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# Rediscovering Ancient Seeds and Hope

*by Kushal Poudel, Nepal*

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Stories  
of  
Change

Connecting traditional knowledge and  
innovations for fair and sustainable  
food systems

United Nations  
Decade of  
**FAMILY  
FARMING**  
2019-2028





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## Stories of change: *Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems*

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

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*Cover photo by Kushal Poudel*



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## Dilemma

It had been a year since I completed my bachelor's degree in agriculture, but the dilemma of what to do next still continued. "Should I find a job or get a master's degree? If I am going for master's degree, which subject should I choose, what is my field of interest?" As I weighed up my strengths and the things I loved; mathematics, working with computers, data and statistics, teaching courses on Microsoft Office, I thought that maybe Data Science was my field of interest. However, I was equally driven towards the subjects related to environment and sustainability. I was in an extreme dilemma. All my friends were either studying, working or starting their own businesses.

I felt soaked by depressing thoughts. I had a bachelors with people expecting me to be fully independent and I was doing nothing! On top of that it was COVID-19 pandemic. With nowhere to go, the internet was my only friend. I started watching documentaries and taking online classes. I began with courses related to data science but after a while my interest started to fade.

I had started to watch environmental documentaries and movies and slowly I got

drawn into issues related to sustainability and climate change, loss of biodiversity, chemical pollution, food related pandemic, plastic pollution and many more. I could feel a deep yearning growing inside. I should save the coral reefs, I should stop plastics from entering the ocean, I should stop chemicals being used in agriculture, I should stop industrial agriculture, I should talk about green washing, I should save bees and other pollinators, I should save biodiversity and I should make people aware about the junk food.... Every time I knew some new issues about sustainability, I also wanted to do something for those issues.



Photo by Kushal Poudel

## Connection

So, I started to join each and every webinar and discussion related to sustainability which I found online. I listened and learned more about this issue. I connected with Ms. Shilshila Acharya, the CEO of an NGO working in Nepal in the field of sustainability and learned that her team had been conducting courses online

1 Links: <https://www.recordnepal.com/planting-indigenous-crops-to-build-climate-resilience>, <https://ekantipur.com/photo-feature/2021/07/21/16268614847015835.html>, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62yHkpiIQ2o&ab\\_channel=TheRecordNepal](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62yHkpiIQ2o&ab_channel=TheRecordNepal), <https://www.eadarsha.com/eng/in-a-path-of-success-farming-on-rocky-land-in-annapurna/>. Contact Details: Kushal Poudel, Nepal. Khoj Pathashala Pvt. Ltd. [kuslpdl@gmail.com](mailto:kuslpdl@gmail.com), <https://www.linkedin.com/in/kushalpoudel/>.

called 'Understanding Sustainability'. I enrolled. This was a life changing course for me. I felt that I had found the missing link in my understanding and was finally able to connect the threads to understand that the current condition of world – whether it was COVID-19 or Climate Change – was the result of human action or inaction. But CHANGE is inevitable and our individual and collective action is the only solution to save the mother earth.

### **Exploration**

I spoke to someone I had met during one of the workshops related to Ancient Agriculture Wisdom. He was Dr. Chalise from my hometown. Dr. Chalise was a retired bank manager, but he had also worked in the field of exploring ancient agriculture wisdom and our forgotten and neglected food crops. He had collected seeds of different tuber crops from all over Nepal and was promoting their use. These tuber crops, which once were staple food crops of every Nepali residing in Hilly region, were now neglected and limited to a specific festival called “Mage Sakranti” and to a specific ethnic group.



*Photo by Kushal Poudel*

Once the lockdown was lowered, I went to visit him at his home. We talked about the current scenario of agriculture and how 30 years of Agriculture Development in Nepal had failed. Nepal once used to export food but was now importing billions worth of agricultural commodities. He gave me the deeper understanding of Nepalese Agriculture and what was going wrong. He told me how development programs had failed as they were not aligned with our needs and conditions as they were prepared by funding agencies from developed countries and with their own mindsets that did not apply to Nepal. It became clear to me that I needed to understand our geography, our soil, our crops, our farming technique, our food and our overall culture.



*Photo by Kushal Poudel*

I belong to the land of Everest, and I was fortunate enough to be born under a foothill of Mount Annapurna in a remote village. It was normal for a village kid to engage with his mother in agriculture related works, going into forests and wandering the rivers. My mother used to tell me stories from our ancient scriptures of Mahabharata and Ramayana and my grandfather used to tell me about our ancestry and our culture. Fortunately, with an interest in culture and tradition, I had taken a

Sanskrit Language Course for about a year to enrich my understanding about our ancient culture and wisdom.



