

**PADMA-SHRI RAHIBAI SOMA POPARE ‘THE SEED MOTHER OF INDIA’: A  
PIONEER IN SEED CONSERVATION, ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION,  
SUSTAINABILITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

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**Abstract**

The contemporary world witnesses an accelerated pace of life, driven by rapid advancements in lifestyle, food habits, and technology. While these changes offer numerous short-term benefits for humanity, they also have long-term detrimental effects on human life, the environment, and overall well-being.

Globalization, privatization and Liberalization LPG has significantly impacted India, modernizing various services and facilities to cater to the evolving needs of a growing population. Agriculture, a cornerstone of the Indian economy, has also undergone significant transformations to meet the increasing demand for food. However, amidst these advancements, concerns arise regarding the long-term sustainability of these changes.

A small but dedicated group of individuals, deeply concerned about the harmful effects of these changes on agriculture, the environment, biodiversity, and human health, are actively engaged in conservation efforts. These efforts include seed conservation, environmental preservation, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of farmers' empowerment and women's empowerment in ensuring the long-term sustainability of these efforts. This research aims to honor the dedicated efforts of these individuals, particularly recognizing the contributions of the "Seed Mother of India, Padma-Shri Rahibai Soma Popare".

**Keywords:** Seed conservation, Indigenous seeds, Agrobiodiversity, Sustainable agriculture, Farmer empowerment, Women's empowerment, Biodiversity conservation, Environmental preservation, Food security, Sustainability, rural development, Local knowledge, Traditional farming practices, Genetic resources, Crop diversity.

**Introduction**

Rahibai Popare was born in 1964, is a farmer and traditional seed breeder from Kombhalane village in the Akole Taluka of Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, India. She has been recognized by the Indian government for her work in conserving indigenous seed varieties, receiving the Padma Shri award in 2020.<sup>[1]</sup>

Growing up in a family of eight children, Rahibai experienced hardship early in life, losing her mother at a young age. Her father, a farmer with limited dry land, instilled in her an understanding of agriculture. Her husband's family also engaged in dry land farming.<sup>[2]</sup>

While hybrid seeds were widely adopted for increased yields, Rahibai's concern for her grandson's health led her to investigate the impact of food production methods. She discovered that organic seeds could contribute to improved health and began experimenting. Her success in organic farming sparked a broader initiative to promote these practices within

her community. Working through a cooperative society and with the support of the Bife organization, she established an indigenous seed bank, which also provides seeds for wild vegetables. This initiative aims to preserve traditional varieties and promote sustainable agricultural practices. [2]

The following images are highlighting the transformation of her efforts which has turning into the green and sustainable environment.



1. Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>



2.Source:

<https://www.amarchitrakatha.com>

"The title 'Seed Mother of India' is a testament to the pioneering work of Padma-Shri Rahibai Soma Popare. Long before seed conservation became a widely recognized concern, she was already working tirelessly to preserve indigenous varieties and promote sustainable agriculture. Her foresight and dedication have not only safeguarded valuable genetic resources but also inspired a movement for environmental preservation and women's empowerment, making her a true leader in the field. She has dedicated her life to preserving traditional seed varieties, establishing seed banks, and championing sustainable farming. Her holistic approach recognizes the interconnectedness of these areas, creating a model for community-based conservation that addresses both ecological and social needs. Her work is a powerful counter-narrative to the global crisis of agrobiodiversity loss, demonstrating the impact of individual action and inspiring communities.

### Research Methodology

This research is mainly based on Secondary data collected from user's citizens, articles, research journals, magazines newspapers and official and unofficial websites of governments and others institute. The Qualitative and Quantitative research methods like Archival Research, Content Analysis and Statistical Analysis are used.

### Objectives:

The research has conducted for encountering following objectives to highlight the impact of LPG on agriculture, environmental concerns, and the importance of sustainable practices and enlighten on contribution of Seed Mother to honor the dedicated efforts of Seed Mother Rahibai Soma Popare involved in conservation efforts.

1. To understand her philosophy on sustainable agriculture and food security.
2. To analyze her approach to community building and women's empowerment by inspiring and motivating others, particularly women and marginalized communities, to engage in sustainable agricultural practices.

