

VAIKUNTH MEHTA NATIONAL INSITIUTE OF CO-OPERATIVE MANAGEMENT PUNE

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Sr.No.	Headline	Newspaper	Language	Date	Page No
1	The rice plate expands as heirloom grains are revived, sold	Business line	English	11.3.2024	1
2	Sponge iron units face ore shortage, seek export ban	Financial Express	English	11.3.2024	2

Date	11.3.2024		
Newspaper Name	Business line	Page No	1

Business Line 11-3-2024 (1 No.1)

The rice plate expands as heirloom grains are revived, sold

You can think beyond the ponni, matta and basmati as a host of players are now bringing you fragrant ancient rice varieties

Anjana PV
Chennai

A day in the life of an Indian is incomplete without a bowl of rice. But now your rice plate can expand beyond the usual matta, ponni, basmati or sona masuri, as a host of players are resurrecting and bringing heirloom grains online or to stores near you.

An exciting catalogue of 52 indigenous scented rice has just been made available by the Small Farmers' Agri Business Consortium (SFAC) on the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC).

CURATED BY SFAC

The 52 heirloom varieties, one for each week of the year, have been specially curated by SFAC with a link provided of the Farmer Producer Organisation (FPO) that grows the paddy and processes to rice - so that there is a seamless farm to table connect. There are varieties such as Chin Shakkar from Chhat-



TIME TO ACT. There was a time when India had 1.1 lakh varieties of rice, which have now dwindled to 6,000.

isgarh, Javaphool from Madhya Pradesh, the small slender Kalo Nunia from West Bengal and more.

There was a time when India had 1.1 lakh varieties of rice, which have now dwindled to 6,000. But the good news is that SFAC is not the only one. Online there are platforms like Bio Basics that are retailing varieties like Mullan Kaima, an aromatic white rice indigenous to Wayanad or the fragrant Ambe Mohur from the foothills of

the Western Ghats. In Chennai, there are stores like the 'Spirit of the Earth' in Mylapore and the 'Namma Nellu' initiative run by the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems that are reviving heritage rice varieties. 'Spirit of the Earth' is an endeavour supported by the Swami Dayananda Educational Trust (SDET) and was launched in 2013 during the 'NelThiruvizha' (Seed Festival) in Manjakkudi, under the guidance of Sheela Balaji,

the chairperson and managing trustee. Initially conserving two rice varieties, the initiative has now amassed 289 heritage rice seeds from farmers nationwide. These include Karuppu Kavuni, Thanjavur Black, Kala Bhat. The rice varieties are priced between ₹130 and ₹180. Factors such as value, production costs and yield are considered during pricing.

ORGANIC FARMING

'Namma Nellu', founded in 2016 by AV Balasubramanian and KS Vijayalakshmi, operates with the goal of promoting sustainable and organic farming practices. According to Balasubramanian, Director of CIKS, the initiative emphasises the medicinal values of these rice varieties, such as Pitchavari for treating diarrhoea and Navara and Neelan Samba for supporting pregnant and lactating mothers.

With inputs from Prabhudatta Mishra

Date	11.3.2024		
Newspaper Name	Financial Express	Page No	2

Financial Express 11-3-2024 Pg No 2

Sponge iron units face ore shortage, seek export ban

SURYA SARATHI RAY
New Delhi, March 10

THE DOMESTIC SPONGE iron manufacturers fear a continuous shortage of iron ore may bring it to the brink of collapse.

Sponge iron is used as a raw material to make finished steel in electric-arc or induction furnaces.

India has been the world's largest sponge iron-producing nation since 2003, and 30% of the country's steel production comes via this route.

The ore shortage, industry sources feel, is due to the rampant export of the crucial steel-making raw material.

Without captive sources, the sector generally buys iron ore from merchant miners, including PSUs, to meet its annual needs of around 80-85 million tonnes (MT).

The skyrocketing exports, Chhattisgarh Sponge Iron Manufacturers Association president Anil Nachranai, said, leaves a very minimum quantity available for use by secondary steel sector players.

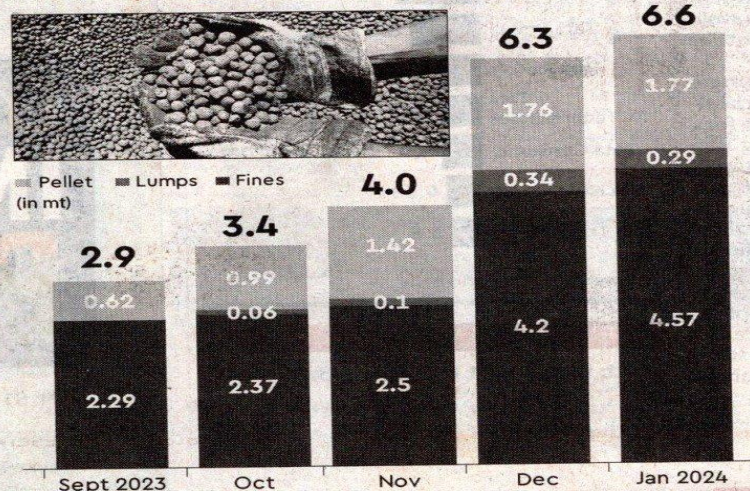
"Primary steel producers have also started exporting iron ore in its various forms — fines, lumps, and pellets — from their captive mines. They are also buying from merchant miners," Nachranai alleged.

He said the sponge iron sector is incurring losses operating at an 80-85% capacity utilisation level due to inadequate availability of iron ore and its higher costs.

Karnataka Sponge Iron Manufacturers' Association president T Srinivas Rao said, "Currently, iron ore of less than 58% Fe is allowed for export. We request the government to reduce this to 54 Fe grade as sponge iron industry can use iron ore above 54 Fe grade."

Miners, however, differ. "Exports of iron ore from the country are mainly fines below 58% Fe, which have no domestic market. Currently, the non-moving stock of more than 180 million tonne of mainly low-grade iron ore is lying at mine heads," said B K

IRON ORE AND PELLET EXPORTS



Source: BigMint

Bhatia, additional secretary general, Federation of Indian Mineral Industries (FIMI).

It is well known that the domestic steel industry consumes ores of +62% Fe content, unlike the major steel-producing country China, which consumes low-grade iron ore up to 55% Fe grade.

Owing to the fact that there is no domestic market for such low-grade iron ore (-58% Fe), hence there is no option but to export and monetise these low-grade ore, which are mainly in the form of fines," Bhatia noted.

Iron ore exports, including pellets, almost tripled in 2023 to 44 MT from 16 MT a year ago. The floodgates opened following the withdrawal of export duty in November 2022 for ores with less than 58% Fe from 50% imposed in May 2022.

Iron ore production, on the other hand, has not increased in proportion, from 254 MT in FY22 to 258 MT in FY23. On the contrary, steel production increased from 121 MT

in 2021-22 to 127 MT in 2022-23. During the April-December period of the current fiscal year, crude steel production stood at 106 MT.

According to the National Steel Policy 2017, India needs to produce 80 MTPA sponge iron by 2030-31 to reach the targeted 300 MT steel production capacity by 2030-31. The secondary steel sector has embarked on a 25% capacity expansion, which is at different stages of completion.

At least seven state-based sponge iron manufacturing associations from West Bengal, Odisha, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and others have written the Union steel ministry urging an immediate ban on exports of all forms of iron ore as they are "grappling with a severe shortage of the raw material".

Industry experts said the government should immediately address pending litigations to expedite the reopening of the mines that have been closed since 2014 to enhance iron ore production in the country.