*Photo by Kushal Poudel*

One day, during dinner, I asked my father about how the farming was during his days. He told me in detail about how they were self-sufficient in food, how they used to farm and the crops they used to grow. He told me that there used to be aromatic rice, rice with medicinal properties, finger millet which was much sweeter than the present varieties and many more, but all of these landraces<sup>2</sup> were lost and we were now farming imported, modern crops. The productivity was also decreasing, and so people had to buy from the market. The real meaning of the name Mount Annapurna, after which my village was named, signifies food abundance. In Sanskrit, Anna means grain or food and Purna means abundance. In my village, people celebrate every agricultural season and carefully maintain the fertile terraces to convert ounces of grains into tons of food, but this real meaning of Annapurna was lost from my village. I realised that this is not only the story of the tuber crops and my village but is the story of every village and of every crop. With the introduction of new

and hybrid seeds, modern farming techniques and changes in our lifestyle, we have lost more than 50% of our agriculture biodiversity and we are importing 80% of seed and billions worth of chemical input that is harming our soil and environment. This is distorting our whole food system and our lifestyle.

At my next meeting with Dr. Chalise, we were discussing our culture and traditions. Among our cultural practices is Bala Chaaturdashi a famous Nepali Hindu festival. Everyone comes together at different blessed and holy sanctuaries of Hindu God Shiva where they offer Satbeej. Satbeej is the mix of varieties of holy grains, fruits and wild fruits along with coins to departed family members. Those plant materials, which can be grown and are used for plant propagation, fall under Satbeej. In other words, Satbeej are local crops along with wild edible fruits that are still available locally. He beautifully connected this festival with the promoting agriculture biodiversity and how this festival imparts the message to save seeds, the very source of life.

I had learned that the solution to our modern, corrupted food system was working the way nature does, farming naturally, using local crop varieties, understanding indigenous knowledge, knowing our culture and going back to roots. And this is also the solution to the greatest human threat of climate change. Natural farming is an ideal way to capture carbon back into the soil with our plants "simple" technique of photosynthesis.

### **From chaos to order and hope**

With this realization, and my connection with nature and culture, I decided that I will work and devote myself to the field of regeneration.

<sup>2</sup> A landrace is a domesticated, locally adapted, traditional variety of a species of animal or plant that has developed over time, through adaptation to its natural and cultural environment of agriculture and pastoralism, and due to isolation from other populations of the species. It typically displays greater genetic diversity than types subjected to formal breeding practices.



I started with this forgotten and neglected tuber crops in collaboration with Dr. Chalise. I travelled from village to village collecting planting materials of tuber crops. But, collecting was not only the solution as we needed areas to plant, to conserve and to promote them. So, two months prior to the plantation season, we went in search of a plantation. We found this in my own village! We managed to negotiate with a local school to rent it for 10 years.



*Photo by Kushal Poudel*

Instead of fertile agricultural land, we had chosen a neglected, rocky area with very low soil profile and a slope of 30-45 degree on which were growing small trees and little grasses. We undertook this challenge of regenerating this marginal land so that we could showcase it. If this kind of land could be regenerated, then everything was possible. In this neglected area, we planted the hope for neglected food crops. We used bamboo to make terraces and filling them with soil, manure and dried leaves from the forest. And, in the areas with no soil, we farmed in sacks filled with soil and manure. After planting these crops, they didn't sprout for more than a month and we were really demotivated. Then one day the rain fell, and the plants started to sprout, along with our hope. Every day, when I visited the farm, I witnessed the

change. The changes from a small sprout to tillers and leaf, flowers and fruit. This was amazing and energizing, helping me forget the hardship and the chaos I had felt earlier.



*Photo by Kushal Poudel*

Our work started with the seed fund that I had received as a loan plus some money from Dr Chalise. Later on, likeminded people started to come. At present we are operating on our own funds and haven't approached any funding partner to work with us on this initiative. We believe that we will showcase our work rather than go and seek funds. If anyone is interested to collaborate with us and will work for the same purpose, we are open to them. We are planning to develop this as a research farm. Now we are growing more than 30 varieties of plantation crops in less than a year with an agroecology approach. We are determined to rejuvenate this land with diverse crops and ancient ways of farming, known as Rishi Krishi. We will also be teaching this way of farming and conserving mother nature to others as well.

Today, while writing this story, I remember a conversation with my friend during our college days. He had asked me, "Kushal, what do you

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think you will do in the future?” I had replied that I wanted to build a research farm. I had forgotten this, but now I realise that I had rediscovered the hidden seed inside me. Through the chaos my interest in saving mother nature and our ancient

wisdom has emerged. Now I want to explore how our ancestors were connected to mother nature and how they interacted and shared this knowledge with the world.

*Photo by Kushal Poudel*





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