

## Rahibai Popere: An Epitome of Social Innovation

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**Abstract:** The present paper attempts to explore the seminal work of Seedmother Padmashri Rahibai Popere, a woman farmer with no formal education. Integrating the concept of social innovation, the paper tries to present Rahibai as a social entrepreneur whose mammoth work has transformed the farming practices of not only the area she lives, a village called Akole, but has made the entire nation to think about the importance of preservation and conservation of native, indigenous seed varieties, organic farming, millets and wild vegetables. Her work is a torchbearer in the rural India for sustainable farming and therefore sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Social innovation, social entrepreneur, sustainable development, organic farming

‘The earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need but not any man’s greed.’ Mahatma Gandhi

It will be important to discuss the following terms in order to comprehend the scope and significance of Seedmother (□□□□□□□□) Padmashri Rahibai Popere’s apparently simple yet effective methods of farming that she developed through hands on experience and deep sense of responsibility for society and most importantly, the soil and the earth.

**Social innovation:** Social innovation refers to the design and implementation of new solutions that imply conceptual, process, product, or organisational change, which ultimately aim to improve the welfare and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Many initiatives undertaken by the social economy and by the civil society have proven to be innovative in dealing with socio-economic and environmental problems, while contributing to economic development. To fully tap the potential of social innovation, an enabling policy framework is needed to support public, non-profit and private actors to co-construct and implement socially innovative solutions and thereby contribute to address socio-economic issues, build stronger territorial resilience and better respond to future shocks.

( <https://www.oecd.org/regional/leed/social-innovation.htm#:~:text=Social%20innovation%20refers%20to%20the,wellbeing%20of%20individuals%20and%20communities.> )

**Social Entrepreneur:** A social entrepreneur refers to an individual who pursues novel ideas with the potential to solve or alleviate certain community-oriented problems. Social entrepreneurs

often are willing to take the risks associated with their venture to help address issues, enabling positive change in society.

**Sustainable Development:** Sustainable development has been defined by the United Nations Organisation as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

- Sustainable development calls for concerted efforts towards building an inclusive, sustainable and resilient future for people and planet.
- For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize three core elements: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected and all are crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies.

**Organic Farming:** According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, sustainable agricultural system uses ecologically based pest controls and biological fertilizers derived largely from animal and plant wastes and nitrogen-fixing cover crops. Modern organic farming was developed as a response to the environmental harm caused by the use of chemical pesticides and synthetic fertilizers in conventional agriculture, and it has numerous ecological benefits.

**Indigenous Knowledge:** As per UNESCO's definition Local and indigenous knowledge refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. For rural and indigenous peoples, local knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life.

This knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality.

**Millet:** Millet is a collective term referring to a number of small-seeded annual grasses that are cultivated as grain crops, primarily on marginal lands in dry areas in temperate, subtropical and tropical regions. (Food and Agricultural Organization)

Indian millets are a group of nutritiously rich, drought tolerant and mostly grown in the arid and semi-arid regions of India. They are small-seeded grasses belonging to the botanical family Poaceae. They constitute an important source of food and fodder for millions of resource-poor farmers and play a vital role in ecological and economic security of India. ([https://apeda.gov.in/milletportal/about\\_us.html](https://apeda.gov.in/milletportal/about_us.html))

Rahibai Soma Popere, popularly known as SEED Mother for conserving indigenous seeds who is also associated with BAIF Development Research Foundation, a Core Support Group of Department of Science & Technology (DST), has been conferred fourth highest civilian national award Padma Shree for her contribution in the field of agriculture.

She has worked for conserving hundreds of native varieties and encouraging farmers to grow traditional crops. She has also made it a motto of her life to spreading awareness about organic farming, agro-biodiversity, and wild food resources.

Conservation of agro biodiversity and wild food resources is need of the hour for seed sovereignty and nutritional security especially during uneven rainfall. Certain paddy varieties like Raibhog, kolpi, kalbhat are sustaining and giving better yield and Hyacinth bean varieties like Kaduwal and goad wal can grow on residual moisture. So she intends to conserve and promote the production of these varieties.

Through her experiences, Rahibai realized that the conservation of agro-biodiversity and wild food resources is the need of the hour to achieve seed sovereignty and nutritional security. She started a nursery of Blackberry and distributed them as a gift to members of the Self-Help Group (SHG). She then established a nursery of hyacinth bean seedlings, rice, vegetables, beans landraces and shared them with 210 farmers in 7 villages of Akole Block. She also conserved and multiplied about 43 Landraces of 17 different crops (Paddy, hyacinth bean, millets, pulses, oilseeds, etc.) by establishing an in-situ germplasm conservation center. She has also established a perennial kitchen garden for House-hold consumption and year-round use.

Popere is an active member of Kalsubai Parisar Biyanee Savardhan Samiti, Akole, and has established a community seed bank in her small house for conservation and revival of crop diversity and wild food resources. At present, about 122 landraces of 32 crops are under conservation. She has the zeal to learn new agronomic techniques. She developed expertise in the SRI method of paddy cultivation, improved cultivation practices for tomato and hyacinth bean, introduced participatory seed selection, organic farming techniques (vermicomposting, vermiwash, natural pest repellents), nursery establishment and trained about 3500 farmers across Ahmednagar district.

Rahbai leads 5 Self Help groups in Kombhalne village and is creating awareness among women for Participation in the Self Help group movement, village sanitation, clean kitchen, seed conservation, and wild food exhibitions. Her work has drawn a lot of visitors-agriculture officers,

scientists, farmers, students from different parts of Maharashtra who came to see her in-situ conservation centre, hyacinth bean diversity centre, kitchen garden, etc.

Her association with BAIF, a national NGO involved in the implementation of pioneering development programs in different parts of the country, is a long one. BAIF Development Research Foundation has been working with disadvantaged rural communities and stakeholders for more than four decades and is now spread over 85,000 villages across India. Their main focus is on developing sustainable livelihoods by applying technology and research to farming and livestock to raise productivity while conserving natural resources. BAIF is operating in the areas of cattle development (particularly dairy husbandry, goat husbandry), silvipasture development, feed and fodder management, water resource development, improved agriculture, agri-horti-forestry and drudgery reduction of women.

Nowadays she is invited for many scientific, educational and cultural events. She speaks out in simple, rural dialect yet her words touch the deepest core of her audience. She appeals her audience sincerely to adapt methods of organic farming and eat healthy, pesticide free food. She also invites all to visit her humble home that itself is a laboratory for social innovation. Her work makes her a true epitome of social innovation. Her efforts at the grassroot level show that breaking the mould of traditional idea of entrepreneurship itself is entrepreneurship. Moreover, Rahibai's methods of preserving, conserving and planting indigenous seeds have greatly contributed the reservoir of Indian Knowledge System, at the same time making it practicable and important for overall growth of the nation.

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