3. To advocate for the preservation of traditional agricultural knowledge and biodiversity.

### Scope

Though the contribution of Seed mother is vast in the all context mentioned above in the scope of study is limited to important incident related to the above objectives regarding her philosophy on sustainable agriculture and food security, approach to community building and women's empowerment, inspiring and motivating efforts for women and marginalized communities, engagement for sustainable agricultural practices.

### Related work

#### Seed Conservation:

Rahibai shares her expertise in seed selection, storage, and propagation with farmers, empowering them to preserve traditional varieties on their own farms. First, the seeds are sorted, and the good ones are dried with ashes from the chulha (fine ashes after sieving). Once they are properly dried, they are stored in these earthen pots. Using this method, seeds can be preserved for up to 10 years for consumption and up to 3 years for sowing.

#### Seed Conservation:

- **Indigenous Seed Bank**
- **Promoting Native Varieties**
- **Knowledge Dissemination**

Rahibai Popare's commitment to preserving agricultural biodiversity is exemplified by her establishment of an indigenous seed bank in her village. This repository safeguards over 250 varieties of local seeds, providing a crucial resource for farmers and ensuring access to varieties well-suited to the region's environment. Beyond simply storing seeds, Rahibai actively promotes the cultivation of these native crops, emphasizing their inherent resilience, superior nutritional value, and adaptation to local conditions. Crucially, she disseminates her expertise in seed selection, proper storage techniques, and effective propagation methods, empowering farmers to become custodians of these traditional varieties on their own land.





Images 3-12 showing process of conserving seed traditionally and seed bank

Source: <https://www.loksatta.com>, <https://vaagdhara.org>/<https://news.cgtn.com>

The seed mother's philosophy on sustainable agriculture and food security is deeply rooted in her lived experiences as a farmer and her profound respect for nature's wisdom. Here's a breakdown of her key efforts and principal are discussed below:

Rahibai Popare's dedication to conserving indigenous seeds has taken her across Maharashtra. She emphasizes the superior qualities of native crop varieties, citing their drought and disease resistance, nutritional value, and positive impact on soil fertility due to their reduced need for chemical fertilizers and excessive water. She actively raises awareness about the importance of organic farming, indigenous seed conservation, agrobiodiversity, and wild food resources.

Rahibai's work is crucial in preventing the exploitation of farmers. The promotion and patenting of hybrid seeds by large companies threaten the extinction of native crops. Farmers often become dependent on these companies, unable to save seeds for future planting. Conserving native crops safeguards genetic diversity and protects the livelihoods of farmers and the health of consumers. Rahibai has conserved numerous native crops, including 15 rice varieties, nine pigeon pea varieties, and 60 vegetable varieties, along with various oilseeds.

Concerned about the health of her community, Rahibai observed frequent illnesses potentially linked to food prepared from hybrid crops. Recognizing the superior nutritional value of traditional seeds, she began collecting local seeds with other women farmers in Akole taluk, forming the Kalsubai Parisar Biyanee Samvardhan Samiti. Initially, she and her family practiced rain-fed agriculture on a small plot of land. With support from MITTRA, she expanded her activities, including poultry rearing and establishing a nursery. She also mastered a four-step paddy cultivation method, increasing her yields significantly. Now, Rahibai trains farmers and students on seed selection, soil fertility improvement, and pest management. She provides seedlings of native crops, encouraging a shift away from hybrid

varieties. Her seed bank, distributing 122 varieties of 32 crops, requires farmers to return twice the borrowed quantity, ensuring sustainability. This system has significantly reduced farmers' dependence on expensive hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizers, saving them substantial amounts of money.

Rahibai has applied for registration under the Protection of Plant Varieties & Farmers' Rights Authority, India, and participates in programs like the Indo-German Bilateral Co-operation in Seed Sector to further the cause of landrace conservation. Her goal is to conserve and promote 250 crop varieties and help 25,000 tribal households establish kitchen gardens for nutritional security. Her work has a visible impact, contributing significantly to genetic diversity in Indian agriculture.

