

Conversations Today

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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Agriculture is at epicentre of the country's journey towards self-reliance with farmers at its core. The efforts of our government have consistently focused upon upliftment, empowerment and stability of farmers in the technical, economic and social realm. It is in this endeavour that we continuously explore various methods to achieve ecologically sustainable and economically viable methods.

Natural farming is one method that holds potential to realise all these goals. It is backed by our rich traditional knowledge, and is a practice of agriculture that is based on locally available resources, which makes it a sustainable and viable practice. It is a promising agricultural practice that offers many benefits for farmers, consumers, and the environment.

Natural Farming has become an important part of the sustainable agriculture movement, as farmers and consumers seek more environmentally friendly and health-conscious farming practices. Furthermore, it can also promote sustainable livelihoods for farmers and rural communities.

Despite its many benefits, natural farming still faces several challenges. One of the main challenges is the lack of knowledge and skills among farmers, particularly in developing countries. To address this issue, more education and training programs are needed to help farmers learn about natural farming techniques and how to implement them effectively.

CSIM is now coordinating training in natural farming for rural communities where subject specialists are the resource persons. On 25th march, 2023 Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani is recognising Agripreneurs and Farmers who have adopted natural farming techniques with Awards and Fellowships.

The stories of our Awardees and Fellows are featured in this issue.

Read, be inspired!

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

REGENERATIVE FARMING



Natural farming is a practice adopted by our forefathers 60 to 70 years back. The Green Revolution, though a definite need during the great famine, encouraged harmful chemicals as fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, etc.

However, our forefathers did not spend money to get external inputs but used naturally available materials like cow dung, cow urine, green leaves, dried leaves, etc. to enrich the soil which in turn helped growing nutrient rich, natural paddy, cereals, fruits, vegetables, oil seeds, etc. They used bulls to till land thereby not stressing our Mother Earth.

In fact, our Rishi Parashara (father of Vyasa Muni and grandson of Sage Vasishtha) produced a treatise on Plant Science called Vriksha Ayurveda, compiled by Surapala.

We have totally neglected age-old, tested and proven practices and started applying harmful chemicals indiscriminately.

Covid taught us lessons and luckily we started evaluating options to create immunity and eat safe food. In those days, it was 'உணவே மருந்து' but

these days it is "மருந்தே உணவு". How have we degenerated to this lifestyle?

We are exploiting our next generation's natural resources with no regret, try to earn wealth, and in return give them house money, car, etc. This is a disastrous journey. Should we not give them what we inherited as natural resources—which is their real ancestral property and a strong foundation for safe living?

With folded hands I plead with everyone to adopt Natural Practices and encourage Regenerative Farming. It is unethical to leave the next generation high and dry.

Wake up ... Enrich Soil ..Increase Soil Carbon... Optimise Water usage, Adopt Rain Water Harvesting Methods, Utilise low cost Natural, freely available inputs, and produce Safe Food!

Let's march towards regenerative practices and respect Bhooma Devi who gives us abundance.

Pranams to Rishi Parashara!

P.N. Subramanian

GROWING BEYOND PESTICIDES: THE BENEFITS OF ORGANIC FARMING



Agriculture continues to be a way of life for many families. But the changes it has been through as an industry and as a process has influenced the attitude of second generation farmers remarkably.

While it continues to sustain a wide variety of species, sustaining agriculture itself has become extremely challenging due to multiple factors.

Mrs. G. Kirubasankari, Assistant Agriculture Officer, Government of Tamil Nadu, currently posted in Chengalpattu district, opines that all stakeholders—including the farmers and government departments—miss a holistic understanding about the changing patterns in agriculture.

Having served in more than 70 villages across Tamil Nadu, Kiruba has had an opportunity to interact with farmers about almost everything related to farming. “Right from tilling land, sowing and up to harvesting, we officers ensure that farmers receive all kinds of support and services from the Central and State Governments. In this completely field based job, what we get to see is a first-hand account of how farmers perceive agriculture, the way they operate, their attitudes towards farming, and how all of this is received by the next generation,” she says.

Kiruba is aware of the potential of organic farming but is perplexed about how farmers choose to do organic farming for their personal use but load chemicals on the produce that are cultivated for sale. “Why do we even call it organic farming? It is natural farming in true sense and this is why farmers keep it chemical free in the part of the land where they sow crops for their personal use. They are unaware that natural farming cannot be sustained like this,” she laments.

While the struggle for land and water rights is making enough noise, Kiruba feels that land ownership is not a pre-



requisite to be acknowledged as a farmer. “One need not advocate about land rights for lease farmers and farm labourers. Rather, policy makers must be urged to recognise farming skills of landless farmers as well. Promoting their skills in the best interest of livelihood and agriculture in the region must be the guiding perspective,” says Kiruba, who is disheartened at the plight of farm labourers who cannot access any benefit, whatsoever. She hopes that the inclusion of farmers as a beneficiary category who can apply for financial assistance under the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) will be widely defined to include all vulnerable farmers. “In spite of working so hard, they are pushed to penury. This is not only unfair to them but also to those who may aspire to take up agriculture as a full-fledged occupation,” she says.

Enlightening about schemes on agricultural engineering, soil and water conservation, training in agriculture machinery, etc., Kiruba also tries to throw light on the need for real time financial support for farmers. While subsidies do intend to resolve the issue, they are not timed correctly and therefore lose the purpose. Also, some of the schemes that have been understood to be beneficial for farmers

do not even reach them. Propaganda is one thing but what actually benefits the farmers is another. Able to distinguish the two, Kiruba confesses that Agriculture Officers walk a tight rope with a larger vision. “This is why the promotion of organic farming as a trend in social media and promotion of farming by individuals who



crossed the halfway mark in their careers doesn't excite me. They do promote farming but they are not real farmers according to me. Real, full time farmers are innocent, lack awareness and are always struggling. They are the ones who continue to take tough decisions to keep agriculture alive. It is high time policies reflected on their performance. Why can't agriculture be perceived as a performance based occupation?” she wonders.



