This site contains all of Fountain Ink's articles and photo stories published since our launch in November 2011. At this time, however, the site contains only limited number of photographs for articles older than January 2016. The process of migration is ongoing, and we will notify you once it is complete.

Reportage

Back to the roots

They quit jobs and left cities to become the new farmers of today.

Agriculture • by GBSNP Varma • Feb 15, 2018

Bharath Varma Chiluvuri wanted to get his hands dirty. He wanted to figure out farming. He was a greenhorn. He wandered around his family farm of 20 acres, paddy and coconut, feeling the dirt, following the

astringent spoor coming off it. He spent his time by the little pond filled with stagnant water. He capered with and fed *desi* cows and a little lamb.

By the side of the river Gautami—a tributary of the Godavari—that encircles the island of 13 villages in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh like palms in *namaskaram*, his family's farm in Kesankurrupalem has always been fertile.

He first heard of organic farming at Hyderabad-based Ekalavya Foundation that helps marginalised sections earn livelihoods. The foundation offers a diploma in organic farming through its Ekalavya Centre for Organic Agriculture, Research and Training (ECOART). Bharath would volunteer in educating children in slums, one of the foundation's activities.

His family had land but was buying rice from outside. Their land was leased to a tenant farmer. It didn't help that his father fell sick and had to undergo three surgeries. He wanted his family to eat healthy food, not grain grown with pesticides and fertilisers. He knew nothing about how to do it. He picked the brains of older organic farmers and religiously read *Prakriti Vyvasaya Vachakam* (Primer of Natural Farming). Farmers advised him to try one acre first, and learn from it. So he put in green manure, prepared concoctions and fertilisers with cow dung and urine and various leaves and applied it in his field.

It was hard to convince his parents, who wanted him to work in a "real job". As a last resort, they asked him to hold a job till he got married because nobody would want their daughter to marry a farmer. Relatives, friends and well-wishers dissuaded him. In villages where everybody's business is everybody else's business, people mocked him.

> *"Although I knew nothing about agriculture, I had wanted to do it since my childhood."*

He was under pressure to prove that he could do natural farming and grow food. In that kharif season in 2014, heavy rain lashed these parts and flooded the fields. All the fields in his village were inundated, and for more than ten days water stagnated in the fields due to poor drainage. The crop in all fields rotted. "There was anxiety as to what would happen," Bharat says. At his one-acre test patch, however, the crops withstood the standing water. They eventually yielded 20 bags of 75 kg paddy each, while the others were left with nothing.

People noticed that, and word spread.

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Before all that he was a boy boarded up in residential schools since childhood, a teenager who studied in cities, completed a degree in electrical engineering in another city and worked in Pune as a junior engineer for one-and-a-half years making good money. The thing he set out to do in 2014 seemed overwhelming and exciting.

"I was away from home all my life. I wanted to come back to my village, be with my parents and take care of them, and do some business or something," says the 29-year-old says. "Although I knew nothing about agriculture, I had wanted to do it since my childhood."

Bharath Varma Chiluvuri gave up his job in Pune to farm his ancestral land in Telengana's East Godavari district. Photo: GBSNP Varma

Bharath is one of a minuscule number of young, educated, perspicacious people attracted to farming. These people—educated and brought up in urban and semi-urban settings—are choosing small-scale farming over other opportunities available to them, mostly out of a desire to reconnect with nature and the land. The slow-growing popularity of natural farming—in addition to the constant drumbeat of all-around environmental degradation, climate change, disconnect with how and where food is grown and consumed, resulting in ill health—is triggering interest in small-scale natural farming.

Anecdotal evidence suggests Kerala tops the list of returnees, with Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu following. In north India too,

there is a silent, small minority doing it.

> *Most are in it by choice, not by inheritance. Some are in it for the alternate lifestyle; some are inspired by the environmental and land ethic; some are in it to solve their existential problems of "powerlessness and meaninglessness". Some are in it because that's what they always wanted to do, finding personal nirvana on land.*

Most are in it by choice, not by inheritance. Some are in it for the alternate lifestyle; some are inspired by the environmental and land ethic; some are in it to solve their existential problems of "powerlessness and meaninglessness". Some are in it because that's what they always wanted to do, finding personal nirvana on land.

