

Seed Girl of Koraput: Harshita's Journey to Keep Odisha's Indigenous Seeds Alive

In the hills of Koraput, where green forests stretch across valleys and small farms are woven into the landscape, agriculture is much more than a livelihood. For generations, tribal and farming communities here have lived in close relationship with the land, rain, forests and seasons. They have grown crops suited to their soil and climate, preserved seeds after every harvest and passed agricultural knowledge from one generation to another. In this landscape, a seed is not merely something that is put into the soil. It is a part of a community's memory, food culture, traditional knowledge and relationship with nature.

Yet, like many parts of the world, Koraput's traditional agricultural diversity is facing change. Modern farming practices, changing food habits, commercial crop preferences and evolving market demands have gradually reduced the cultivation of many indigenous varieties. Some traditional seeds that were once familiar to farming families are now difficult to find. With every disappearing variety, communities risk losing not only a crop but also the knowledge, stories and practices associated with it.

It is against this backdrop that an extraordinary journey is unfolding in Baipariguda of Koraput. The protagonist is not a seasoned agricultural scientist or an experienced farmer, but a 14-year-old girl who has chosen to make seed conservation part of her life. Harshita Priyadarshini, known affectionately as the "Seed Girl", has been travelling between villages, meeting farmers, collecting indigenous seeds, learning about traditional crops and encouraging others to preserve them.

At an age when most children are only beginning to discover their interests, Harshita has already built a remarkable collection. She currently conserves around 230 varieties of indigenous Paddy, 80 varieties of Ragi, six varieties of Little Millet, 12 varieties of beans and jhata, and 10 varieties of forgotten indigenous seeds. But the numbers tell only one part of her story. Behind every variety in her collection is a farmer, a village, a traditional practice and a piece of agricultural heritage that might otherwise have been lost.

To give this work a more organised and sustainable form, Harshita established the Harshita Priyadarshini Indigenous Seed and Grain Bank. The initiative provides farmers with access to indigenous seeds while creating a cycle through which those seeds can continue to be cultivated, multiplied and shared.

For Harshita, conservation does not mean simply keeping seeds safely inside containers. A seed survives only when it reaches the soil, grows into a crop and finds its way into another farmer's hands. Her work is therefore as much about people as it is about seeds.

Where a Seed Became a Purpose

Harshita's journey into seed conservation began when she was just 12 years old. At that age, her interaction with Padma Shri Kamala Pujari, one of Odisha's most recognised advocates of traditional agriculture and indigenous seed conservation, left a lasting impression on her.

During their meeting, Pujari recognised the young girl's curiosity about agriculture and indigenous seeds. She gave Harshita four varieties of traditional rice and encouraged her to

take up the responsibility of conserving indigenous seeds for future generations. That simple gesture became a turning point in Harshita's life.

She began to look at seeds differently. They were no longer simply something farmers sowed in their fields. She began understanding their connection with food security, biodiversity, climate resilience and the cultural identity of farming communities.

Inspired by Pujari, Harshita started visiting villages and meeting farmers. She collected small quantities of indigenous rice, millet and other crop seeds and began documenting and preserving them.

Her father, Harekrushna Mohanty, remembers how quickly her interest transformed into a mission.

“When Harshita met Padma Shri Kamala Pujari at the age of 12, she became deeply interested in agriculture, indigenous seeds and their importance in the present time. Pujari ji gave her four varieties of indigenous rice and encouraged her to conserve them for future generations. Inspired by her, Harshita began visiting farmers from village to village and collecting indigenous seeds. What started with a few varieties has now become a mission.”

What began as a child's fascination gradually became a commitment. Harshita started understanding that the disappearance of a traditional seed could mean the disappearance of an entire body of knowledge. The way a crop was grown, the food prepared from it, the season in which it was cultivated and the stories associated with it were all connected to that seed.

She began sharing what she learned with farmers and encouraging them to continue cultivating indigenous varieties. In the process, she was not merely collecting seeds; she was building relationships with the people who had protected them for generations.

A seed bank built from determination

In 2023, with the support of her father, Harshita established the Harshita Priyadarshini Indigenous Seed and Grain Bank through her own initiative and resources. It was a modest beginning, but the idea behind it was ambitious: create a living repository of indigenous seeds that would remain accessible to farmers rather than allowing these varieties to disappear from cultivation.

