

BACK TO THE SOIL – TAMIL NADU’S RURAL YOUTH RETURN TO ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

The average age of an Indian farmer is almost 50 years. With more and more young people migrating from rural areas to cities, the number of farmers practising agriculture will decline in the long run. In a pilot initiative called “Retaining Village Youth in Agriculture”, the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems, along with India’s National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development and Rabobank Employee Foundation, Netherlands, partnered together to invoke interest among the rural youth of Tamil Nadu to practise and sustain their traditional occupation, agriculture – with success, as the following examples show.

By Sharada Balasubramanian

On a late morning, M. Parthibaraj, a 28-year-old farmer, runs vividly around his ten-acre plot of land, chasing almost a dozen goats, one after another. The goats were left for grazing, and now have to be led back to their sheds. After almost five rounds of running around the farm, he manages to bring all the goats together inside the shed and closes the gate. The hens and the goats are all safe now. Relieved, Parthibaraj looks up his coconut tree, pulls out a few of them with a long stick and brings them down. Sipping coconut juice straight from his farm, he asks: “Can you experience this in a city?”

After gaining a Master’s Degree in Computer Application (MCA), like many rural youths, Parthibaraj had migrated to the city for work. Cocooned in a nine-to-five cubicle job, he was frustrated and unhappy. One day, he decided to quit his plush software programmer job in the city of Chennai and return to his village in Adamangalam, Sirkazhi district of Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu to work as a farmer. “After shifting to the city, I put on a lot of weight, and my health was getting ruined more and more by the day,” he recalls. “I felt out of place in the job. Now, back in the village, I am physically active, taking care of my father’s farm.”

YOUTH EXCITED ABOUT ORGANIC FARMING

His decision to move back to his village was mooted by his interest in agriculture from childhood. But it was not just agriculture that he was interested in. Unlike his father, he did not want to use chemicals in the farm. Instead, he chose to implement organic practices. “I saw many YouTube videos which talked about the perils of chemicals such as urea. That shifted my perception, and I decided not to produce food from chemicals,” he explains. The young farmer built a farm pond and started aquaculture. The water from the pond is



M. Parthibaraj, a software professional working in Chennai, shifted back to farming in his village.

Photo: Sharada Balasubramanian

diverted to the paddy field and vegetable farm. He explains: “Like everyone else, I did not want to just grow paddy. I started to cultivate many vegetables. I then went to the nearby town of Sirkazhi and delivered the vegetables door to door. That was sometimes difficult, as there are days when vegetables do not sell. Then, they are only left to rot.”

It was through his brother that Parthibaraj came to know of the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS) and the existence of the Valanadu Sustainable Agriculture Producer Company (VSAPCL). CIKS was about to start a programme called “Retaining Village Youth in Agriculture”, based on the concept of integrated farming. “Through the training, I learnt many elements of farming – including goat and cow rearing, how to add value to products, how to market them, and how to approach banks for a loan,” says Parthibaraj. “There were leadership sessions as well.”

The producer company also procures vegetables from Parthibaraj, which has reduced the

burden of selling the vegetables by going to the nearby town every day. With a market price of 35 rupees per kilo (0.50 US dollars), he knows that all his vegetables are sold at the right price and nothing goes waste.

As the project commenced only a few months ago, Parthibaraj is yet to witness any profit, but what he gets through integrated farming, he says, is enough for him to sustain his livelihood. “I catch two eggs every day. There is a daily income with goats and hens. I have also applied for a loan, and the bank has agreed,” he says. The manure for the farm comes from the cow dung. “Earlier, my father resisted this idea of organic farm, but I persisted,” he explains. “Now, youngsters around me are motivated seeing me, and are showing interest. I am greatly satisfied with my life.”

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

Like Parthibaraj, almost 60 youths were selected for this pilot project by the stakeholders.

Participants were chosen on the basis of various parameters – their age and qualification, and their involvement and interest in agriculture. Ms Subhashini Sridhar, Project Director at CIKS, says: “Today, the average age of a farmer in India is 50. To prevent rural-urban migration in youth, and to prove that agriculture is a profitable business, we started the programme ‘Retaining village youth in agriculture.’” India’s National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and the Dutch Rabobank are providing financial support.