Going back to the land is not a new idea. It has been around in the US for half a century. During the Vietnam war, many college educated young people went back to the land. It's another matter that not all of them succeeded. It was there in Europe even in the 19th century. Some people in China are going back to the land, in their response to loss of villages (according to reports, 300 villages vanish every day in China) and increasing gentrification. It's interesting that the idea has come up in India. What's more, these people are returning to do physical work, while the rest want to be as far from it as possible.

Although very niche, these young people are at the forefront of an unheralded yet important undertaking, at the cutting edge of changes that might follow. They might just be harbingers of a revolution. In a way, it also shows a change in how we perceive time, its cyclical nature—historians like Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler stressed the cyclic nature of history, and were influenced by Indian scriptures and the *Puranas*—in contrast to the view that times progresses in a straight line. It also differs from Will Durant who had not considered pastoral life as contributing to civilisation, though the best of Indian thought came out of a pastoral life.

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Things that were until recently considered anachronistic and old-timey can sometimes become hip again. "Leaving a city to go in for farming and for doing the physical work yourself seems like a romantic idea. But I think one way to succeed could be to concentrate on organic farming and sell the produce to customers in the middle class who are willing to pay higher prices for healthier food," says Mark Lindley, an ecological economist who is now serving as a visiting professor at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University.

Ecological economics deals with the capacity of the earth to supply us with materially valuable goods and services: decent weather and fertile soil, breathable air and drinkable water and the ores from which we get economically valuable minerals.

Lindley grew up mostly in Washington DC, but spent his summers feeding the animals on a family farm. He got interested in India when he was ten

years old. His father was a journalist who attended the inauguration of the Indian Republic and came home saying that India had "leapt ahead of us" on the road to social reform by having in its national cabinet an untouchable—Ambedkar. Lindley recalls, "I thought: 'If they have leapt ahead of us, I should go and see.'" He first came to India in 1994. A year later, he read Gandhian economist J.C. Kumarappa's *Economy of Permanence* and got interested in economics.

He says, "India can't afford to import a large part of the nation's food on top of importing most of the petroleum and petrol that is converted into smoke and ashes making the monsoons misbehave."

To make matters worse, India's population is projected to reach 1.5 billion by 2030, according to UN's 2017 Revision of World Population Prospects. Macro economically, Lindley says, it's India's farmers who have to feed India's people.

"I think Indian agriculture should go in for an evolving mixture of technological improvements (like more drip irrigation and solar panels) and 'romantic' aspirations to undo the damage done by the Green Revolution."

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Saraswati Kavula was many things before she ended up as a farmer in Nandiwanaparthy village in Rangareddy district of Telangana. She was a journalist, documentary filmmaker, environmental activist, and also had a short stint in the corporate world.

After completing her studies in filmmaking from Salford University in

Manchester, she came back and pursued a career in cinema and documentary. But after a couple of years, she chose to go into documentary work and continues to make documentaries. Oriented towards the environment since her school days, she was naturally attracted to filmmaking about ecologically sustainable alternatives. And a major part of her films were on farming, farmers' suicides and related issues. This has given her a deeper understanding of the agrarian crisis and she felt the need to go back to the land, not only to sustain our natural resources but also to work at alternatives.

Saraswati (third from left) holds frequnt talks and discussions with people in the village to adopt natural farming.
Photo: Special arrangement

Her experiences convinced her that “what we need is de-urbanisation and localisation of economies, rather than governments driving people away from rural areas to cities and launching big projects, which displace people and dismember communities”.

In her work as an activist and documentary filmmaker, she witnessed entire communities disturbed and frayed; uprooted from their land, disentangled from their roots and driven to hunger and malnourishment.

“In the last 25 years of liberalisation, all that we have seen is large-scale destruction in the name of development,” she says in a phone conversation.

“Our governments talk of projects that are resource-intensive”, she continues, “even when we don’t have that kind of resources in this country”.

For Saraswati, the farm is a form of protest against the land-grab the governments engage in, a field of individual responsibility to mitigate changes in climate, a refuge from degradation and pollution of the environment, and a sanctuary for tying the day-to-day economy with ecology.

Though she was convinced that organic farming was the way forward, being brainwashed by the “green revolution” concepts, she was not sure if organic or natural farming could create enough food for all the people in the country.

However, a chance to attend a five-day workshop by Sundar Raman Iyer on natural farming at his ancestral farm in Sathyamangalam triggered the

confidence that natural farming is the way forward. Iyer is a farmer in Sathyamangalam town in Erode district, Tamil Nadu. He went into farming without looking for jobs after completing a diploma in electrical engineering. He inspired thousands of people to take up organic farming in different states.