Her collection includes a remarkable range of traditional rice varieties, among them Umuriachudi, Assam Chudi, Bori Kaveri, Mahul Kunthi, Tulasi Kanthi, Govind Bhog, Badshaha Bhog, Pathangada and Bayagunda. Alongside rice, she has conserved traditional varieties of ragi such as Baria Ragi, Jam Ragi, Bhalu Ragi, Bhairabi Ragi, Bati Ragi and Shila Ragi.

The collection does not stop with rice and ragi. Harshita has also conserved six varieties of Little Millet, 12 varieties of beans and jhata, and 10 varieties of forgotten indigenous seeds.

For her, each variety has its own identity. Some may be remembered for their taste, some for their suitability to local soil, some for their resilience and others simply because older

generations once cultivated them as a regular part of their food system. That is what makes the seed bank different from an ordinary collection. It is a repository of agricultural memory.

The seed bank also reflects Harshita's understanding that conservation cannot remain confined to storage. If seeds are locked away and never cultivated, they may survive physically but disappear from living agricultural practice. Her aim is to keep them moving, from the seed bank to farmers, from farmers to fields and from one harvest to another.

Project Harshita: Giving seeds a new journey

In 2023, Harshita took another important step by launching Project Harshita, an initiative designed to make indigenous seeds available to farmers free of cost and encourage their continued cultivation.

One of the most distinctive elements of the project is its “**Loan-for-exchange**” model. Under the system, a farmer receives 2 kg of indigenous seed without any cost. After cultivating the crop and harvesting it, the farmer returns 4 kg of seed to the seed bank.

The idea is simple but powerful. The seed does not end with the farmer who receives it. It multiplies in the field and comes back in a larger quantity, allowing Harshita to share it with more farmers. In this way, every farmer can become a link in the chain of conservation.

A seed received by one family can eventually reach several other families. A traditional variety that might otherwise have disappeared can return to cultivation. What begins as a small exchange can gradually create a community-based system of seed security.

The initiative has already reached around 1,000 farmers. Over the past three years, approximately 400 farmers have received nearly 30 varieties of indigenous seeds, while around 600 farmers have been provided seeds during the current year.

The project began with just 20 farmers. Since then, its reach has expanded steadily. Around 50 percent of the participating farmers are women and 20 per cent are young farmers, an important indication that seed conservation is finding space among both women and the younger generation.

Farmer Madan Mohan has watched Harshita's journey develop from close quarters. “Harshita is very young, but her effort to bring change to agriculture is remarkable. She first came to us with a curiosity to learn about seeds. Today, she is known as the Seed Girl across the country and beyond. It is a matter of pride for Koraput, and we are proud of her.”

For farmers like him, Harshita's age makes her achievement even more striking. She approaches farmers not as someone who has all the answers, but as a young learner who is willing to listen. That openness has helped her build trust and learn from the very people who have carried traditional agricultural knowledge through generations.

Keeping indigenous seeds alive through young minds

Harshita knows that conserving seeds today is not enough. Someone must also conserve the knowledge that explains why those seeds matter. That realisation has taken her beyond farms and into classrooms.

Through awareness programmes, she has reached more than 2,000 students, introducing them to indigenous seeds, biodiversity, food systems and environmental conservation. In her school, she encourages students to think about where their food comes from and how the diversity of crops grown in villages is connected to the health of people and the environment.

Her school headmaster, Krishna Nishanka, believes that her initiative is particularly meaningful because it is inspiring other children to look at agriculture differently.

“Harshita’s initiative at such a young age is highly appreciable. She conducts agriculture-related learning and awareness activities for students, helping them understand farming, seed conservation and forgotten indigenous varieties.”

For the students listening to her, agriculture becomes something more than a distant occupation. Through Harshita’s stories and activities, they begin to see the connection between the fields surrounding their communities and the food on their plates.

Harshita also places particular emphasis on encouraging girls of her own age. She wants young people to understand that agriculture is not limited by age, gender or background. It can offer space for innovation, leadership, scientific curiosity and social change.

Her message is especially relevant at a time when many young people are increasingly disconnected from farming. Harshita believes that this distance can be reversed if children are given opportunities to understand agriculture from an early age.