Farmers' Security is another attribute that has not been prioritized enough by the state. While pension schemes have been in operation, they need to be further strengthened in order to be meaningful. “Many times, we find in the field that what is given is just a token amount. Farmers still take it and government continues to give it, even if the real purpose is not addressed. A thorough contribution audit of all agriculture and farmers' schemes is definitely an impending need to help define the vision,” she suggests.

Agriculture needs to be understood as a life sustaining process and therefore anybody who is interested in cultivating their food must be encouraged. Influenced largely by dynamic factors like weather and climate, agriculture must now be looked at as humanity's responsibility.

“We have different programs under which terrace gardening, nutrition gardens are also being promoted. All an interested individual needs to do is visit the horticulture department, apply and acquire the specific kits and get started. One significant development in the last decade is the simplification of processes and promotion of small scale initiatives that can demonstrate the potential of sustained investment,” she comments.

Shanmuga Priya.T

FASHIONABLY SUSTAINABLE



Fashion industry is one of the top pollutants in the world. From synthetic materials that create toxic waste, to artificial dyes causing water pollution, to fast-fashion piling up on the landfills year after year, the industry is in dire need of change. While the ethical fashion market is steadily on the rise, it still accounts only for a measly 5% (approx.) of the global market.

Cotton, silk, linen, are all commonly known varieties of natural fabric. They are comfortable, luxurious and trendy. However, sustainable they are not. There is excessive usage of chemical fertilizers, artificial dyes and wastage in the production of these fabrics that renders them in a bad light. There is an ongoing quest to identify naturally occurring fibres from plant sources that can also be harvested and processed in a more environment friendly manner. This is where people like Shankar make a difference.

Shankar is the founder of Faborg, an eco-business that manufactures fabric from the wild plants *Calotropis Gigantea* and *Calotropis Procer*. Known in Tamil Nadu as 'Erukam poo', the flowers of the *Calotropis* plant are usually made into a garland, as an offering to Lord Ganesha. Shankar, however, noticed the fine strands sticking out of the pods of the plant and those from within the stem of the plant, and decided to experiment with them.

Shankar hails from a centuries-old traditional weaving community in Tamil Nadu. Mainly weaving silk and occasionally other kinds of fabric, his community has for generations remained committed to their artisanal traditions. So connected is his community's ties to the woven fabric, that Shankar's childhood was filled with mythology, stories of sages who wove clothes for Lord Shiva Himself.

"As a child I grew up listening to these fantastic stories. It turned into a quest of mine, to unravel the mysteries behind some of these mythological stories, which in turn have become part of my very identity," he says.

It was not just the glorious past that Shankar explored. He was also tuned in to the various opportunities and problems in his community. For instance, he noticed there was a simmering discord between the weaving community and the farming community in his region. The farmers, who provided cotton among other things to the weaving community, did not like that the weavers were part of the larger water pollution that was affecting their villages. The toxic dyes that the weavers let out into local canals directly flowed into the irrigation system. This set Shankar on a course of discovering the most holistic sustainable process to produce clothing.

Since starting Faborg in 2015, Shankar has been looking at end-to-end solutions. Identifying the least invasive methods to extract fibre, weave cloth, recycle the residue that gets created in the weaving (fabric making) process, and also identifying ways to create fashionable clothing using natural, non-toxic dyes, attempting overall, to conduct his business in the most environment-friendly way possible. At this point, he has developed 'Weganool' - vegan wool made from the *Calotropis* plant, and 'Arka', a natural insect repellent that is made from the residues of Weganool from *Calotropis* fibre extraction. Arka has been tested and proven to keep agricultural crops, house-plants, and neighborhoods free of insects and pests. It is Shankar's offering of truce to the farming community, to say that he is eager to be a part of the solution.

Newer and more diverse uses for the *Calotropis* plant are showing themselves up, day after day and Faborg is determined to put this plant on the national map. Shankar suggests that if he gets the support he needs, he would utilise wastelands to cultivate the perennial *Calotropis* plant, generate employment for people by the thousands and also help reduce water pollution all over the country. He has even worked out regions that are known for their drought-like conditions where *Calotropis* can thrive.

At the heart of Faborg is Shankar, whose maverick ideas

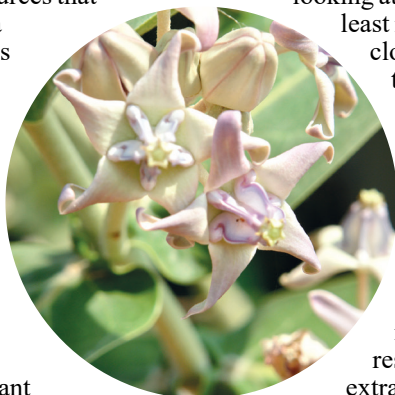
keep him busily working, testing his own inventions and understanding governmental regulations (which are many) surrounding his business. Having previously worked in the high-fashion industry, he now runs a pilot unit just outside Auroville in Villupuram District, Tamil Nadu. His wife Elen works right alongside him, helping him out in every way in this journey. An Estonian by birth, Elen met Shankar at a small get-together at a mutual friend's place. They soon fell in love and got married. Elen left her high-flying sales career back home in Estonia in USA to live with Shankar in India to work for the Mother Earth. "We are constantly working together, day and night. We have this amazing energy between the two of us," says Shankar, "There is no decision I would make without first running it by Elen."

Faborg has earned clientele both from India and outside. Their clients include on the one hand, fashion boutiques that are happy to use Faborg's Weganool- vegan wool, and on the other, local farmers who rave over the efficacy of Arka- the pest-repellant made from the Weganool residue. Shankar is excited for the times to come. He is gradually looking to expand his small but mighty team. He feels especially protective of the farming community around him who have supported his Arka-pest-repellant even through the challenges of the ongoing pandemic.