In the beginning, she didn't feel confident enough to move to a village. It was her farming guru P. Kishan Rao who inspired her. After a masters degree from the Mangalore Institute of Technology and Engineering in the 1980s, Rao left a career in engineering and took up farming on his ancestral land. So going to a workshop with Rao and others to Sathyamangalam and after seeing the results that Sunder Raman Iyer managed to get with natural farming convinced Saraswati that this was what she wanted to do.

However, the transition took time. At first, she tried to work on leased land in Khammam district in Telangana, but realised that to make any kind of long-term impact, one had to have one's own land. So, after searching for a couple of years, she first bought about four-and-a-half acres and later another four acres in Nandiwanaparthy village.

On this land her first experiment involved building a house using local mud and bricks, with some success and some failure. In the seven years of her farming life since 2010, there have been many experiments with the land, with crops, with mixed results.

She gravitated towards permaculture and total natural farming, growing fruit trees, forest trees and medicinal plants, mostly species that require little or no irrigation, on six acres. On two acres she grows rain fed crops

like ragi, bajra, jowar, and red gram, green gram, black gram and oilseeds like castor and groundnuts.

She harvests them and sells them among friends and acquaintances. Breaking even was tough, what with adverse climate, escalating costs of labour, and sometimes farming mistakes. Due to climate change, the yields are coming down, she says, and “you cannot be sure of your produce until it’s in your hand”. But now the farm has come to stabilise and she hopes to make profits. Having a diversity of crops and tree species is the key to maintaining soil health, preserve biodiversity and reduce pest attacks and also have a steady income.

Fortunately for her, she got pristine land, uncontaminated by pesticides and fertilisers, except for one acre where the earlier farmer grew tomatoes. “In the beginning I only grew annuals like pulses and millets, but over time I started planting fruit trees and though they take time, in the long run they will bring good returns. In these days of climate change, trees help in mitigating climate change, while they bring in a steady income in case of crop failures.”

Living in a drought-prone region, she says, “You need to train your trees to survive with less water.” That is why she planted mango, tamarind, kala jamun, amla, which require less water, while using mulch to help the trees retain moisture. In addition, she planted forest trees like Arjuna, Addasara, Jatropa, Pongemia, Soap nut and Tanikaya, while local trees like Neem, Babool, Custard Apple and Ber grow naturally. She plants only dry-land crops like millets and pulses. The key is to grow local species which perform better under these arid conditions.

She is proud to have maintained soil health. “You can make out. Good soil is porous.” All these years of farming taught her many things: dealing with labourers, working with weather such as planting crops when rains arrive, the pace of life on a farm. “You cannot expect quick results on a farm, one has to be patient”.

Transplanting oneself is not easy. “You need to have exposure and experience, working with land and labourers and weather. It’s a trial and error enterprise.”

> *“There is no greater security and no greater satisfaction than living off the land. The future is for those who can live off the land, because this juggernaut of technology-driven, job-oriented economy is going to tank very soon. We are already heading towards that situation. We are seeing that jobs are dwindling.”*

Farming is always better as family farming. Then family members can work on various aspects of farming, getting harvest and selling the produce, with some value additions.

She views farming as a way of living sustainably and also as being able to sustain her. “There is no greater security and no greater satisfaction than living off the land. The future is for those who can live off the land, because this juggernaut of technology-driven, job-oriented economy is going to tank

very soon. We are already heading towards that situation. We are seeing that jobs are dwindling. The depleting natural resources and the escalating global warming are putting our present economy in jeopardy. The time will come when only those with access to land, seeds and natural resources can survive," she says.

"Here, I can grow my own food continuously, because I use indigenous seeds; I have my place to stay and my water resources, hence my basic needs are taken care of. For travel and other expenses I can make do. Most importantly, I don't feel like doing anything other than farming, right now."

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However, farming does not attract young people. "Young people are made to believe that being in a job—as a clerk, as something in an office–just about any blue or white-collar job—is the only dignified way of life."

She reckons farming and doing artisanal work in general is considered low. "People have lost the sense of pride in farming and artisanal work. They do not see that agriculture and artisanal life are more self reliant, independent fields of work where a person's creativity is satisfied while he or she could live according to their time and pace".

Seventy per cent of our people are self-employed, she continues. They are not going with a begging bowl to anybody. If a person has some land, and works on it, he or she has more independence than a typical corporate job holder. They can speak up against unjust governments, while people working under someone can't do so for fear of losing their jobs, especially

if they are working in the government sector.

