A union for a century

There is a tribal couple from Dhandhora village, Chota Udepur who has lived a hundred years and continues to age gracefully. In a country where the average life span is 65 years, a 92-year long journey as a couple for 107-year-old Chotiyabhai Radathia Rathwa and 104-year old Khapriben Chotiyabhai Rathwa will inspire many to aim for a long and happy life.

We seldom appreciate that lessons in sustainable living can in the real sense be taught only by those who have lived long. Our questions were answered by Chotiyabhai since Khapriben has hearing difficulties.

Childhood

Chotiyabhai and his wife did not receive much education. They spent most of their childhood grazing cattle. They would boil and eat wild edible roots while keeping an eye on the cattle. One of their other favourite pasttimes was making tattoos by pricking babool [Acacia nilotica (L.) Delile] thorns.

Favourite games of their childhood were amla pipdi (a game that involves chasing and tree climbing), gilli danda (tipcat, a game involving a small and big stick), and gedi dada (a game similar to hockey).

Farming

They practiced mixed farming to reduce risks. When there was a high rainfall, only paddy would grow. When there was low rainfall, banti [Echinochloa crusgalli var. frumentacea (Link) W. Wight] and arhar [Cajanus cajan (L.) Millsp.] would grow. Moderate rainfall allowed all the crops to grow. This ensured that they always had some food. They did not grow crops for the market but for their own food. Happy with whatever they had, they did not ask for much and ate the fruits of their own labour. Rains provided enough water for farming and cattle provided the manure.
They had a variety of 27 different types of vegetables to eat. Their staple diet is called vagedu, which is made of equal portions of rice and kodri (Setaria italica (L.) Beauv.). The cooking oil they use is made from mahua [Madhuca longifolia (J. Konig) J.F. Macbr.] seeds. While cooking, they drizzle very little oil over the food. However, on festive occasions they deep fry to make arhar vada and use fewer spices in their cooking.

Chotiyabhai remembers tales from his elders about the infamous Samwat 1956 (1900 AD) famine. During those days, they collected edible leaves from the thick forests and fed them to the animals after boiling. They had barely survived the famine when the first rains resulted in an outbreak of disease, killing many animals.

In about three years after the famine, there was a massive rat infestation wherein the rats ate away both the sown and stored crops. This turned out to be worse than the 1900 famine.

The tribal community worships nature and paints things they use in daily life. These paintings are called Pithora paintings. Before planting seeds, they put the seeds in front of the painted elements of nature asking for their blessings to protect the grains. Also, after the harvest, they keep their harvest in front of these elements as a customary offering. Only after this ritual, do they make use of the grains for food.

Chotiyabhai recalls how, during their youth, the villagers used to build roofs of all the houses together. There was a lot more cooperation and unity in the village in those days. All the disputes were sorted out with the consultation of village elders.

Although, marriages were fixed depending on how much land the groom’s family owned, the prestige of a man depended on his hunting skills. Their village did not have too many people. So, all the festivals were celebrated in the nearest town, Chota Udepur.

Chotiyabhai and Khapriben got married at the age of 15 and 12 respectively as per the custom during those times. Customs were very different back then. They used to carry the groom around the village and finally to the marriage ceremony venue, on the shoulders of their relatives or friends. The married couple left in a bullock cart while the others followed them dancing along the way.

Interesting practices

They mixed mamejawa [Enicostemma littorale Blume] seeds and neem [Azadirachta indica A. Juss] with grains to keep stored grain pests away. They made lightweight fences by using arhar stalks and covering them with cow dung. Similarly, cow dung smeared bamboo grain storage bins were made. They used to make curd by mixing a special local herb with milk. To protect themselves from the rains, they made umbrellas out of teak wood. For driving away mosquitoes, they used to carry pots with burning cow dung cakes while weeding.

A life fully lived

Chotiyabhai is a man content with his life. He has allowed very little external influence on his way of life. He still roams around in his traditional attire and he still boils chicken without any spices. The couple has five children and the joint family has 46 people. Many of the young grooms which Chotiyabhai lifted on his shoulders are now dead. At the age of 107, he can still climb toddy trees - an art which only one of his sons has learned. The Honey Bee Network wishes them even more health and longevity. Hopefully, in eight years, the couple will celebrate their hundredth wedding anniversary.