"I want Faborg and the principle behind my eco-business to live on long after I am gone. I wish to keep all my knowledge open and available for the taking. At the same time, I'm wary of people who may want to tamper with the processes I have painstakingly developed. Weganool and Arka are mutually complementary products. In order to be sustainable, they both must be part of one larger process. Just this past year the government has announced a list of 10 natural dyes that can be derived from local plant sources. This opens up a whole host of opportunities for us" says Shankar, who has already begun working with natural dyes for Faborg.

"Innovation should not be restricted to just the crème de la crème of society. With just a little cooperation between stakeholders, even a plant growing in the wild can serve as a consummate solution to several problems." he adds.

Archanaa Ramesh



BETTER FARMING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

The farmer community has been under the spotlight in the recent past thanks to several reforms in the sector, including the introduction and discussion surrounding farm laws. In this time, there have also been several challenges that the community has had to contend with, including climate change, drought, irrigational vagaries and legislative complications. However, through this all, the FPO or FPC system has benefited several farmers and has become a model for discussion.

For the uninitiated, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) or Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) refer to a collective of farmers or primary producers of food grains that forms a platform, which in turn gives these producers direct access to markets and government schemes like the Public Distribution System (PDS) or MNREGA. Along the way, other benefits like fair prices and hassle-free operations have also come about through the FPO/FPC model.

“Women farmers who are part of the FPC get better income in three ways – fair market prices, hassle-free farm gate pick-up and the supply of organic manure which creates a poison-less eco-system,” says Mr. Ganesan Arunasalam, CEO, SPD Women Farmer producers Company, Coonoor, The Nilgiris promoted privately by Rural Development Organization (RDO Trust) and currently acting as a Resource Institute, supported by Water Energy For Food (WE4F) - a CSR project funded by USAID.

He explains: “Fair prices come about because there are no commissions at the Mandi level or costs incurred by way of loading and unloading produce and the hassle-free farm gate pick-up saves us transport cost.” Ganesan has a point. A number of farmers have seen costs go up thanks mainly to the Mandi system, which sees middlemen fix prices for their produce. Despite minimum support prices, the fact remains that commissions often end up eating into farm incomes. Add to this, farmers incurring costs by way of transportation and wastage that occurs during the process of transportation, and the FPO system makes sense.

However, this doesn't change the fact that FPOs face challenges too. For instance, input costs continue to remain high and climate change continues to weigh in on agricultural activity as a key determinant of output. But there are other factors too. “Many times, we are not supported with fair market prices (MSPs) and post-harvest wastage continues to remain a factor,” Ganesan says, “Several farmers are also unaware of value-additions by way of products, and do not practice crop rotation or multi-cropping, and choose to be carried away by market demand.”

Over the years, farmers from the collective have slowly but surely addressed these problems and worked towards a solution that is not only acceptable but beneficial to all. “Firstly, we have tried to build a continuous relationship that leads to a trust-based equation that we share with our agricultural partners,” Ganesan explains, “We have also built awareness and have conducted continuous training methodologies on the need for natural farming.”

Further, farmers are also supported through assurances of sales support when it comes to post-harvest products. The fact remains that healthy partnerships with other stakeholders in the agricultural process are the need of the hour, should agricultural activity take on a dimensions of



its own and zoom towards success. However, that doesn't change the fact that factors like climate change continue to wreak havoc on agricultural produce, especially when it comes to small farmers.

“Not just climate change but the overall emergency situation on account of global warming is a factor that could threaten livelihoods of small farmers,” says Ganesan, “Then the availability of resources like water and native seeds, and vagaries in market trends also play a role in turning out to be a risk to the livelihoods of small farmers.”

He believes that the one way farmers can salvage the situation is by turning towards classical practices and methodologies followed by their forefathers. But the fact remains the continuous awareness programmes for farmers is the more important need of the hour. “Another important need is to arrest rural-to-urban migration by extending extra benefits to the rural and farming community,” says Ganesan.

The future for farming is bright thanks mainly to what Ganesan says is an upward curve on many fronts. “We see an upward curve in the present community in terms of

increase in the volume of agricultural land and a lot of social activism in the field of agriculture and farming,” he says, “Organisations are also stepping forward to improve the situation.”

There is no doubt, though, that the role played by corporate social responsibility (CSR) is invaluable in the process of bringing the environment back to normal, which in turn could support farming and its processes. After all, funds are crucial for both climate-awareness and better agricultural practices, and the support extended by corporate enterprises could well be the deciding factor when it comes to determining how they fare and how much success they encounter.

Given the fact that awareness programmes are the need of the hour for farmers, a great deal of funding must also be spent on ensuring the farmers get on board and are sufficiently educated and made aware of important interventions that play a role in ensuring better produce. Education on climate change, crop rotation and multi-cropping is also important.

For the moment, however, just the existence of FPOs/FPCs as instruments of better market reach, lesser input costs and better convenience all-round, has helped farmers reach a new level of doing business with better ease and well-being. This could well help the community achieve better growth and stay in better health for the years to come

Rahul Philip

CELEBRATING NATURAL FARMING

Natural farming is an ecological farming approach where farming system works with the natural biodiversity, encouraging the soil’s biological activity and managing the complexity of living organisms—both plant and animal—to thrive along with food production system. It can be defined as “chemical- free and livestock based farming that integrates crops, trees and livestock, allowing the optimum use of functional biodiversity

Internationally, natural farming is considered a form of regenerative agriculture—a prominent strategy to save the planet. It has the potential to manage land practices and sequester carbon from the atmosphere in soils and plants, where it is actually useful instead of being detrimental.

