

Assam farmer organization sows seeds of change



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Mubina Akhtar 23 June 2017 Updated 24 Jun 18024 views

The shrieking crescendo calls of the Koel and the flowering of 'Kopou' are harbingers of spring signaling the dawn of a new year in the [Brahmaputra](#) valley. The season sees the ubiquitous orchids with bright and heavy blossoms, varying in colors, bejewel the wilderness of the Northeast. 'Kopou Phul' is the most sought after orchid in Assam during New [Year](#) festivities in April. [Assamese](#) women adorn the pink flowers with deep pink spot [as](#) ornamentation on their head during celebration of 'Rongali Bihu'. Found in [North East as](#) well [as](#) South [India](#), Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, [Myanmar](#), Thailand, Indonesia, Java and Philippines- -'Kopou Phul' or 'Seeta [Pushpa](#)' in Sanskrit, *Ryncostylis retusa* is commonly named 'Fox Tail'. Declared the [State](#) flower of Assam, *Ryncostylis retusa* is intrinsically associated with the mosaic of tradition and culture of the [state](#)'s diverse ethnic groups.

“Orchids are the most beautiful and wondrous among the flowering plants of the world and the origin of orchid dates back much longer than originally expected. The age of Vanilla is estimated at 60 to 70 million years,” says Dr Padmeshwar Gogoi, a renowned botanist of Assam. The cultural symbolism of orchids-- that have long been a symbol of love and beauty--could be traced to many tropical and subtropical countries where they are [found](#) in abundance and therefore enjoy the status of national flower. In [India](#) about 1,300 species (140 genera) are [found](#) that form 9% of our flora and are the largest botanical family. While the North-Western Himalayas houses 200 species and the Western Ghats about 300 species, Northeast [India](#) boasts of some 800 species. Among northeastern states, [Arunachal](#) Pradesh alone hosts more than 500 species. A 100 sq km area in Sessa in [Arunachal](#) has been declared [as](#) Orchid Sanctuary that preserves half of the orchids [found](#) across the [state](#). In [Meghalaya](#)--Juwai, Jarain, Tuber, Mukhaialong, Narpuh and Raliang in [East](#) and West Jaintia Hills districts and Tura peak, Nokrek, Baghmara and Rongrenggre in the Garo hills provide habitat for wild orchids. Sikkim’s floral wealth has a treasure chest of some 600 orchids. About 300 species of orchids are reported in Assam that represents 44.39% of the north eastern species and 24.42% of species occurring in [India](#).

Rare orchid varieties of Northeast [India](#)



Renanthera imshootiana or red vanda is one of the most rare and beautiful orchid in Northeast [India](#). The blue vanda is equally cherished. There are many other rare varieties [found](#) in Lakhimpur district and Dibru Saikhowa [National](#) Park. Of them Rhynchostylis retusa 'Alba' is one of the most uncommon and rare genus of fragrant flower. This is said to be the rare albino form of "fox tail" species. Aerides odoratum is beautiful pinkish white or pale pink waxy fragrant flower also known [as](#) 'Draupodi [Pushpa](#)'. Papilionanthe teres, Dendrobium Transparens, Aerides multiflorum, Malaxis acuminata, micropera rostrata, Dendrobium moschatum, Eria bractescens, Thunia alba, Phalaenopsis parishii, Dendrobium farmeri, Phalaenopsis mannii, Dendrobium primulinum, Gastrochilus desypogon, Dendrobium, Cymbidium pendulum aphyllum, Liparis plantaginea, Dendrobium densiflorum, Calanthe masuca, Robiquetia spathulata, Dendrobium aduncum, Dendrobium chrysanthum, Dendrobium sulcatum, Arundina graminifolia, Dendrobium fimbriatum, Eria fragrans are other important species [found](#) in Assam.

