

Unleashing Entrepreneurship

A woman shows the way



Photo: Author

Janaki displaying mushroom harvest

Mushroom production is an untapped potential source of employment and income in Kerala. Janaki who has established herself as an enterprising entrepreneur in mushroom production is now a role model for several unemployed youth.

G S Unnikrishnan Nair

Janaki is one of the largest individual producers of mushrooms in the state of Kerala in South India. She was recently honored by the National Mushroom Research Center at Solan as one of the best mushroom farmers in the country. The success story of Janaki, residing in Trivandrum district of southern Kerala has motivated many youngsters who wanted to be on their own.

The journey of Janaki started in the year 1998, when she was looking for alternative income generation options after quitting her job in a private agency. Having a zeal to take up self employment, she toyed with idea of taking up mushroom production, which was just picking up in the state. She participated in the training programme of Kerala University on mushroom production.

In 1999, Janaki started mushroom cultivation on an experimental basis. She started off in a small room with 10 mushroom beds.

The mushrooms started growing and were ready for harvest by the twentieth day. She could harvest till one month and each bed yielded up to 800 grams. The harvest of the first year was used for the family and was also shared with relatives and friends.

Expanding the enterprise

Gradually, Janaki expanded the number of beds and tried to sell the harvested mushrooms. But, in Trivandrum mushroom was not a very popular dish. Only the upper class in the society enjoyed mushroom dishes. Common people were not used to eating mushrooms and were of the opinion that they were poisonous.

Mushroom was more used by high-class hotels. These hotels were using button mushrooms (*agaricus species*). Oyster mushroom (*pleurotus species*) which is a very tasty mushroom and which grows well in tropical climate was unknown to them. They were of the presumption that button is the tastiest mushroom and good dishes can be made only with it. Janaki approached the hotel managers and explained the benefits of oyster.

Janaki went to Bangalore, a metro city in south India, and discussed with an executive chef of a five star hotel who was an expert in oyster mushroom dishes. She learnt several good recipes from him that could be made from oyster mushrooms. Back in her hometown,

she made some oyster dishes and supplied free samples of these dishes to two hotels. Convinced with the taste and cooking quality of oyster mushroom, the two hotels placed orders. Janaki supplied oyster mushrooms at rupees 100 a kilogram, while the button mushrooms were selling for rupees 200 a kilogram. Gradually 20 other hotels and clubs placed orders. With increased demand and by raising a bank loan, Janaki expanded mushroom production to 3000 beds. She rented a new building and employed 6 youth. She could supply 30 kilograms a day.

Janaki started to popularize mushroom among common people. With the help of residential associations, she conducted exhibitions in various residential colonies in the city. In these exhibitions she supplied mushroom dishes like mushroom soup, mushroom pickles, mushroom cutlets and raw packed mushroom at nominal cost. She also participated in state level flower shows and agricultural exhibitions. Her product name “Swadishta Mushroom” (Swadishta meaning tasty) became popular.

Janaki also expanded her enterprise to include mushroom seeds (spawn) production. She converted a room in her house into laboratory with the required equipment. 600 packets of mushroom spawn is being produced every month.

Finding low-cost local solutions

During summer month production of mushrooms reduced owing to the increased temperatures. Meeting client’s requirement became difficult. To overcome this problem, Janaki started growing plants on the roof to reduce the temperature effect on mushrooms. She erected a green house on the roof top and started growing about 1000 anthurium plants in pots. These plants were irrigated daily. This in turn reduced the radiation of heat from the roof. Besides reducing heat, anthurium flowers also fetched an additional income.

As the mushrooms were grown on paddy straw, there was a lot of waste generated. The mushroom bed waste was being made into compost by open aerobic method. As compost making by this method generated foul smell, Janaki started preparing vermicompost from the bed waste. By vermicomposting, the problem of smell and time for composting was reduced drastically. She also started treating the bed waste with Effective Microorganisms (EM), which proved to be very effective in hastening composting. The compost made by this process was of excellent quality and gained good demand. As vermicompost had good demand with urban farmers she could sell a packet of 2 kgs for rupees 10. She also sold earthworms for those in need of them for a price.

Spreading far and wide

Janaki became a known person among farmers. Two newspaper reports on her activities appeared in local dailies which made a tremendous impact. About 2000 persons, mostly un-employed youth, contacted her seeking self-employment potential in mushroom farming. Owing to the demand, Janaki started conducting training classes. Around 1000 of the trained persons took up mushroom production. Janaki also helped some of them in marketing their produce. She also formed a state level

“Mushroomers Club”. Presently, around 2000 people are members of the club.

Today, Janaki is not only a self reliant successful woman, but is also helping many youth in making their living. She is a source of inspiration for many around her.

Janaki says, *“I feel great satisfaction and happiness to be able to stand on my own feet and earn something for my family. Moreover, I could be of help to many unemployed youth in finding a livelihood. I could teach my two children the principles of entrepreneurship. Overall it is the wholehearted support of my husband and gods’ grace”*.

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Themes for LEISA India

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Finance and transition to sustainable farming

Farmers need timely access to finances to meet their farm needs. For small farmers, it continues to be difficult to access credit facilities through the formal banking system. They depend on informal forms of credit, for instance provided by local money lenders. Interest rates are generally high. We also know that, often, they are the only sources accessible in rural communities – even influencing the choices and decisions of farmers. Often, these farmers are caught in fragile eco-systems where the risk is high too.

Over the past decade, many innovative micro finance facilities have been emerging. Many groups of small farmers and landless people, notably women are reportedly benefiting, though not to the extent and scale desirable. But, it is always challenging to get the amount of credit they need at an affordable rate, also, at the time when they need. However, we are coming across interesting examples of proactive efforts being made by Financial institutions and Non-banking financial institutions to innovate with new models to address financial inclusion.

Farmers who are interested in making a transition from highly chemicalised agriculture to eco-friendly alternative agriculture need support. Also, they need the ‘transition’ financing too. The present mainstream systems are not geared up enough to meet these needs.

In this issue we would look forward to readers sharing their experience of alternative working models – involving both alternative institutional as well as mainstream financial institutions. These stories could be successes as well as challenges. We are also interested in experiences highlighting the transition efforts as well as realistic time frames.

Please send us your articles to the Editor at leisaindia@yahoo.co.in

Deadline for submission of articles - May 15, 2010