

NREGA – bringing hope to small farmers

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Sadashiva (33) from Kottagaranahalli of Magadi *taluk* close to Bangalore is an organic farmer and cultivates grains, fruits and vegetables with the help of organic pest control methods and inputs prepared on-farm. He converted to organic farming from conventional farming in 2004 and his 3.5 acre farm is currently completely organic.

Sadashiva's farm gives him good yields and contributes significantly to the food security of his family. Additionally, it has also become home to a near-extinct variety of a sweet pulpy banana called *madarangi*. This variety of banana is said to be rich in medicinal properties and the weight of each banana occasionally goes up to ½ kg.

He says, "Organic farming has worked well for me and is cheaper than conventional farming. In the initial years after converting, I had reduced yields, but gradually, by stopping the use of chemicals, the fertility of the soil has improved and my yields have increased." Sadashiva has now begun propagating organic farming to other farmers of his village.

On the other hand K. Chikkanna (66) who owns four acres of land in the same village and practices conventional farming has a tale of woe to tell. In the mid 70s, which saw the Green Revolution at its peak, his land yielded record crops and he also won accolades from the Department of Agriculture of the Government of Karnataka. Thirty years down, Chikkanna is struggling to repay debts he has incurred to pursue chemical intensive farming as his yields have shrunk and the fertility of his soil has decreased. Chikkanna says, "Overuse of chemicals on my farm has resulted in loss of soil fertility; earthworms and other beneficial insects have disappeared, and my family is battling with numerous health problems."

Chikkanna is however apprehensive of converting to organic agriculture as it is labour intensive. "We know that chemical farming is harmful for us and for our soil. It has also left me with debts instead of prosperity. But what alternative do I have? Organic farming involves generation of on-farm inputs and a lot more work. Rural people are giving up agriculture and have started to migrate to urban areas. This has resulted in an acute shortage of agriculture labour," he says. "Organic farming yields results slowly and we do not have the time to wait as we are small farmers who depend on our farms for our livelihood. There is a desperate need for new measures by the government to address the problems of farmers."

Two voices, two farming systems and two diametrically opposite impacts...

Background

Nearly two thirds of India's population is engaged in agriculture and around 80 per cent of Indian farmers have landholdings of less than two hectares. India also has a rich tradition of farming, where farmers put their landholdings to optimum use by using traditional seeds saved at the household level, and used nutrients from inputs produced on the farm. This accounted for almost zero-expenditure farming, and gave them year-round food and nutrition security.

The farming systems that farmers practiced in



the past were benign to the environment as they used no chemical inputs and integrated annual crop plants, perennial trees and animals, thus maintaining a balanced eco system.

There are still thousands of farmers in every region of India who practice organic farming and get sustainable high yields on their farms. For crop nutrients, they depend on plant biomass and ferments using small quantities of animal droppings. But they are in the minority as more and more farmers have eschewed their traditional methods and converted to hybrid seeds, which demand the use of chemical fertilizers.

Excessive and inappropriate use of chemical fertilizers has down the years destroyed soil health and biological fertility rendering it less productive and rendered farmers vulnerable to instability and indebtedness. Small farmers are now in a situation where their cost of production is more than their returns.

Valid concern

Despite the benefits, the younger generation of farmers are hesitant to convert back to more sustainable farming systems as they have lost the traditional knowledge and the expertise of their elders. There is the additional apprehension that organic farming is labour intensive. While it is true that organic farming involves more work, it is also true that this is only in the case of lands that have been rendered infertile through the use of chemicals. Once the soil has been brought back to a living entity, labour requirements become less. (Reclaiming Earthy Smells and Livelihood – Svaraj experience, L.C Nagaraj. Living soils, Leisa India, June 2008)

Cherkady Ramachandra, a renowned organic farmer from Cherkady village in Udupi district, also considered the pioneer of the SRI method of paddy cultivation in India, provides testimony for this, “I have been practising organic farming for the past 30 years. The soil on my farm is fertile and needs no extra care. I use minimal quantities of compost, as the biomass I have on the farm is more than enough. My son and I

Excerpts from the NREGA:

... Section 13 of NREGA makes the Panchayats at district, intermediate and village levels the principal authorities for planning. The process of planning as laid down under the Act gives under Section 16 of the Act, the power to make recommendations on the works to be taken up under NREGA to the Gram Sabha and the power to prepare a development plan comprising a shelf of projects on the basis of these recommendations of the Gram Sabha to the Gram Panchayat...

... Generally, a District Perspective Plan will have the following features:

- a) Village-based: with the village as the unit for planning;
- b) Holistic: attempt to cover all aspects of natural resource management along with socio-economic infrastructure requirements so as to identify all critical aspects of development in the local area...

... The intention of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is to provide a basic employment guarantee in rural areas. The Act indicates the kinds of works that may be taken up for this purpose. As per Schedule I of the Act, the focus of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) shall be on the following works:

- (i) Water conservation and water harvesting;
- (ii) Drought proofing, including afforestation and tree plantation;
- (iii) Irrigation canals, including micro and minor irrigation works;
- (iv) Provision of irrigation facility, plantation, horticulture, land development to land owned by households belonging to the SC/ST, or to land of the beneficiaries of land reforms, or to land of the beneficiaries under the Indira Awas Yojana/BPL families.