A Young Voice for the Future of Agriculture

Harshita’s work is rooted in indigenous seeds, but her vision extends much further. She sees youth leadership and agriculture as deeply connected. “Youth leadership and agriculture complement each other, and this is extremely important today,” she says.

She believes young people have an important role to play in strengthening agriculture, improving food systems and creating greater awareness about biodiversity. With growing urban populations and changing food habits, she feels that the younger generation must reconnect with the crops and foods that have sustained communities for generations.

For Harshita, this means bringing indigenous Paddy, millets and other traditional foods from the farm to the plate.

She sees the loss of crop diversity as a concern not only for farmers but for society as a whole. When communities move towards a narrow range of crops, they may lose varieties that carry nutritional, ecological and cultural value. Preserving indigenous crops can therefore help maintain diversity within the agricultural system while keeping traditional knowledge alive. Her own work has become an attempt to build that bridge. In villages, she speaks about seed

conservation. In schools, she talks about biodiversity and food. Among young people, she speaks about agriculture as a field where they can create meaningful change.

“Seed Girl” on the National and Global Stage

Harshita’s efforts have gradually taken her beyond Boipariguda and Koraput. Her work has received recognition at both national and international levels.

Among her honours are the IDEA Young Stars Winner (2023), Young Eco Hero Award, USA (2025), Indian Book of Records (2024), Idea Book of Records (2023), Jewels of Odisha, New Delhi (2024), Tarun Pragnya Bharati Samman (2023), Young Indigenous Seed Conservationist-International Icon Award (2024), Prakruti Bandhu (2024), Krushak Ratna (2023), Food Hero (2024) and Nirbhaya Yuva Puraskar (2026), Innovation World, USA, Women’s Achiever Odisha (2026) among others.

She has also received recognition from institutions and initiatives including NABARD, Shree Anna Abhiyan and Berhampur University.

Her work has taken her to platforms dealing with farmers’ rights, indigenous rice seed security, Millets, forgotten foods, biodiversity conservation and tribal seed promotion. She has also participated in national and international discussions around food systems and agricultural diversity.

For a young girl from Koraput, these platforms have offered something equally important as recognition: an opportunity to share the knowledge she has gathered from farmers and traditional seed conservators with a wider audience

A Young Seed Keeper Finds Encouragement from a Visionary Scientist

One of the significant moments in Harshita’s journey came when she interacted with Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, Chairperson of the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation. At international millet and Shree Anna Symposium, Dr. Soumya appreciated Harshita’s efforts and encouraged her to continue her work and consider becoming an agricultural scientist.

“Today, when many young people are moving away from agriculture, while you are moving forward as a guide to bring positive change in agriculture. Your work to conserve indigenous seeds is not only preserving our agricultural heritage but also contributing to biodiversity, food security and the resilience of future food systems. I hope more young people will draw inspiration from your journey and recognise that protecting our traditional knowledge and crop diversity is an investment in the future. You have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to agriculture, so I encourage you to continue this journey and pursue your dream of becoming an agricultural scientist.”

For Harshita, these words were a source of encouragement. The appreciation from a leading voice in agriculture strengthened her resolve to continue conserving indigenous seeds and inspiring more young people to take an interest in agriculture.

The Future Hidden in a Handful of Seeds

Harshita's story offers a quiet but powerful lesson about conservation. A seed may fit easily into the palm of a hand, but within it lies the possibility of an entire crop. It carries the characteristics of a particular variety, the knowledge of the farmers who cultivated it and the food traditions of the communities that consumed it. When a traditional seed disappears, something much larger than a crop can disappear with it.

Harshita is determined to prevent that loss. She collects indigenous seeds from farmers, preserves them in her seed bank, returns them to the fields through Project Harshita and shares their importance with students and communities. In doing so, she is building a living link between generations.

At just 14, Harshita is still a student, but she has already shown that conservation does not always begin with a large institution. Sometimes, it begins with curiosity, determination and a handful of seeds. In Koraput, she is carrying agricultural heritage forward, one seed, one farmer and one conversation at a time.

The four varieties once handed to her by Kamala Pujari have grown into hundreds of indigenous varieties and a growing community of farmers and young learners.

Harshita is not simply preserving seeds from the past. She is keeping alive the possibilities they hold for the future.