

WOMEN FARMERS OF JHARGRAM REAP FORTUNES WITH ORGANIC RICE

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As you sow: As many as 4,500 women are part of the organic farming initiative. special arrangement Aamon women

Panchabati Baske of Damodarpur village and Nirmala Mahato of Murakhati village are trendsetters in their respective villages in Jhargram district. They have started a revolution by cultivating indigenous varieties of rice organically, without using any chemical fertilizers.

Now, there are 55 women farmers in Damodarpur village and 21 women farmers in Murakathi village following in their footsteps.

Hundreds of women farmers have taken up the cultivation of indigenous rice varieties such as *Kalabhat* (black rice), *Mallifullo* (brown rice) and *Kerala Sundari* (raw aromatic full bran folk rice) and red rice, locally called as *Sathia*, in the remote villages of Jhargram.

What started in 2017 with a dozen women has taken the form of a thriving company with 2,677 women farmers as shareholders to Aamon Mahila Chasi Producer Company Ltd.

As many as 4,500 women cultivators, across the five-gram panchayats of Nayagram block in Jhargram, are participating in this initiative. The area of land cultivated this year is more than 1,100 hectares.

Ms. Baske started by cultivating the indigenous rice varieties in two to three *cottahs* of land in 2016-17. This year, she has cultivated black rice in 1.5 *bighas* (1 *bigha* is equal to 20 *cottahs* or 0.16 hectare) of land and *Sathia* rice in one *bigha* land.

"We are saving Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 5,000 per *bigha* on fertilizers and there is not much difference in the yield," Ms. Baske said.

PRADAN, a non-governmental organisation, has hand-held the women by providing training in the cultivation process. The body has also set up a rice processing mill and has started marketing the indigenous produce to different parts of the country. A bio-fertilizer unit has also come up in the region, replacing the chemical-based fertilizers used in high-yielding varieties with farmyard manure and other natural inputs.

Madhura Kanjilal, an executive with PRADAN, said that the turnover for Aamon this year is pegged at Rs. 3 crore. "The women who are part of Aamon have a voice now. Though agriculture is considered a male domain, most of the labour is provided by women," she said.

While indigenous varieties offer a yield of five-six quintals per *bigha*, paddy cultivated with chemical inputs can yield nine-10 quintals. However, with the price of the former being three times that of the latter, the women are making profit.

The women also produce plates made of sal leaves. This year on, the women farmers are also selling this ecofriendly product.

Attempts are being made to make the rice varieties available for individual consumers through

online platforms, said Buddhadeb Jana of Aamon.

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