Saraswati Kavula at her farm in Nandiwanaparthy village. A farm, for her, is a form of protest against the government's land grab. Photo: Special arrangement

She challenges on the farm remain: correct way to grow crops and marketing the produce. With some value addition—making ragi flour, bajra rawa, moringa powder and so on, she believes farming can create

multiple streams of income for sustainable living.

She feels that farmers have stopped thinking on their own and using common sense. They are following each other like a herd. Farmers got accustomed to planting crops and leading lives as their neighbours do. She often pleads with and prods small farmers with half, or one, or two acres to plant different crops, and secure their food first, and sell whatever remains.

"Who stops them from growing their own food in the small plot of land they have? Instead they grow only one crop or two like cotton or maize and then spend a lot of money buying food for their home. Not to speak of money on medical bills. They can have animals; they can grow vegetables, first take care of their food needs and then grow and sell commercial crops like cotton. They can plant curry leaf, they can plant drumstick and sell all of them. With some value addition, they can earn more but they don't do it. "

She believes farming can have other income generation aspects for people. "We can offer farm-tourism where you can home-stay on a farm for a few days unwinding. These things can be done."

"It's satisfying, very much fulfilling, but be prepared to live with less money," she says about her life on the farm. "If you want to live in a big building, own a car, or send your children to international schools, this will not work."

Her life experiences—transiting from the corporate world to cinema and to documentary films prepared her for a simple life.

"If you think you're that you're somewhat less of a human being if you don't have Gucci shoes, then this is not for you. Nature gives us enough to have a comfortable life, but if we think that owning stuff is the only essence of life, then farming cannot satisfy those wants."

At least five, six youngsters in her village have taken up farming, on seeing a city dweller like her farm. Wherever she talks—in colleges, farmers' meets, and activist congregations—she instills the need to go back to a land-based economy.

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Economists say hunting-gathering gave way to agriculture. There is an idea in economics that as countries develop people move from agriculture to industry and then to services. That's how societies go forward.

"Market economists say that just as agriculture became more important thousands of years ago than hunting and gathering, so manufacturing became more important than agriculture in the 20th century. But agriculture is, in fact, always more important than manufacture. You can get on OK with rice and veggies and no shoes, but not with shoes and no rice and veggies," says Lindley.

Moreover, all of India's young people cannot be accommodated in industry. India is way behind China in this. China committed to universal primary and secondary schooling right after the Cultural Revolution in 1967. Also, India doesn't have the experience of Switzerland which rode to fame as an innovative country on the back of precision manufacturing as a cottage

industry (incidentally, they have a strong, enchanting cow culture, and Roger Federer was once presented with a cow for winning a tournament) or of South Korea which rode the microelectronic revolution to middle-income status.

You cannot be a good labourer or worker in industry without good secondary schooling. India went for universal schooling only 20 years ago, and so wasted a vast pool of talent, and hasn't tapped the full potential of her people. It's hard to catch up with China. In addition, China is also an example of how rapid development destroys the environment.

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Endless growth is not possible with finite resources, says George Varghese, who runs an eight-and-a-half-acre organic farm called No Man's Land in the Western Ghats, 16 kilometres from Sirsi town in Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka. Last April, they—Geroge and Susheela Varghese—completed 10 years of farming. Susheela is an architect and did her masters in environment science from the University of Melbourne.

After completing an engineering degree in electronics and communications, he joined the IT industry in 1996 and then moved to the U.S. In 2006, the couple came back to slow down their life, cut down on consumption, and support themselves on the land, grow food and be in tune with nature. George's view recalls what the existential philosopher Kierkegaard said more than 150 years ago: "Of all the ridiculous things the most ridiculous seems to me, to be busy—to be a man who is brisk about his food and his work..."

"In urban living you're surrounded by an artificial environment, all man-made stuff. You don't really know when the sun rises and sets, what phase the moon is in, what season it is," George says.

When they started they thought of giving natural farming a try and continue as long they enjoyed doing it. They also thought if that didn't work out that way, they would try something else. Eleven years on, things have worked out well and they don't feel like doing anything else. They grow rice, sugarcane—they make their own jaggery out of it—banana, turmeric, pepper, mango, cashew nut, and many more. They also offer homestays on the farm for city-slickers.

Geroge Varghese at his farm 'No man's land' near Sirsi in Karanataka. Photo: Special arrangement.