In India, natural farming has been practiced for centuries, especially in rural areas where farmers rely on traditional methods to cultivate their crops. However, in recent decades, the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides has become more widespread, leading to environmental degradation, soil depletion, and health problems. To address these issues, the Indian government has promoted natural farming as a sustainable alternative to conventional agriculture. In 2015, the government launched the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana, which provides financial support to farmers to adopt natural farming practices. In addition, several NGOs and farmer cooperatives have also been promoting natural farming in various parts of the country.

Natural Farming holds the promise of enhancing farmers’ income while delivering many other benefits, such as restoration of soil fertility and environmental health, and mitigating and/or reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It builds on natural or ecological processes that exist in or around farms. Currently, the acceptance and adoption of natural farming systems are at early stages and gradually gaining acceptance among the farming communities.

MSDS is recognizing Agripreneurs and Farmers engaged in Natural Farming in an event organised on 25th March 2023 at Swami Vivekananda Rural Community College, No. 62, Ganapathi Chettikalam, Keezhputhupattu, Puducherry, 605014. Please join us in this celebration!

Marie Banu



Mahalakshmi is a post graduate in Psychology and worked as an Assistant Professor in Dr. Karthikeyan College of Pharmacy from 1985 to 1989 and at M. V. Hospital for Diabetes from 1991 to 1993.

Her cousin, who was studying in 11th standard, died due to cancer and this affected her very much. She was saddened to note the rise in heart ailments and mortality among youth and learnt that this was majorly due to use of chemicals in food production.

This led her to get trained in natural farming by Shri. Nammazhvar and was associated with his organisation until 2011. In 2010, she returned to her hometown and purchased five acres of land in her husband’s village - Malayan Kulam village of Uthramerur district. Here, she and engaged in organic farming under the guidance of her relative Mr. Rathina Naicker, a 90-year-old traditional farmer. At first,

the villagers mocked at her and did not allow the local people to engage as labourers in her land. But, Mahalakshmi was determined to pursue natural farming. She established International Organic Farmers Foundation and trained over 500 women from Dharmapuri, Salem, Theni, Kambam, Thiruvannamalai and Kanchipuram districts. She also networked with the Agriculture Department in Sri Lanka and conducted training in natural farming for farmers in Batticaloa, Neduntheevu, Mullai, and Arasadi Islands.

Mahalakshmi has won several accolades for her tryst in natural farming. In 2021, The University of Tolosa, Mexico conferred upon her the Doctorate Degree. It is noteworthy to mention The International Women's Organisation's "Best Woman Farmer Award 2020", and the "Singa Penn Award" bestowed by CREST foundation in 2023.



Tmt. Kumari (56) lives in Chennagunam Village at Kandachipuram Taluk, Villupuram. Although she hailed from a family where agriculture was their traditional occupation, she was unaware of farming techniques.

While working as an assistant in Dr. Akbar Ali Private Hospital in Thirukovilur, she met Mr. M.G.Francis Xavier who encouraged her to undergo a training in agricultural practices (உயிர் சூழல்) conducted by Shri. Nammazhvar and organised by LEISA (Low External Input and Sustainable Agriculture).

Later, Kumari worked as a field officer in Village Community Development Trust from 2005 to 2009 and was part of the tsunami rehabilitation programme for affected farmers in Marakanam. She was determined to spread awareness in organic farming and conducted several trainings in Tirukoilur village and its surrounding areas.

As Kumari was volunteering her services, she faced several hardships in managing her family’s economic needs. It was then, social activists Mr. Anand and Mr. Balaji Shankar encouraged her to continue her training and together contributed Rs. 5,000 every month.

Kumari started a seed bank for traditional grains which was not successful due to lack of cooperation from the farmers. However, she was determined to pursue her mission and formed a group of 22 farmers from Arcot, Chennagunam, Karanai and Perichanur areas and trained them through Krishi Vigyan Kendra on manufacturing agricultural products. She also obtained an incentive of Rs.12,500 for each of them. So far, Kumari has influenced over 150 farmers in Villupuram, Dharmapuri, Karur, Kanchipuram and Trichy districts to adopt natural farming methods. She is in constant touch with them and offers advice and guidance whenever required.

Kumari has won the “Progressive Farmer Award” from Coimbatore Agricultural University in 2018. She was also recognized by Lakshmi Organics with “Farmers Award” in 2019.



N. Murugan(49) hails from Pudurchengam Village located in Chengam Taluk, Thiruvannamalai District. He is a Postgraduate in Physics and English Literature, and holds a Master's Degree in Education. From 2000 to 2009, he worked as a PTA teacher at Panaiolaipadi Government High School and from 2009 to 2013 served as Vice Principal at Secondary Teacher Training Institute in Pudupet at Tiruvannamalai District.

Murugan got married in 2006, and was suffering from infertility for over 10 years. He underwent treatment in various hospitals, but to no avail. Instead, he suffered from diabetes as a side effect of the medicines he took. It was at this point in time he decided to engage in social work and joined Kalaimagal Village People's Education Development Foundation as a Project Coordinator.

Inspired by Mr. Nammazhwar's principle that “உணவே மருந்து”, he read his books and

decided to venture into natural farming and consume only food that was organically produced. Fortunately, he had the opportunity to attend a training in organic farming which enabled him to adopt natural farming methods in his two-acre land and produce food for his family’s consumption.

Mr. Murugan is blessed with two sons now. He is also cured of diabetes without availing any treatment. He is now spreading awareness about health benefits arising out of consuming only organic food among his friends, relatives and fellow farmers. So far, he has influenced 20 farmers to adopt natural farming practices.

Murugan also runs a seed bank of traditional paddy varieties and vegetable seeds in his village. At present, he serves as a teacher in Government Middle Schools run by the Forest Department at Melapatu and Puliur. His aim is to create a Farmer Producer Company with 100 organic farming farmers in the Chengam Taluk.