The seed mother strongly believes in the importance of preserving a wide variety of indigenous seeds. She understands that this diversity is crucial for resilience against climate change, pests, and diseases. By conserving traditional varieties, she ensures that farmers have access to seeds adapted to their local environment.

In essence, the seed mother Rahibai Popare's philosophy is a universal one that connects seed conservation, sustainable agriculture, and women's empowerment to achieve food security and environmental sustainability.

### **Respect for Traditional Knowledge:**

She values the knowledge and practices passed down through generations of farmers. She integrates traditional wisdom with modern techniques to develop sustainable agricultural solutions. Her approach recognizes the value of local knowledge in adapting to specific environmental conditions. Her work is a testament to the power of individual action and the importance of respecting traditional knowledge in building resilient and equitable food systems.



Images 13. <https://www.unnatisilks.com>

**Collective Action through Community Building:** Rahibai fosters a sense of community by encouraging collective action. She works through local groups and cooperatives, recognizing that shared knowledge and resources strengthen the community's ability to address challenges. Her seed bank isn't just hers; it's a community resource.

**Knowledge Sharing:** A core element of her approach is the sharing of knowledge. She readily imparts her expertise in seed saving, organic farming, and sustainable practices. This empowers others and builds local capacity. She understands that knowledge held collectively is far more powerful than knowledge held by an individual.

**Local Resource Mobilization:** Rahibai's work emphasizes the use of local resources. By focusing on indigenous seeds and traditional farming methods, she reduces dependence on external inputs and strengthens local economies. This fosters self-reliance and resilience within the community.

### **Environmental Preservation, Sustainability**

#### ➤ **Conservation of Agrobiodiversity:**

- Protecting Indigenous Varieties
- Promoting Native Crops
- Sustainable Farming Practices
- Soil Health and Fertility
- Holistic Approach
- Awareness and Education



Images 14. Source: <https://delhipostnews.com>

We can enlighten her contribution in context with Environmental Preservation, Sustainability through the highlighting the following points.

**Conservation of Agrobiodiversity:** We already discuss this issues in seed conservation as she contributed for **Protecting Indigenous Varieties and Promoting Native Crops**.

#### **Sustainable Farming Practices:**

- **Organic Farming:** Rahibai advocates for organic farming methods, promoting the use of natural fertilizers and pest control. This minimizes the use of harmful chemicals that can pollute the environment and harm human health.
- **Traditional Techniques:** She integrates traditional farming techniques with modern knowledge, promoting sustainable practices that work in harmony with nature. This approach recognizes the value of traditional wisdom in environmental conservation.
- **Water Conservation:** Rahibai has developed innovative methods for rainwater harvesting and water conservation on farms. This addresses the critical issue of water scarcity in her region and promotes sustainable water management practices.

#### **Soil Health and Fertility:**

- **Natural Fertilizers:** By promoting organic farming, Rahibai encourages the use of natural fertilizers that improve soil health and fertility. This reduces the dependence on chemical fertilizers, which can degrade soil quality over time.
- **Crop Rotation:** While not explicitly mentioned in every source, crop rotation is often a

part of sustainable agriculture practices. This helps to maintain soil fertility and reduce pest problems, contributing to long-term soil health.

#### **Holistic Approach:**

- **Interconnectedness:** Rahibai recognizes the interconnectedness of environmental preservation, sustainable agriculture, and community development. Her holistic approach integrates these elements to create thriving and resilient communities.
- **Long-term Vision:** Her work is not just about immediate gains but also about ensuring the long-term sustainability of agriculture and the environment for future generations

#### **Awareness and Education:**

- **Community Mobilization:** Rahibai works with local communities to raise awareness about the importance of environmental conservation and sustainable agriculture. She emphasizes the interconnectedness of human well-being and environmental health.
- **Knowledge Dissemination:** She shares her expertise in seed conservation, organic farming, and sustainable practices with farmers and students, empowering them to adopt environmentally friendly methods. In essence, Rahibai Popare's advocacy is rooted in her deep understanding of traditional agricultural practices and their importance for biodiversity and food security. Through her work, she is not only preserving valuable genetic resources but also empowering communities to embrace sustainable agriculture and build a more resilient future.

