



Sheela Balaji

'We aim to make 500 farmers take up heritage rice cultivation'

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Sheela Balaji, chairperson and managing trustee of AIM for Seva, recently received the Nari Shakti Puraskar, a national honour conferred on individual women for their exceptional achievement. She's the only person from Tamil Nadu to have received the honour. Coming from one of the most respectful business families in our country, Sheela says that she is very happy to receive this prestigious award. "It validates the work we do and inspires us to work further. My goal is to educate and empower rural India," begins Sheela. Her encounter with her guru, Pujya Swami Dayananda Saraswati, is what became an inspiration for her to work for rural India. She says, "My encounter with my guru paved the way for an effortless transition to

social service. He wanted to educate and empower rural India and began with building free student hostels for children. Today, our work spreads across — education, health care, community development, organic farming, facilities for people with special needs and sustainable livelihood practices."

Ask her why she chose rice and she says, "We took on the project to build Manjakkudi into a model village. Manjakkudi is a village near Kumbakonam on the Kaveri delta region, with lush paddy fields. I happened to see a farmer spraying pesticide on the crops that is not only hazardous to the soil but also to the farmer's health. Rice is our staple food. My concern and curiosity forced me to start learning about the diversity of rice that India once had and their innumerable nutrients and medicinal values. Being indigenous, these varieties grow well in Indian soil and climatic conditions without any chemical input. Around that time, I also came across a festival of grains called 'Nel Thiruvizha' being organised in one of the villages called Adirangam and started conducting this festival in Manjakkudi. At that festival, I met me



Receiving the award from the President Ram Nath Kovind

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helped me get seeds for the indigenous rice."

While Sheela has been instrumental in bringing heritage rice — almost seven varieties that were regularly consumed till a few decades ago — it is challenging to make these changes among people as they are used to consuming a particular variety of rice for the last few decades. She says, "People are tuned to a particular lifestyle. It is not easy to change. However, when we educate and inform them about the benefits of organic heritage rice, not just for our health, but for the environment and our future generations, they are keen to experiment." On the future, Sheela says, "In the next 10 years, we aim to make 500 farmers take up heritage rice cultivation by organic methods and encourage urban consumers to make conscious lifestyle choices. And also build free student hostels across 300 districts in India."