Seenuvasan (36) is an MCA, M.Phil graduate. He hails from Thenalapakkam village in Mailam block in Villupuram district. He was the Head of Computer Department at Indira Gandhi Jayanthi College of Arts and Science for Girls, Tindivanam from 2010 to 2012, and as the Head of Computer Department at Swami Vivekananda Arts and Science College, Villupuram from 2013 to 2016. From 2016 to 2021, he served as an Assistant Professor at Srimateh Sivagnana Balaya Swamigal Tamil Arts and Science College at Mailam.

Mr. Seenuvasan launched an Education Foundation named “எல்லோருக்கும் எல்லாம்” meaning “Everything for Everybody” in 2012 and offered 42 types of vocational training for the youth. Most of the trainers were specially abled. His objective was to make the youth self-reliant once they attain the age of 18 and be capable of meeting their higher education expenses. So far, 614 youth have benefited from this programme.

Youth who were interested in agriculture and agricultural enterprises were provided training in vegetable cultivation, chicken rearing, rabbit farming, etc. Till date, 245 people have benefited from his training.

Realising the fact that many farmers in Mailam were quitting agriculture as they did not get a

good price for their agricultural products, Seenuvasan quit his employment and focused on encouraging farmers to get back to their agriculture.

He formed the Maduram Farmers Producers Association with 289 farmers that was led by youth. The association facilitated online marketing of farmer's products and fetched better revenue than before. This instilled confidence among the farmers.

Seenuvasan is now launching an agricultural training centre in Mailam where he would propagate the techniques of organic farming and conservation of natural resources.



Appreciating his service in the field of agriculture, he has won the "International Development Consultancy and Research Foundation Award in 2013" and "Man of Humanity – India Award" in 2013. He was also honoured with "Outstanding Achievement Award for Young Entrepreneur" by Global Achievers Foundation New Delhi in 2016.

FARM LIVES

Love for nature and passion for farming together have inspired individuals from different walks of life to venture into organic farming. They all look up to mentors who have demonstrated that nature and its cyclic systems are more efficient in adapting to modern requirements. “All we need to give them is space, some room for thought, introspection and execution. Nature finds its way. We only have to overcome the obstacles,” says Mr. Manna Egambaram, who takes pride in being known as the son of a farmer.

Born in Senji, Villupuram, Egambaram grew watching his father struggling with farm loans and low crop yields. Farmer suicides, on the other hand, bothered him much as most of the adults who lost their lives were farmers he knew well. “Why is agriculture, the profession closest to nature, unpredictable and unsustainable? Where are things going wrong? Why do farmers give up?” he wondered.

Egambaram dropped out of College not only due to the dis-interest he had in city life, but for the reason that he was in love with farming and wanted to pursue agriculture. “My heart is here, in our farms. I was associated with Nammazhvar’s ‘உயிர் தூதல் நடுவம் Trust’. The 25 years I spent with this renowned organic farming champion not only inspired me, but also made me realise the magnitude of responsibility I was going to handle very soon,” he adds.

Ekambaram was trained by Shri. G. Nammazhvar in organic farming and now he is into training many farmers across different states in India in this farming technique. He engages in building model farms through participatory learning signifying his approach, which is relatable and

reliable. He explores local herbs and materials to prepare plant and soil tonics, pest repellants, and food for microorganisms in the soil.

Egambaram has also worked with Government departments to promote organic farming among farmers in the State. Under his leadership, his team curated the practical training module for the course on Rural Development Science in Arulanandar Arts College in Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

With financial assistance provided by CSIM, Inba Seva Center and various other organizations and friends, he conducts training and seminars in the name of Shri. Nammazhvar Natural Agriculture Center for farmers in organic farming and develops model farms in Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam, along with HMI, and institution based in Hyderabad.

As Egambaram grew popular, his work in the farms of noted civil servants recognised the leader in him and soon he began to teach organic farming to be as a way of life.

During his early years as a organic farmer, he learnt about CSIM from a friend and is still glad that he made the decision to join CSIM. “I dropped out of Polytechnic because I wanted to live as a farmer.

“I consciously tried to disconnect from city life as I had my own faulty assumptions. CSIM taught me how cities and villages constitute a whole. I began to see the city village interface for what it is and the opportunity it promised for farmers like me. I learnt to see the goodness on all sides and this inspired me to explore farming from a local perspective. I now proudly advocate locally made farm materials fertilisers and pest repellants. I learnt how to promote cultivation of traditional crop varieties,” shares Egambaram, quickly adding that CSIM helped him understand marketing from a social perspective.

An important aspect of Egambaram’s trainings is the inter-generational workshops in community halls where age-old, sustainable land and water use systems are discussed. Facilitating the same, he feels it is also important for farmers to evolve organically. Soon, he helped trainees focus on local crop varieties that had interesting characteristics. For example, Tahabrikshan is a rice variety from Manipur that helps in treating cancer. He cultivated this crop in his farms and also taught the technicalities to 80 other farmers.

“That is how the chain grows,” he says. Sandikar, is another variety native to Ramanathapuram district in Tamil Nadu that helps build immunity and can grow in dry, drought prone areas. “Traditional crops also give more pasture for farm animals. They personify co-existence. There is a lot about tolerance and adaptation that we can learn from plants. All we need are the eyes to see them,” he says.

Egambaram’s passion and work not only inspires other farmers but compels one to question why organic farming is not the common norm. He assures that organic arming will be our future and he will do everything possible in his capacity to make this transition smooth and worthy.

Terrace and kitchen gardens administered by women and children is an incredible testimony to this transition already in place. Compost pits that recycle wet waste from kitchen not only give manure but also show the value of reducing waste. His movement ‘பசுமை இயற்கை விவசாய இயக்கம்’ has been demonstrating the strength behind cultivation of native crops through organic methods using local materials on his 30-acre farm. He has also been producing and selling vegetables, fruits, small grains, pulses, and oilseeds.