In 2017, almost 38 training programmes were conducted for the youth on improving farm production, water saving techniques, certified organic and integrated farming approaches, production of bio fertilisers and bio pesticides, paddy weed management, traditional paddy seed production, and the use of new varieties. Further topics included entrepreneurship skills development, preparation of business plans and bankable proposals, animal husbandry, poultry, functioning of producer companies, high density of horticulture crops, honey bee rearing, farm mechanisation, value addition and packaging. On exposure visits, the trainees were able to link theoretical learning with practical experience. They were also taken for field visits to gain first-hand experience. Almost 90 per cent of the sessions were field-based. The training programme was run in the Sirkazhi, Vedaranyam and Maliyaduthurai regions of Tamil Nadu.

“It is not wrong to go to cities, but whoever is in agriculture should be retained in agriculture,” says D. Ganesh, District Development Manager, Nagapattinam, NABARD. And Subhashini Sridhar adds: “The youth should be role models for others to come and join.” The concept seems to be working, for, encouraged by the positive experience gained by the first 60 participants, further youths who are interested in the scheme have already registered with the CIKS. Now the pilot project is to enter its next phase.

YOUNG PEOPLE OPTING FOR NETWORKING

Where Parthibaraj chose to cultivate vegetables in organic way, S. Anish Kumar ventured into preparing vermicompost with earthworms. With a Master of Science degree and teacher’s training, he is a part-time teacher in a school. With a keen interest in organic farming practices, he returned to agriculture. He says: “Earthworms are a farmer’s friend. To

get compost, one needs to maintain the moisture in the compost bed by regularly spraying it with water. We can get inputs in 45 days and use them for organic farming.”

Of course there were challenges for Anish when he shifted to organic practices on his farm. “Everyone looks at more yield, but not at the quality of food. It is more about appearance,” Anish notes. “The greatest challenge was to do organic farming while having chemical farms around us. Our farm could be contaminated through insects.”

Anish strongly believes that the older generation and his forefathers had a longer life span (some of them lived for over 100 years) primarily because of the food they consumed. “I took this small effort to bring back organic practices in agriculture. At the training programme in CIKS, I was taught a host of things including goat rearing, cow rearing, seed saving, and about various other schemes,” he recalls. “I was personally interested in earthworm rearing, and I am doing it successfully now. It is too early to talk about income, but I am hopeful. People can do vermicomposting on their own if they have a cow, or they can buy the compost from people who rear the worms.”

According to Anish, he and other youths in the village gained confidence that they too could pursue agriculture with simple methods. For instance, for the cow dung that is needed, having a cow is enough to start with. CIKS helped them with a loan to buy the cows. “We now have a farmers’ club where we can sell our products to each other,” says Anish. “It should not stop with us. It should reach more people and show a way for others to do it.”

Rajesh Kumar from Vettayambadi village is another teacher who has entered goat rearing. “From a small age, I was interested in farming, and joined my father after education”, he says. Rajesh’s father also used chemicals on his farm. “On Facebook, I came to know of CIKS, and of how to do farming without chemicals,” he explains. For goat rearing, he procured a loan. Seeing the success of Rajesh, 20 youths have come forth, and have formed a farmers’ club.



A farm in Sirkazhi, Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu.

Photo: Sharada Balasubramanian

BREAKING WITH TRADITIONS

For these young farmers, coming back to agriculture means not just continuing their traditional livelihood, but also reforming the way agriculture is done today. As their fathers practised chemical farming, post-green revolution, these youngsters, knowing the impact of chemicals on food production, are going back to old ways of organic farming. Further, they stepped away from just growing paddy. They diversified into integrated farming, vegetable cultivation, goat rearing, vermicomposting, etc. This change was not easy, as the youths were criticised for shifting to organic by the local people and their families. This is demonstrated by the example of J. Natarajan, a 35-year-old farmer from Kottayamedu village. “I am traditionally from a farmer’s family. After class 10, I started farming on the land with my father. I was planning to go abroad for work, but after hearing about the village for youth programme here, I enrolled for it,” Natarajan recalls. “I visited a lot of farms and received trainings intensively. There was tremendous opposition in the family when I told them that I would stop using chemicals for brinjals, and use organic manure instead.”

Today, Natarajan’s farmland teems with brinjal plants that stand very tall. He also rears rare black hens, the eggs of which, if consumed, are good for human health. Natarajan says: “We need to do organic farming. The next generation should be able to use this soil.”

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