Over the years, their understanding has evolved. "We see it is necessary to actually de-grow. This is for everybody, even for people in cities, in corporate world, not just for us," George says.

"Shrink your carbon footprint because of the changes taking place in the environment and climate." Going back to the land is tough. Those who own family land might find the transition somewhat smoother. To get land and set up a farm takes a lot of capital.

George had the luxury of savings from his corporate job, and the couple bought degraded land. They learnt on the job, without much hands-on knowledge. Their savings pulled them through bad seasons. "That's because how underpriced agricultural produce is in the market. None of the food crops gives good returns for farmers."

Also, land has become a commodity, and speculation is rife. Lots of people own land but don't cultivate; they simply sit on it, driving up prices, George says. Farmers need to be good at marketing their produce directly to consumers, taking away all the layers of middlemen, he adds.

Farming activity runs around seasons and the natural order. With climate change there is no predictability. Risks are higher. George talks of resilience in the face of change.

"We can grow food to support for ourselves regardless of things that happen in the outside world, in global economy. That's the resilience," he says.

Farming, for him, provides a safety-net at the individual level, along with being a profession. He thinks creating awareness about natural farming among young people, farmers and consumers will yield results. He conducts workshops and teaching sessions on his farm. On a recent day, he was busy sprucing up the place to welcome 40 youngsters who would camp there for four days.

George sees a role for them in nurturing the land, and nature to re-grow. "We are stewards of our land, this land that is with us."

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To make farming more attractive for youngsters so that it can be financially viable, change is needed both at the individual and policy levels. Farming and keeping up with the Joneses don't work out.

"Nutrition is more important than keeping up with the Joneses," Lindley says. "The discomfort in India due to its being a crowded country is less on the farms than in the cities. A thing that most villages have, but cities don't have, is more land within walking distance than is needed to feed the local population."

How to use that land agriculturally—crop choice—is the most basic kind of agricultural decision.

Just as financial advisors usually design for their clients a portfolio with a mixture of safe but low-yield and risky but potentially high-yield investments, Indian farmers need a prudent portfolio of crops: some that will do OK even if the monsoon misbehaves, plus some that may with good luck fetch a heap of money, he suggests.

After completing a degree in sociology from Hyderabad Central University, Sharanya Nayak worked as a journalist in the Bhubaneswar edition of *The New Indian Express* for three years. She didn't like journalism so joined ActionAid, and worked with it for 16 years on farming, livelihoods, and forests. She learnt a lot about traditional farming, and in time felt like farming "on my own".

Sharanya Nayak at her farm in Odisha's Koraput district. She practises agroecology, which uses no external input and relies on biodiversity of the land. Photo: Special arrangement

Working with an NGO involved certain limitations and processes and she was a bit tired about that. So, she and her husband who works as a financial officer—he still works in that capacity—bought 11 acres in Koraput district of Odisha in 2007, in an area bordering Andhra Pradesh.

The previous owner used so much fertiliser, pesticide and herbicide that the soil was "rocky, hard laterite soil". For the first two, three years she didn't get anything out of it. She ploughed it, and sowed some millets but the grass dominated. Later she built an adobe home for herself and two tribal families, planted trees and cover crops. In 2015, she quit her job and with her savings constructed a meeting place, cattle shed and living quarters for three families.

"On the farm, your life is fluid," Sharanya says.

She gets a surplus of produce now. She sells millets and vegetables, depending on the season. She doesn't sell paddy, though. She has millets, ragi, oil seeds, fruits—papaya, mango, jackfruit and many others—vegetables, poultry, six bullocks and two cows on her farm. She pays the families who work on the farm. Her biggest expenses involve labour. In the village, they have clan- and tribe- networks where people share their labour.

She is an outsider—although, she contributes to festivals and cultural activities in the village, and is a part of the village—so the villagers don't share their labour. To make ends meet, she freelances as a consultant for NGOs, writing reports, project documentation and reviews. Sharanya, along with other new farmers, survive and profit by creating many income streams, all feeding each other in a positive feedback loop, not dependent on just a single source.

She makes ₹15000-20,000 a season, with "additional recurring income" that comes every day in the monsoon from vegetables. Due to a lack of water, she is not able to plant vegetables through the year, which she hopes to do

soon. Annually, she makes about ₹30,000-35,000. When her entire farm is in operation, she expects to make more. On a farm like this, food essentials are taken care of: rice, millets, vegetables, milk, fruits and whatever one gets to eat and it doesn't factor in as an expense, whereas people in towns and cities spend so much buying all these. Her farm life is really satisfying, she says.

