How women farmers of this Tamil Nadu village are going climate proof by growing millets

Rising temperatures and erratic rainfall in drought-prone Dharmapuri in Tamil Nadu is making rain-fed agriculture non-viable. Here, some women farmers are going climate proof by growing millets

Every time it rains in Dharmapuri, M Molagappan, a retired farmer from Maraavadi village, claims to know its name. The year is split into periods of 13.5 days, he says, and each period has a different name.

“Ubba mazhai” literally means heavy rains, and usually comes in the month of October. Pazhaya mazhai, or old rains, is at the end of the Tamil year, in March,” he said, but failed to recall all the names of rains in different seasons, which one can find in Tamil literature.

“We have forgotten their names, the rains have forgotten us,” says SA Chinnasamy, president of the Thamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam (Tamil Nadu Farmers Union). “It is because it doesn’t rain like the way it used to. The last 15 years seem to be particularly bad,” says Chinnasamy.

Data from the state’s agriculture department shows that apart from 2016, the district has received average or above average rainfall since 2004. The problem here, is not really the amount of rainfall through the year, but its distribution.

Dharmapuri was among the worst hit in Tamil Nadu in 2016 when the state saw its worst drought in 140 years, receiving less than half the average rainfall. While the long period average rainfall for the region is 853.1 mm annually, the district received only 397.6 mm of rain in 2016. “It’s not just the total rainfall. Rain distribution over an area and time are most crucial for farming, and this has been a failure in Dharmapuri