

Koraput Traditional Agricultural System, India to be designated as Globally Important Agricultural Heritage (GIAHS) site

Bhubaneswar, (India)– During the 99th Session of the Indian Science Congress, an important announcement function will take place for the certification of the Traditional Agricultural System of Koraput (Odisha, India) as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) site. The congress, aiming to draw the attention of scientists and stakeholders towards the need to better employ science and technology, will be held from 3 to 7 January 2012 at the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT), with the participation of over 5000 scientists from all over the world.

During his Inaugural Address to the congress, the Prime Minister of India will announce the official recognition of the Koraput System as a GIAHS site for present and future generations, providing outstanding contribution to promoting food security, biodiversity, indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity for sustainable and equitable development. Following on, a special session of the congress will take place, where Dr. Alexander Mueller, Assistant Director-General, Natural Resources Management and Environment Department, will deliver a lecture on “Agricultural Heritage and Food Security in an Era of Climate Change”. Dr. Parviz Koohafkan, Director Land and Water Division and global GIAHS Coordinator, will also participate to the session delivering an address on GIAHS and other important initiatives of the Organization.

Odisha is a picturesque state located in the Eastern part of the sub-continent, between the Bay of Bengal and the Eastern Ghats. With its gorgeous rivers, captivating lakes, alluring waterfalls and awe-inspiring temples, it is a land of unique and fascinating beauty. At the heart of the tribal belt in Southern Odisha lies the Koraput district, also known as Jeypore Tract, a highland plateau with a number of hills and hillocks of incredible scenic beauty forming part of the Eastern Ghats.

Tribal communities represent an extremely important category of the Koraput social structure. They are considered as the original inhabitants of India, who have been carrying forward a legacy of rich and distinct cultural traits for many decades. The Koraput district is home to approximately 62 tribal communities, each one of them characterized by a distinct identity in terms of social organization, culture and economy. This bewildering variety is fully reflected in their culture, which like a mosaic, evokes the admiration of social scientists fascinated by the dynamics of their society. All tribes observe a variety of religious and socio-cultural functions aiming at ensuring family well-being and happiness as well as community welfare and harmony. Their cyclic rituals and festivals, mainly centered on agricultural operations, human livestock and crop welfare, descend from ancient times and have been preserved unimpaired to the present day.

The Koraput Region is famous for its rich agricultural biodiversity of global importance. The genetic diversity of Asian cultivated rice and has been considered as the centre of origin of *aus* ecotype of rice. The landraces or traditional varieties growing here are thought to be

harboring dominant genes for biotic and abiotic stresses, aroma and palatability, and hold promise for their utilization in future plant breeding and biotechnology programs.

The tribal and rural families of this area have been developing and conserving these genetic resources from immemorial time with their traditional knowledge. Today's landraces, evolved naturally with the changing environment and agricultural practices, are the products of careful and continuous selection by tribal women and men, whose merits have not yet received the recognition they deserved. During the last decade, the MSSRF has put great effort into creating a partnership initiative for biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction of Odisha's tribal communities, resulting in two important awards: the "Equator Initiative Partnership Award" received at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, and the "Plant Genome Savior Community Award" by the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Authority (PPVFRA) in 2006.

The recognition of the Koraput Traditional Agricultural System as a GIAHS site will guarantee local and international efforts for the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable use of its genetic resources, and the recognition of tribal peoples' contribution to biodiversity and knowledge systems, whilst increasing attention to their natural and cultural heritage.