"There is excitement, no monotony; you learn new things every day." She is doing whatever she has known in theory.

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Agroecology, as Debal Deb, a scientist and farmer—a pioneer of going back-to-the-land in West Bengal some decades earlier, and who later started collecting indigenous varieties of seeds—puts it, involves "zero external input and biodiversity." Agroecology makes a farm function like a forest, and Sharanya learnt about it from Deb, and she also got heirloom seeds from him.

> *"The bird, the insect, the fungi—everyone contributes to saving the land, the planet, enriching ecology. It's really a humbling approach. That's the most beautiful thing I learnt from him (Debal Deb)."*

"Debal*da* taught us the mantra of mixed, diverse crops." He also taught her

that the farm is part of a larger ecology, not a standalone thing, and he took them out of the economists' view of farming and growing food, and supplanted her with ecological point of view.

"The bird, the insect, the fungi—everyone contributes to saving the land, the planet, enriching ecology. It's really a humbling approach. That's the most beautiful thing I learnt from him (Debal Deb)," Sharanya says.

Debal Deb (right) with Sharanya Nayak. Deb is one of the pioneers of back-to-the-land movement and advocates agroecology. Photo: Special arrangement

The more poly-cultural your farm is, she adds, the fewer pests you have. So, she mixes various vegetables—tomatoes one row, brinjals, the next, and so on—and paddy with chana, bajra, jowar, urad. The diversity on her farm

repulses pests. She reckons that even if the pests eat only tomatoes, only one row goes, while other vegetable are good.

“Farm is basically a support base, a home for a whole range of life forms,” she says

While she found nothing on the farm when she started out, except rocky soil, she now has a melange of life: birds, rabbits, jackals that visit in the evening, an occasional bear that roars out of the forest some distance away.

She feels she is approaching farming in the way tribals approached it generations ago. “I feel farmers like me are rejuvenating, regenerating the old practices.” Tribal farmers—both young and old—in the surrounding villages understand what she is doing but don’t really do it themselves. When men and women drop by her farm in their walks from fields to drink water and rest, they chitchat with her, and “feel nostalgic”, saying their grandfathers did this type of farming.

She sees the farmers’ distress around, and engages with them. ’I really want to build a community of young farmers who will rejuvenate the agrocecology type of farming. The more you diversify—the thing I learnt from Debal*da*—the more resilient you are.”

However, most of the farmers are into mono-cropping, she continues, and so are exposed to risk, especially with climate change playing havoc.

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Natural farming and agroecological practices ensure both food security, the access to healthy, nutritious food, and food sovereignty

where you have access and control over all aspects of food production—starting from the land, seeds, water, labour and so on.

“It gives food security as well as nutrition. When you have ten different crops, then you have all essential minerals, carbohydrates, proteins.”

“Our farmers here can have different varieties even of paddy and millets. For example, they can plant four varieties of paddy and two varieties of millets (depending on the region and microclimates).” Agroecology also teaches that farmers need to depend on the resources surrounding the farm, not on market for cash or kind.

Farmers have been persuaded to grow for money and not for eating. Farmers are persuaded into thinking that a single crop will fetch money. You cannot sell a little quantity of tomatoes to a trader; you need bulk. So they plant a single crop, which they bring to a trader after spending a ton on inputs and weathering climate shocks, and get a bit of money, which never balances out in their favour.

In practice, traders have the monopoly over prices. They hoard things, artificially creating scarcity and driving up prices. They have large, powerful associations, fund political parties, while farmers have no bargaining power. Some government policies too encourage mono-cropping.

Mono-cropping, it can be safely said, kills the variety of tastes people find themselves enjoying. A farm like Sharanya’s or Saraswati’s or George’s provides all tastes—sweet, sour, bitter, salty, umami. In contrast, a pizza is a stupid man’s idea of smart taste.

Added to the mono-cropping pattern (and exposure to high risk), the villagers, she reports, splurge on weddings and festivals. In the old days, the villagers would celebrate their festivals and culture with rice and country liquor. Now, they have big sound boxes, DJs, larger feasts. “I cannot tell them what to do or not to do. But it puts a lot of pressure on their earnings.”

Enough employment opportunities exist on a farm, she says. “A five-acre farm can provide enough for at least four families. They can diversify crops, grow and eat their own food, even have savings. By having healthy food, you can cut down on medical bills.”