#### **Women's Empowerment**

The approach of Seed mother Rahibai Soma Popare related to community building and women's empowerment is deeply intertwined with her work in seed conservation and sustainable agriculture. Rahibai recognizes the crucial role of women, play in agriculture and food security. She empowers women by providing them with access to seeds, training, and resources. By strengthening women's roles in farming, she promotes gender equality and community development



Images 15-16 Source: <https://kokanngo.org>

She empowers women by providing them with access to resources, training, and leadership opportunities in seed conservation and sustainable agriculture.

**Central Role in Seed Conservation:** Rahibai recognizes the crucial role women play in seed saving and agriculture. She actively involves women in all aspects of her work, from seed collection and storage to cultivation and marketing. This gives women greater control over resources and decision-making.

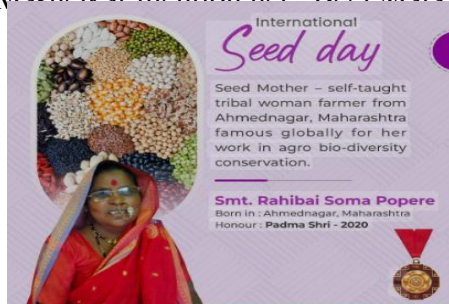
**Access to Resources and Training:** She provides women with access to seeds, training, and other resources they need to succeed in sustainable agriculture. This empowers them economically and gives them greater agency within their communities.

**Leadership and Recognition:** Rahibai's own success serves as an inspiration to other women. Her recognition at the national level demonstrates the potential for women to become leaders in their communities and beyond. She creates a space for other women to step into leadership roles.

**Building Self-Confidence:** By providing women with skills and knowledge, Rahibai helps build their self-confidence. This allows them to participate more fully in community life and advocate for their own needs.

### Interconnectedness

The strength of seed mother's approach lies in its recognition of the interconnectedness of community building and women's empowerment. By empowering women in agriculture, she strengthens the entire community. Women, in turn, become key drivers of community-based conservation efforts. This creates a positive feedback loop where empowered women contribute to a stronger, more resilient community, which further empowers women. While summarizing the seed mothers Rahibai's approach is about building resilient communities through women's empowerment and sustainable agriculture. It's about collective action, knowledge sharing, and local resource mobilization. Her work is a powerful example of how community building and women's empowerment can go hand in hand to create positive change. It's about collective action, knowledge sharing, and local resource mobilization. Her work is a powerful example of how community building and women's empowerment can go hand in hand to create positive change and hence for valuable contribution not only for the India but for the whole nation she has awarded with PADAMASHRI AWARD by Hon'ble President of India in 2020. The senior scientist Raghunath Mashelkar mention her "Beei Mata" means Seed Mother.



Images 17-18 Source: Wikipedia

Table 1. List of Renowned Award received by Seed Mother

Award	Year
Honorary Research Fellow	2015
The Best Seed Saver award	2015
BAIF Development Research Foundation Best Farmer Award	2015
Nari Shakti Puraskar	2018
BBC 100 Women	2018
Padma Shri	2020
Jijamata Krushibhushan Puraskar	2022

Source: Wikipedia.

## Conclusion

Padma Shri Rahibai Soma Popare, the "Seed Mother of India," stands as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of individual action in the face of global challenges. This research has explored her multifaceted contributions to seed conservation, sustainable agriculture, and community empowerment, highlighting the interconnectedness of these crucial areas. Rahibai's journey, from a farmer concerned about her grandson's health to a nationally recognized advocate, underscores the importance of traditional knowledge in building resilient and equitable food systems. Her holistic approach, encompassing seed preservation, organic farming, and community mobilization, demonstrates how environmental sustainability and social well-being can be mutually reinforcing. By empowering women and fostering collective action, Rahibai has not only safeguarded invaluable genetic resources but also inspired a movement for environmental preservation and community-led development. Her work serves as a beacon of hope, demonstrating that through dedication, innovation, and a deep respect for nature, individuals can make a profound difference in creating a more sustainable and secure future for all. Rahibai's recognition with prestigious awards, including the Padma Shri, further underscores the significance of her contributions to India's agricultural landscape and serves as an inspiration for future generations.

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