“The idea is to show how everything in nature is cyclic and an embodiment of interdependence. We must respect the requirements of plants and fields. Once this mutual bond is in place there will not be any exploitation of resources from any side. Good health is plant and soil’s right too,” he insists.

Shanmuga Priya.T



OVERCOMING THE HURDLES OF ORGANIC FARMING



Latitu
Longi
Eleva

Farming is a tedious process and the decision to choose organic farming methods over chemicals is really a tough one. Farmers are aware of the potential and benefits of organic farming. They do know that chemicals drain the soil of its nutrients, eventually reducing its productivity. Yet, they are not able to easily shift to organic farming. This is because of the hardships they are unable to cope with during the transition period. “The land, soil and crops need time to adapt to new inputs. Farmers need time to learn, prepare and follow organic methods. During this time, they definitely need proper guidance and support services. They cannot afford to miss a yield. For them to take that risk to protect soil and food security, there must be an ecosystem of support services,” insists Mr. N. Sakthivel, an organic farmer from Parameswari Mangalam village in Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu, who overcame all hurdles of transition, one by one.

Sakthivel always loved life in the country side and accepted farming for life as he felt that farming kept him closer to nature. Following his father’s experience and taking cues from emerging trends he did all that was possible to keep his farming activities on. Over time, giving in to use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, he realised an unfavourable change happening. It was becoming difficult to earn the investment he had made, leave alone the profit. Cost of labour and farm machinery increased manifold and he mortgaged his land to manage these costs.

“Although I struggled much, I never thought of giving up on farming. I continued my interaction with different farmers’ groups and this gave me new insights. That is how I started introspecting on natural farming,” he shares.

Sakthivel believed that farmers best learnt from other farmers’ experience. He enrolled in a government exposure cum training program and the interaction with

experts worried him. “Use of chemicals in agriculture was preferred by almost everybody. Hybrid varieties were preferred for the yield they delivered. All these made me feel distant from nature and I began to despise agriculture,” he recalls. In spite of all the confusion, he decided to try farming with reduced dose of chemicals inputs. “Chemicals anyways led to loss so why not try with reduced dosage?” he questions. He also took part in a farmers’ exhibition in Coimbatore but was disheartened to see tractor, motor and fertiliser companies promoting their products. “There was only one small nursery. I felt discouraged,” he says.

Sakthivel’s questions are very much valid as every farmer goes through this phase at some point of time. After all the hardships, when there is no rice inside the husk, it could be devastating. It was such disappointments that pushed him to experiment with organic farming techniques. “We farmers just go and buy chemical fertilisers and pesticides, nobody thinks of brand or quality, as long as we get our yield and returns,” confesses Sakthivel. From such a mind-set it took sheer determination for him to attempt farming with reduced use of chemical inputs and he saw a difference in his yield.

Soon he came to know about Jeeva Sakthi, an organic fertiliser produced and promoted by a Dharmapuri based company. He tried one cycle of cultivation using Jeeva Sakthi and farm waste. But then, he realised that the cost of organic and chemical farming was nearly the same. Sakthivel continued his experiments in spite of his increasing



debts. He adopted principles of both natural and organic farming and there was a rising demand for his watermelons, which were smaller in size than those produced by his counterparts who used chemicals. This surprised him. “The buyer paid a good price and took all my watermelons to Mumbai,” he recalls with delight.

Sakthivel travelled a lot to learn from farmers across states. The next valuable lesson he learnt was about the influence of good water on yields and his trials proved that lake water fetched better yields on his land. He used every piece of information he acquired, and each time his knowledge and wisdom widened. He was now confident to try organic farming on one acre land.

His experience led him to form a Farmer Producer Group where he further delved into farmers’ issues, and became a resource person on organic farming. His association with natural vegetables producer groups and farmer groups who cultivated traditional rice varieties exposed him to newer aspects of organic farming. His yield kept growing and soon, he produced 35 bags of rice from two acres of land. Cultivation of

traditional rice varieties worked very well and the production of organic fertilisers like Panchakavyam and Dasakavyam also picked momentum.

While being a full time farmer, Sakthivel also took time to teach other farmers. He reached out to more than ten villages and trained farmers in availing subsidies under various government schemes. College students also visited his farm and learnt from him about the cultivation of traditional rice varieties. “The most cherished piece of learning is about the difference between organic and natural farming. They are different and are certified separately. Students and farmers are shocked to know that they are different from each other. I now know that I have moved away from chemical farming, trying out organic farming in order to pursue natural farming,” he clarifies.

Sakthivel’s learnings are not only valued within farmer groups. His association with NGOs in the field also led him to a radio channel. His podcasts on ‘உழவன் சக்தி’ radio channel are now listened to by more than 10,000 farmers across Tamil Nadu. He is now engaged in demonstrating the strength of group farming for traditional rice varieties. “All farmers are not the same. There is a sense of insecurity. After all efforts, a farmer told me that he used fertilisers only on the soil but the remaining inputs through out cultivation was organic. They will pass this insecurity too,” says a hopeful Sakthivel.

Shanmuga Priya.T

FARMER TO FARMER, ORGANICALLY

The gender gap in land ownership is both a national and an international concern as data continues to point out that women are less likely to be land holders than men. Irrespective of the reasons, what emerges clearly from this stalemate is the line of obstacles for women farmers. “We are easily accepted as agricultural labourers who work on commands but not as land owners and capable farmers, who can take wise decisions on yield, productivity and farming methods. Situations led me to farming after marriage, but it all started with my husband,” reflects Ms. Manimozhi, Founder of the Vandavasi Organic Farmers’ Group in Thiruvannamalai district, Tamil Nadu.