She cites her own case: every six months she would get malaria, and arthritic pain. But, after working on the farm she has not once been attacked by malaria; her pains have gone away.

It’s not an idealist thing, she says. “We need cash. By approaching farming in agroecological way, we can sustain ourselves and even have savings.”

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There are government policies that don’t achieve what they are intended to; instead, they sow distress.

It seems to me, Lindley says, that subsidising rural work in India—as is done by the National Guaranteed Rural Employment Act where the projects are chosen by people who know what the local problems are—is a terrific idea, but that subsidising crop choices is a bad idea. Farmers should produce food they think people will want to eat, not food for the government to buy and waste in storage.

"A government-guaranteed 'Universal Basic Income' (UBI) would be, I think, the smartest way to protect farmers who make economically poor crop choices from destitution." The 2016-2017 Economic Survey, chapter 9 titled, Universal Basic Income: A Conversation With and Within the Mahatma, talks about UBI.

There are experiments going on with UBI. A pilot project in Madhya Pradesh in 2010 covering 20 villages—eight villages got basic income and the rest acted as a control group—yielded great results: people spent more on food and healthcare; more children went to school; sanitation and nutrition improved. Other pilots took place in the U.S, Canada and Scotland and several countries in Europe and Africa.

The path towards UBI in India may be to merge existing subsidies and plough in tax collections from GST. Apart from UBI protecting farmers in distress, it could stem the attrition of young people from rural areas. That will also relieve them of anxiety of making a living from scratch.

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Rajesh Krishnan always wanted to be a farmer. Born and brought up in Trivandrum, his graduation degree was in biotechnology and a masters in ecology. He worked with Greenpeace for ten years.

"At some point in your life, you feel you should do it now, otherwise it will never happen," says the 38-year-old. So, in 2007, he and some friends bought four-and-a half acres in Wayanad in Kerala. He took up farming full time four years ago, and stays on the farm, while his friends are still working in cities, thinking of ditching their jobs. Rajesh is not only an

organic paddy cultivator but also a conservator of traditional varieties of paddy.

In contrast to regular farmers who are mostly in it for socio-economic reasons, the new farmers, he says, choose to do farming. “It’s a passion.”

Rajesh Krishnan (Left) farms four-and-a-half acres in Wayanad. He is part of the Seed Savers’ Network and believes in employing more people than machines on his land. Photo: Special arrangement.

These people, he continues, bring a complete outsider’s view to farming.

“For me, it’s not just about farming but changing the way we look at farming.”

With distress all around, he wanted “to show that we can really succeed”. He thinks there are lots of ways to do it, and get off the treadmill of current farming methodology of chemically-intensive agriculture, buying seeds

from the market and so on.

“We need to constantly engage and change the system: policymaking, research, extension and market,” Krishnan says. There are two streams, he continues: the same old system of farming, and the alternative, both in technique of farming and market and policymaking.

Being a member of the Seed Savers network, he and his friends are taking up large-scale cultivation of traditional varieties of paddy and marketing it.

“Traditional varieties are not just for conservation. We want to bring them to market, from farm to plate.”

So, they have registered a farmers’ producer company that buys traditional varieties of paddy grown organically and pays more than the government’s minimum support price, and supplies it to the consumers. This year their farmers’ collective got 34 tonnes of paddy.

The new or first-generation farmers, Krishnan reckons, come with ideas of what can be done on a farm. They have read and learnt from what’s going on; the second thing is network, the newbies are in touch with living examples of organic farming, unlike regular farmers who probably might have not had a chance to look for alternatives; and, they’re exposed to the market and its potential from their previous life in urban areas. They also know the value of this type of farming, both in terms of sustainability and market.

In his area, he reports, regular farmers too are making money. Off his own farm, he makes ₹15,000-20,000 in a season. Additional income comes from selling hay and milk.

For him, farming is not just about farming, it's also a social and political activity. So, he tries to get as much labour as possible on to his farm rather than machines. Thereby, he says, money gets pumped into the local economy.

There are WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups, many organic farmers associations, like Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) at the national level (of which Krishnan is a member), seed savers networks, and local networks like 'Save Our Rice Campaign'.

"There are multiple mediums through which we can engage," Krishnan says. For him, his farm is his first medium.

"The thing with farmers is that they're interested in what the other guy is doing." So people come to his farm, learn, get inspired. The other is regular media which in Kerala is active in reporting on how agriculture is done. There are people who use social media to connect farmers with consumers directly.

