The Legacy of Sustainable Farming

Kuttanad's GIAHS journey and what it means for agriculture in the future

Sangeetha Rajeesh & Shakthi Harikrishnan

Kerala's geography of the Western Ghats to the Backwaters, coastal plains and wetlands, makes it vulnerable to ecological changes. The recent landslides in the Wayanad region are a stark reminder of the devasting consequences deforestation, brute urbanisation, and climate change can bring.

Kuttanad is located in the state of Kerala and is distinguished by its below-two-meter-sea-level farming system of rice cultivation. Reclaiming wetlands, construction work and regular flooding have left the area vulnerable. The region is subject to agrarian distress and thus it is essential to conserve the ecosystem. Associated with its indigenous farming practices and a rich aquatic biodiversity, a major aspect of Kuttanad's cultivation system is that it is primarily based on ecology. Salt water was permitted as an annual incursion and it was considered essential to manage the soil fertility along with balancing the ecosystem and biodiversity.

In 2013, when the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations recognised Kuttanad's below-sea-level cultivation system with the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) certificate, it laid emphasis as to why it is important to conserve such an ecological system along with preserving food and livelihood security. The certificate calls attention to threats that are faced by the environment and its people. It promotes public understanding, awareness and international recognition about sustainable agriculture.

Kuttanad's GIAHS recognition is more than an acknowledgement of its unique agricultural practices. It serves as a global reminder on the importance of preserving and encouraging sustainable farming.

The MSS Connection

Dr M S Swaminathan is connected to Kuttanad since his father's family hailed from Mankombu village. The family has been preserving paddy granaries of Kuttanad since the 1880's. It was during 2007 at the Government's invitation that M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) undertook a study on the sustainable development of the Kuttanad Ecosystem. The 200+ page report 'Measures to Mitigate Agrarian Distress in Alappuzha and Kuttanad Wetland Ecosystem' describes a study and areas to be developed, also measures to strengthen the ecological security of the Kuttanad Wetland ecosystem, and to expand sustainable livelihood opportunities for the people in the area[1].

[1] http://59.160.153.188/library/sites/default/files/Kuttanad%20Report.pdf

In collaboration with the Government of Kerala, the report elevated Kuttanad to a GIAHS. During this time, the ecosystem was considered through various agricultural, ecological, economic and sociological perspectives. This was when the Kuttanad Package was brought up by Dr Swaminathan, to help in mitigating agrarian distress in the region's fragile ecosystem.

Noormeni Nandhi MSS

The Noormeni Nandhi event organised in Alappuzha, Kerala, on January 23, was part of Dr M S Swaminathan's centenary celebrations. The GIAHS certificate was handed over to the Minister of Agriculture, Government of Kerala - Shri P. Prasad, during this event. He shared his thoughts on achieving the SDG 2 on Zero Hunger, which aims to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030, while ensuring access to safe, nutritious, and sufficient food for all, connecting it to Dr. Swaminathan's Evergreen Revolution concept for food sustainability.

Dr Soumya Swaminathan, Chairperson MSSRF, spoke about the importance of traditional farming systems for a sustainable ecosystem and recalled her father's contributions to making agri practices in Kuttanad more sustainable.

During the event, there was appreciation for the MSSRF-SAARC programme aimed at empowering coconut farmers by transforming traditional farming practices into a community-friendly enterprise. The brand 'Kera Saaras' being developed in Kuttanad through this initiative, and was launched during the event.