Hailing from Soraputhur village near Vandavasi, Manimozhi was the eldest among five siblings and therefore her parents decided to get her married early. Married off as a teenager, she took active interest in agriculture with her husband who encouraged her to participate in all activities on their land. “It took me four years to understand rural life. For an amateur teenager who hardly knew if rice grew on tree or plant, first-hand experience in farming was marvelous, to say the least,” she says, adding that she was a fast learner. She also engaged her two children in the process and started managing farm activities efficiently.

“What changed my course was my husband’s demise. As he was an alcoholic, farming gave us the much valuable family time. My children stood by me and we decided to continue to engage in farming. Now that I was completely into agriculture, every aspect became even more clear and I started thinking futuristically. In 2007, I attended a meeting in my village and developed interest in organic farming. While the gender linkages were not so comprehensible to me, organic farming helped me completely focus on land and overcome my personal loss,” shares Manimozhi.

She tried organic farming on 50 cents of her land and the successful yield drove her to try bigger. With a huge debt to repay, her son discontinued studies and both of them built their land from the scratch. “Economic hardships in the family usually force you to stick to chemical methods but fortunately, my son understood my decision and we both worked passionately,” she adds. Despite all the challenges and the criticism, Manimozhi never gave up. Very soon, all her seven acres were farmed organically and she experimented all methods she had learnt.

“Once you go the nature way, there is so much you can do without fear and confusion,” she says. Manimozhi got back to all her contacts from the first farmers meeting she had attended and took guidance from every source possible. She also shared her experiences with others, which in turn encouraged others to stay in touch and learn mutually from these interactions. “Our interests kept each other growing and the help from District Agriculture Department officers increased our



Thanks to CSIM, consumers now know how to get back to us for repeat orders

knowledge. I started seeing the potential of a network and wanted to influence as many farmers as possible to understand organic farming as the best way to replenish land nutrients and improve yields. Land is the mother of everything and we must do what is in our capacity to keep it productive. Organic farming teaches you why it is critical to give natural resources the time to rebuild. One can never regret this decision, I was confident,” says Manimozhi, who faced flak from her family while being hailed as a leader by farmers in her network.

Manimozhi’s perseverance and support from kids encouraged her to widen the network and in every interaction with farmers in different

villages, there were at least two of them who would want to try organic farming like she did.

Vandavasi Natural Farmers’ Group grew bigger and moved far and wide to spread knowledge, share experiences and also provide organic fertilisers, pesticides and other materials for those who wanted to purchase them from Manimozhi. “The scale of farming worked favorably for me. As I started distributing materials, I saw how interactions were the main source of information and learning in many villages, especially for women. I also saw women naturally driven to trying

organic methods. Women saw it simpler, convenient and above all, safer for their families. It was too much to consume but all of it kept me going,” she reflects.

From only four organic farmers, Manimozhi now leads more than 20 farmers and realised the need to work strategically, because no matter what or how much they all produced, organic farmers needed a strong marketing network to ensure their products were not compromised from the price point of view. She worked hard to recognize

correct channels for different products and eventually, she herself was impressed by the presentation of organic products from her farmers’ group.

CSIM helped Manimozhi see things in perspective. “My classes from CSIM made me see my mistakes clearly. I did many things simultaneously, as and when they came up. I had to organise and also do value addition to our products. We are now better equipped to take regular orders and promote our products. We also regularly visit farmers’ festivals like exhibition of rice varieties in Arcot district. We have learnt to identify ourselves with farmers like us. Above all, branding is something we never really thought of. Thanks to CSIM, consumers now know how to get back to us for repeat orders,” she says.

Shanmuga Priya.T

SDG LAB APP LAUNCH

The Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) has developed an app, called SDG Lab, for college students to promote the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and assess their contribution to achieve the sustainable development goals. One of the key features of the SDG LAB app is that it provides users with a personalized dashboard that tracks their progress towards achieving specific SDGs.

Users can set goals, monitor progress, and connect with others who share their interests and objectives. The app also provides users with access to a range of resources and tools, including data and short videos on each SDG, which can help individuals to understand the issues and engage in positive actions. It has the potential to play a significant role in mobilising individuals and organisations to take action towards achieving the SDGs. Moreover, the SDG app can help to create a sense of community among people who share a commitment to the SDGs. By connecting users with others who share their interests and objectives, the app facilitates collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and collective action.

The SDG LAB App developed by CSIM was launched by Dr. Girija Vaidyanathan, IAS (Retd.) at an event organised by M.O.P. Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai on 6th March 2023.

This app is available for download on both iOS and Android devices, and is designed to help individuals and organizations track their progress towards achieving these goals. It also has a short video on each of the SDGs.

The first phase of the App is aimed at College students. They would get a monthly update on their sustainability behaviour pattern and would receive virtual badges for their social performance. The Colleges will receive department-wise quarterly or annual report on their students actions and the SDG alignment pattern of the College. This report would add value for social responsibility reporting of the institution and submitted to NAAC for the National Assessment and Accreditation process.

Marie Banu



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. www.csim.in

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“Our culture and future is agriculture. The whole conscious shift should come from the consumers.”

Dr. C.K. Ashok Kumar shares with Marie Banu his passion for natural farming

Dr. C.K. Ashok Kumar is a multi-faceted personality. An innovator and founder of First World Community, an entrepreneur enablement platform.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. C.K. Ashok Kumar shares with Marie Banu his passion for natural farming.

About your tryst from corporate to agriculture sector?

I come from Cuddalore, a predominantly agricultural district, where most of the farmers are engaged in paddy and groundnut cultivation. My father is a teacher, and I grew up in a 20-acre farm with coconut groves and paddy fields. The Cuddalore belt is known for vetiver farming, and we ventured into the sachet industry where we introduced herbal products like shikakai and vetiver (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*).