The many uses of orchids

Many orchids are highly valued for their medicinal properties. In traditional [medicine](#) they are used [as](#) cure for many diseases and ailments and an important ingredient in herbal remedies. Pseudobulbs of orchids are sweet, refrigerant, aphrodisiac, febrifuge and tonic and dried pseudo-bulbs are important ingredients of several Ayurvedic preparations. They are believed to be useful in haematemesis, [fever](#), burning sensations, tuberculosis and general debility.

The dried seed pods of *Vanilla planifolia* are commercially important [as](#) flavoring agent in bakeries, for perfumery and aromatherapy. The underground tubers of some terrestrial orchid genus are ground to a powder and used for cooking. Some saprophytic orchid species that produce potato-like tubers are also used [as](#) food and can be successfully cultivated.

Cultivation and collection of variety of orchids on a commercial basis through intervention from biotechnology flourish worldwide forming the basis of a lucrative industry.

Conservation strategies

There exist government strategy for conservation and propagation of orchids. R. C. Goswami, a retired forest official and presently a member of Assam Biodiversity Board says --“Government plans for conservation and propagation of orchids, and development of gene bank for endangered species [found](#) in this part of the country.” Mr. Goswami gives an outline of the [state policy](#) that includes generation of data with enormous practical and scientific utility to enhance the knowledge with regard to orchids--particularly the threatened and high valued species; dissemination of information on orchids to bring awareness among people regarding importance of orchids in commerce in the national and international market; transfer of technology for ex-situ conservation through cultivation of orchids by entrepreneurs. However, nothing materialized in the implementation [level](#). [India](#)’s biodiversity legislation has three main objectives, conservation of biodiversity, its sustainable use and ensuring equitable sharing of the benefits from use of the country’s biological resources or related traditional knowledge and to achieve this, the Biodiversity [Act](#) has a three-tier institutional structure —the [National](#) Biodiversity Authority (NBA), [State](#) Biodiversity Boards (SBBs) in every [state](#) and Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) at local village/urban levels. Unfortunately, the SBBs or BMCs hardly play any role in the conservation of biodiversity in this part of the country. On the contrary, privately funded projects or work at [NGO level](#) has yielded better results.

The [Kaziranga National](#) Orchid and Biodiversity Park in Kohora, in the [Kaziranga](#) landscape, is such an endeavor. This Biodiversity Park inaugurated in 2015, preserves more than 600 varieties of wild orchids, a medicinal plant garden, a fishery for [indigenous](#) fishes, an extensive forest of native trees, a garden for native flowers and fruits and a rice museum.



The [Kaziranga National](#) Orchid and Biodiversity Park

The Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti has come up with a sprawling three hectare [Kaziranga National](#) Orchid and Bio Diversity Park, the one of its kind in the region. The Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti is a people's movement committed for upholding the [rights](#) of farmers and is committed to protect the local heritage and resources.

Akhil Gogoi, [leader](#) of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samitee (KMSS) who is spearheading the anti mega dam movement in Assam is also leading another movement, this time to [fight](#) back the industrial control of our seeds. Gogoi led me to a repository of more than 200 [indigenous](#) varieties of rice in the [Kaziranga National](#) Orchid and Biodiversity Park. Very [soon](#), he informed, KMSS would encourage farmers to cultivate those in their fields. “We need to preserve, collect, distribute and grow our traditional seed and our traditional food culture that is the collective learning of thousands of years.”

The north eastern region is the richest gene pool of many rice varieties [as](#) well [as](#) many endemic and heritage species of [crop](#) plants that include fruits, vegetables, millets, legumes, oil seeds and spices. However, much of these traditional rice varieties and endemic species of fruits and vegetables are already gone. The onslaught of hybrid seeds developed by large corporations pushed much of the crops that were grown from seeds to oblivion. There is every need to counter this industrial rapacity on our [agriculture](#) and horticulture sectors. “The basic purpose of KMSS to open this Park is to conserve the local varieties of orchids, flowers, fruits, fish [as](#) well [as](#) our colorful ethnic culture and to spread knowledge about them,” Gogoi said.

Since 2005, the KMSS has been fighting for the [rights](#) of farmers and opposing transfer of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes.



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