Agriculture can be the largest employment generator for our country, he says. A one-acre farm can create around 60 labour-work days in a season. In addition, there are organic farmer collectives that offer internships to youngsters and in some cases lease out land for farming while helping them with seeds and farming knowledge.

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The new farmers think they are lots of ways to create employment. V. S. S. Krishna Kumar, editor of eveninger *Netitaram Surya* in Rajahmundry reckons every village needs a farmer devoted natural

farming. All of our produce, he says, both from food and commercial crops, comes from agricultural and its by-products, from villages. Agricultural activities like ploughing, planting, transplanting, harvesting and others, require skilled labour.

"That has decreased. The number of our agricultural and artisanal workers has come down due to urbanisation and changing attitudes," Krishna Kumar says. "People have shifted from their traditional work." (The words 'traditional' and 'modern' are conflated with backwardness and progress respectively, while, in fact, 'traditional' involves knowledge gained over generations.) Lack of skilled labour and costs make farmers go for herbicides. There are also increasing instances of people from Bihar and West Bengal coming to Andhra Pradesh to harvest and work in fields, while people in rural Andhra Pradesh are making a beeline for the town and cities.

For example, there are five, six varieties of coconut stripping and peeling, one way for export, one for regular use, one for making oil and so on. The by-products of coconut are legion. In fact, in the delta region of East Godavari district, called Konaseema (also referred to as East Kerala, for its likeness to backwaters in Kerala), there is a saying: four coconut trees will take care of you in your old age, even if your children ditch you.

Everything requires skilled labour. In the case of sugarcane, skilled workers are needed to cut cane and make jaggery. Otherwise, they would get nicked all over. Not every grunt can do it.

Instead, Krishna Kumar continues, people go into construction activity and some such, in which they are not skilled and are highly exposed to danger

at every step of the way. As a result, he says, there is a lot of bad construction and migrating labourers dying in road accidents. There are also a lot of people driving autos or hawking clothes and whatever, or opening a roadside shop.

"There is a belief that work is available in cities and towns and not villages whereas there is agriculture and artisanal work in villages," Krishna Kumar says. Also, "There is no self-esteem, or pride in this kind of work. Except in rainy season, there is work such as dredging village ponds and tanks, irrigation canals and streams, and so much work on the farm itself."

Since farmers are already desperate, they don't want to experiment like new farmers. The 53-year-old Krishna Kumar recalls that in his childhood, farmers used green manure and dung in every field and farm. Then agricultural scientists and extension services people came along and advised farmers to use more and more fertiliser, which farmers would not do. Goaded and prodded, they started using more and more fertiliser and pesticide as time went on. So, to go back to natural farming, he says, farmers would need good examples and in time, they would again take up healthy practices.

The area under organic farming currently stands at seven lakh hectares, according to the International Competence Centre for Organic Agriculture (ICCOA), Bengaluru. It's expected to rise to 20 lakh ha by 2020. India brought out a national policy on organic agriculture in 2001, and according to ICCOA, 3.8 lakh ha is under certified organic farming for cotton. Soyabean, fruits, vegetables, cereals, and basmati rice, coffee and tea are also increasingly grown in the organic way.

According to global market research firm TechSci's "India Organic Food Market By Product Type, Competition Forecast and Opportunities, 2011-2021" report, published in 2016, India's organic food market are expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of over 25 per cent during 2016-2021.

The Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) of the Union ministry of commerce and industry works with states' agencies, private companies, and NGOs to certify farms as organic, collecting charges for certification and inspection.

Bharath is waiting to get his certification through the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), a organic quality-assurance system. To get that, one farmer or a group of farmers can apply. It costs more individually, and so Bharath is waiting to bring five farmers in to apply for it.

The area under organic farming can be increased. Just as these people like variety of crops on their farms and not mono-cropping, there is a variety of practices the back-to-landers would like to adopt. Bharat gets calls from his friends in various cities and from the U.S., wanting to jump in, but reasons vary for not jumping in: wife is not interested; want to earn some more money, and so on. Then there are others who would like to take up hydroponics. Bharath insists everything we eat should come from mud and so he doesn't encourage them and tells them that he doesn't know anything about it. He suggests endowment lands could be given for lease to interested youngsters. Or else they can work and learn natural farming from practitioners, for their survival, and as the time goes on, build their own farms.

As the afternoon winds down, and chill creeps in, he goes to feed his cows, feeds them grass and pats them. His farmland is ready for transplanting.

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