beej Bachao* is a *vichaar*, a philosophy, and it has spread,’ Vijay Jardhari avers.

The intensive search for traditional seeds brought to light several hidden facts. For instance, in the valley of Ramasirain, there grows a distinctive variety of red rice called *Chardhan* (four grains). The rice is nutritious and does not require huge external inputs. Farmers in the Garhwal hills also grew other indigenous varieties of rice, locally known as *Thapchini*, *Gorakhpuri*, *Jhumkiya*, *Rikhwa*, *Sukhmandi*, and *Lal Basmati*. Cultivation of these varieties was totally free from the use of chemical fertilizers.

Commenting on the importance of the unique movement, Biju Negi, another movement activist, says,



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‘We all know that knowledge is power. No one understands this better than the big companies who wish to come and occupy your space. Divest the farmer of his knowledge; say it’s old and outdated; give him an entirely alien knowledge (and free seeds to push that), and he is a puppet in your hands.’

‘That is why this movement is important, which ensures that the farmer retains his knowledge, and he retains the power to exercise that knowledge. Traditional farming meant that the farmer donned the mantle of several scientists rolled into one: a botanist, a zoologist, a veterinarian, a soil scientist, a climatologist, and so on. He was not a puppet in anyone’s hands. He knew his work, and he could take his own decisions. He had control over his farming. This movement seeks to give or return that power to the farmer; that is why this movement is important.’

The movement made the farmers aware about an old practice: *Baranaja*, meaning twelve grains. *Baranaja* refers to inter-cropping of twelve (or sometimes more) crops. Under *Baranaja* a combination of cereals, lentils, vegetables, creepers, and root vegetables is grown. The twelve crops are such that they can grow in harmony with each other.

The trend is slowly changing and the demand for organic food is growing worldwide with each passing day. The *Beej Bachao Andolan* considers this a good

sign, as an upswing trend for organic food grains, which will strengthen the movement.

‘There is a lot of hope for the future. To cite an example, we have just returned from participating in the annual ten-day Nature Bazaar at Dilli Haat in Delhi. This was our thirteenth year there—selling organic pulses, grams, rice, millets, turmeric, ginger, apricot oil, and other organic produce. Initially for a few years, we hardly made any sale and had to do a lot of convincing to whoever came to enquire. Now it is no longer like that. People in bigger cities know what organic food means and they are willing to spend that extra rupee for it. This consciousness is spreading to smaller towns as well. Every year, we find that there is more and more demand for organic produce. So, there is hope for what our farmers are doing,’ says Dhoom Singh Negi.

The movement received a major setback on 15 July 2006 with the death of firebrand *Beej Bachao* activist-writer, Kunwar Prasoon. People associated with the movement were yet to recover from the shocking death of Prasoon, when the news came that Dr Indu Tikekar is no more. Indu was a long-term supporter, from the Chipko days, of the movement. She mixed the environmental philosophy with the Bhagwad recitation and oration, to spread awareness.

The *Beej Bachao Andolan*, despite all odds, continues to gain strength. And it will continue to do so in the near future as it guarantees sustainable agriculture development.

* **Raju Gusain** is a senior freelance journalist based in Dehra Dun.

Comparative net rice obtained from paddy yields (per 100 kg)

TRADITIONAL		HYBRID	
Variety	Net rice (kg)	Variety	Net rice (kg)
Jhumkya	76.5	Saket – 4	70.0
Thapachini	75.0	Dwarf	65.0
Ghyasu	74.0	Dwarf	60.0
Rikhwa	75.0		

Source From *Beej Bachao Andolan* field records

Comparative yields from some traditional and hybrid paddy varieties (per hectare)

TRADITIONAL			HYBRID		
Variety	Yield (kg)	Fodder (kg)	Variety	Yield (kg)	Fodder (kg)
Thapachini	7000	6600	Saket-4	6000	5000
Jhumkya	8800	8000	Dwarf	6400	8000
Lalmati	7000	5600	Kasturi	4000	3200
Nagmati	6000	6500	Sabarmati	6000	4800

Source From *Beej Bachao Andolan* field records