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maintain our five-acre farm with just two hours of work everyday.”

Be that as it may, if larger numbers of small farmers have to be brought back into the fold of organic farming systems, they need motivation and support. Governments have supported chemical farming systems for over three decades, having made huge investments in this area. Enormous amounts of money have been spent on research. Chemical fertilizer manufacturers are heavily subsidised.

A case in point is urea, which costs Rs 26,000 per tonne, but is supplied to the farmer at Rs 4380 per tonne. These subsidies have not helped the farmer, thereby indicating that chemical farming is not a sustainable and viable option



either for them or the state. If similar funds were allocated for creating facilities and policies for production of inputs by farmers on their own fields, it would reduce costs of production, substantially increase net incomes and help them repay their debts.

What can be done

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) provides just such opportunities. It has a mandate to

Appiko

A hug in time

Dr.Sudhirendar Sharma

guarantee 100 days of labour in a financial year to those registered under it, under various categories such as natural resource management, drought proofing, water harvesting and conservation, afforestation and tree planting, and horticulture activities. In reality however, what it has actually done is to convert farmers to road layers and construction labour owing to limited interpretation and short sighted applications of the Act. This is not only an unsustainable means of livelihood, it also strips them of the dignity they have as farmers and suppliers of food for the nation.

Manohar Dronagiri, a farmer in Doni village in Mundargi taluk of Gadag district says, “The NREGA has broad implications, which can be used for the benefit of farmers, small or big. It is up to the village panchayat to prepare need-based, work plans in consultation with the community for each year. These can be within the framework of the Act and still include activities that can really help farmers.”

An example he quotes is that the Act allows for natural resource management. Interpreted properly, this can help farmers to be employed for 100 days to rejuvenate the soils on their own farms by building farm ponds, collecting biomass for the farm and get paid for it. Dronagiri speaks from experience as he has used the Act for horticulture activities on one hectare of his farm. The NREGA also provides for material costs, besides wages and this has helped him to plant 300 sapota trees in his farm.

Mr S.M. Patil, President, Doni village panchayat observes, “It is not possible to keep building roads year after year. We need other activities which can provide the required 100 days of labour to our people. That is why we have contacted all the concerned departments, such as horticulture, forest etc and included their schemes into our yearly work plans. This not only gives opportunities for steady work, it also contributes to the progress and development of the entire village and community.”

Mr S.B. Revanna, Executive Officer of Mundargi taluk panchayat says, “The NREGA gives guidelines, which need to be interpreted according to local requirements.” He draws an evocative parallel, “The Act is as versatile as rice. You can either eat it bare or make *pulao* out of it. It is a question of interpretation, and the interpretation has to be for the overall development of the people. We have given special emphasis to horticulture activities as this area has erratic rainfall and it is difficult for people to cultivate seasonal crops. We also make special efforts to promote organic farming systems.”

It is obvious that the NREGA can be used to benefit farmers and what is more, bring them into the fold of organic farming. It just needs more proactive planning on the part of panchayats while preparing their annual work plans.

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It was 25 years ago this month when villagers in Karnataka undertook an eight km trek to resist massive tree felling at the Kalase forests. In today's milieu, the Appiko movement is facing fresh challenges.

If your journey along the west coast still remains picturesquely green, thank the chants that had rented the air of this region 25 years ago, and which seemingly echo even today. Chanting the Kannada slogan of *Ulisu, Belasu and Balasu*, meaning 'save, grow and sustain', the forest-loving people of Uttara Kannada - the most green district in the country - stood up against the tyranny of the state that was clearing the native forests to pave way for monoculture plantations.

The 25-year-long journey

History was created on 8 September 1983 when people from villages around Salkani in Uttara Kanada district undertook to resist massive tree felling operations underway at the Kalase forests. Hordes of men and women laid seige to the forest over the next three months, hugging the trees and forcing the perpetrators with little option but to make an unceremonious exit.

The news spread fast, catching the imagination of forest dwellers across the state in Kodagu, South Kanara, Chikamagalur and Shimoga districts. Appiko, meaning 'hug the trees', soon became a potent expression to counter violence against nature, reflecting empathy towards forests. “It seems a cosmic force was fuelling indelible energy into each of us,” recalls M N Mableshwar of Gubbigadde village in Sirsi.

The villagers of Gubbigadde and Balegadde, who were the first to lodge a formal protest against clear felling wonder if Appiko could have found a better home than Uttara Kannada. Called the 'forest' district, this region had an impressive 82 per cent of its geographical area under forests in 1950, earning the tropical evergreen forests in the Western Ghats the distinction of being one of the 16 global biodiversity hotspots in the world.

Despite hailing from the 'forest' district himself, the then Chief Minister of Karnataka Ramakrishna Hegde took six years to withdraw the timber concessions given to forest based industries and impose a moratorium on felling