We also run C.K. Engineering College in Cuddalore. Realising that many of our students were unemployed, we motivated them to engage in agriculture and initiated Vetiver centre of excellence in our College.

Around this time, I heard about the International Vetiver Conference in Da Nang in Vietnam. I was curious and attended this conference where the World Bank officials and scientists across the world – Thailand, Mexico, Middle East, China and Africa – were present. I spoke about how the impression on vetiver farming has changed over times.

After this, my interest in vetiver farming became stronger. I came back and started reading more on this and its impact on climate change. Vetiver has carbon sequestration factors and can capture more carbon than any other grass and fix it to the roots. The World Bank scientists called it as ‘wonder grass of the world’ and more than 150 countries grow vetiver today and use it for infrastructure development. This was a huge learning for me.

About the impact of Vetiver farming?

Vetiver is the pride of Tamil and a gift to the world. The botanical name *Chrysopogon zizanioides* is derived from the Tamil word vetiver.

Vetiver acts as a natural defence to slow river flow and reduce flooding as a cost-effective means of preventing frequent breaches of river embankments, one of the biggest problems in coastal districts of the state. Its deep roots (two to four metres in depth) bind the soil and prevents erosion. Moreover, when planted in rows to form hedges, the grass slows down water flow by acting as a barrier, thus reducing the erosive power of the deluge.

I started talking about the goodness of vetiver in several forums and how it purifies the soil. We have registered at TNAU and have formed India Vetiver network.

About the farming sector in our country today?

The fact is that a farmer is the most oppressed or a victim of his/her own farming. Many farmers in Tiruvannamalai district ask why they still living in poverty and only few can succeed.

It is sad that many farmers are not able to calculate the profit they earn in farming as they are engaging in this occupation for generations and are not sure of the revenue they generate.

The natural calamities are also a challenge which small farmers face from time to time.

We see a lot of youngsters taking up vetiver farming and natural farming. Weekend farming is now becoming popular. This is in our DNA as agriculture has been our occupation since stone age. We somehow lost our connection with agriculture after the industrial and digital revolution. In fact, many of my IT friends have expressed that their passion for agriculture as they sense more satisfaction here.

As citizens, it is our first responsibility to rejuvenate our soil. The health of the people today is not as it was of our forefathers. Agriculture is taught in Colleges and schools as a separate faculty and so is health. In my view, Agro-health should be the future because everything comes from the soil. It is based on the concept “உணவே மருந்து” If we take care of the soil, our health will be improved. Each one should be able to realise this interlink so that we can work together to create a disease-free world.

About Tamil Organic Farmers association and its activities?

We are the first world community that have launched the ‘தமிழ் ஆர்கானிக் Farmers association’ (THOFA). We conduct a lot of events and awareness programmes to encourage farmers to engage in natural farming that was led by Shri Nammalvar. Our Vision is “நஞ்சில்லா உணவு செய்வோம் நோயில்லா உலகம் படைப்போம்” meaning: TOXIC free food for all; Disease free world.

Through THOFA, we guide small farmers on the government schemes available. Thondaimandalam comprises of 14 districts from Chennai to Cuddalore and Kongu mandalam is from Coimbatore to Erode belt. The current mission is to capacitate farmers to support other farmers.



Sikkim is the first state in India to become fully organic as the government has banned chemical fertilisers. We must emulate the model of Sikkim to go organic in a phased manner.

Please tell us about the impact of natural farming?

It was due to famine our country started using chemical fertilisers as part of Green Revolution led by Shri. M S Swaminathan. It refers to a period when Indian Agriculture was converted into an industrial system due to the adoption of modern methods and technology such as the use of HYV seeds, tractors, irrigation facilities, pesticides and fertilizers. This has made our land infertile.

Today, people do not having the vigour and vitality as before. We see a lot of infertility clinics mushrooming in our cities as their ability to reproduce is affected due to the quality of food they consume. Fertilisers and chemicals affect the micro nutrients of the soil.

What is the way forward to ensure productivity in agriculture?

Collective farming is the way forward as it is not successful when marginal farmers engage individually. Traditional farming practices needs to be relooked and there should be marketing support and Value addition given to those who engage in collective farming.

I believe that farmers can easily earn Rs. 50,000 a month and this should suffice to maintain their family. The fact is that the middlemen who earn more than farmers and this is the reason for farmers to remain in abject poverty.

The Amul revolution model by Dr. Cherian had 30 lakh dairy farmers collectively involved. We are in touch with these farmers and through THOFA are now looking at adopting this model and providing a marketing channel for collective farming so that many

thousands of farmers will be benefitted.

Israel is a small country with less water resources, but is a world leader in agriculture and uses a lot of technology in agriculture. In our country, we have many farmers who have drones and they also lease it to small farmers. IOT (Internet of Things) based agriculture is coming up and modern factory equipment with Japanese support is gaining popularity.

The future is for agriculture. The whole conscious shift should come from consumers. They should motivate their children to engage in agriculture. Capturing the trend, Gujarat was the first to launch an Organic Agricultural University (GOAU) University.

Shri. Shubash Palekar, an Indian agriculturist like Shri. Nammalvar, has practiced and wrote many books on Natural Farming and is successful in Maharashtra. He talks on natural farming or zero budget farming. We have invited him to talk to our farmers and youngsters in a workshop planned by THOFA in Chennai in April 2023.

We are working closely with Agricultural institutions, food industries and the Government to promote sustainable farming practices to help in empowering the small and marginal farmers.

The awareness and consumption of organic food has been globally increasing. India has 4.72 million hectares under organic certification. It has been estimated that the Global sales of organic food and beverages reached USD 180 billion in 2021. The main reason behind this sales is growing awareness about the health benefits of consuming organic food. This trend is likely to continue at a compound annual growth rate of 13% till 2030 and reach a level of USD 500 billion.