

Sarthak Das successfully defended his doctoral thesis, “Seeds as Power: State, Science and Agricultural Practices in Odisha,” in 2025 at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati (India), where he had previously obtained his MA in Development Studies.

Following his PhD, he was briefly affiliated with the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (India) as an Associate until December 2025. His doctoral research primarily examined the political economy of seed governance, scientific knowledge, and farmers’ practices in eastern India. Grounded in extensive fieldwork, particularly among resource-poor farming communities, his research highlights how state policies, scientific interventions, and market forces reshape agrarian relations, while also documenting grassroots initiatives—such as community seed banks—that seek to reclaim autonomy over agricultural resources. His broader research interests include Science and Technology Studies, rural society and agrarian change, seed policies in developing countries, and democratic accountability in technoscientific governance. He was awarded the Ernst Mach Grant (Worldwide) by the Federal Ministry of Women, Science and Research (BMFWF), Republic of Austria, for 2025–26 to support his research stay at IAS-STS.

Project at IAS-STS: Repossession through Community Participation: Community Seed Banks in India

Historically, the Indian state pursued twin objectives of food security for a rapidly growing population and the modernisation of agriculture through a set of policy choices that established a dominant paradigm for agricultural science in post-independent India. This productivist approach, was legitimised and institutionalised through practices that treated the rural economy and its institutions as largely redundant. This paradigm shaped subsequent state interventions, positioning agricultural science as central to nation-building and rural transformation. This productivist framing reduced food insecurity to a problem of scarcity. However, instances of hunger can persist alongside food sufficiency (Sen, 1981; Sen & Drèze, 1989, 2013). Consequently, the central challenge for a developmental state lies not merely in increasing production, but in ensuring equitable access to food.

The proposed study argues for a shift from this productivist model to a more inclusive, rights-based framework that recognises farmers' a priori collective rights over their commons. As agriculture increasingly moves away from the realm of livelihoods into global supply chains, seed commons emerge as a crucial means through which farmers can reclaim their freedoms and participate in power. Building on this, the research will seek to engage with the lived realities of the agrarian countryside by interrogating questions of food sovereignty, access to resources, livelihoods, and pressures on local farming systems.

By framing seed commons as an alternative to dominant paradigms of agricultural development, the study will critique the agrochemical-industrial model and its impacts on community-based seed systems. The proposed research seeks to scale this analysis from local to global contexts, expand its methodological toolkit, and incorporate new theoretical frameworks to critically examine existing seed policies and intellectual property regimes governing plant genetic resources. It further seeks to examine the questions of ownership and control over seed production and distribution in the US, EU and the Global South, and document ways in which they differ.

Selected Publication

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