

How cotton farming reaping benefits in Chhindwara

A WWF-India project in Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh showed how growing cotton organically brings farmers richer returns.

Nitin Jugran | September 27, 2018

Bharati Ivnati, 40, has been growing cotton on her seven acres of land for several years



now. Convincing her to abandon the farming practices being followed for generations was not easy, but when she saw the returns of the organic cotton crop she had reluctantly experimented with on a small patch of land, she was convinced.

“I prepared one acre of land last year by applying chemical-free fertilizers as advised. I also learnt about the importance of spacing one’s saplings at a distance of three-by-three feet, which is called ‘space marking’ and to grow another crop in between, which would not only protect my cotton plant but also give me an additional crop,” explained the valiant farmer hailing from Gajandoh village, situated about 100 km from Nagpur.

This practice of planting another crop alongside the cotton sapling is called intercropping and is one of the salient features of the Organic Cotton Project, the first of its kind to be launched by Worldwide Fund for Nature-India (WWF-India) in Chhindwara district of Madhya Pradesh in 2015-16.

A total of 72 villages have been covered under the project so far, of which 60 per cent of the total farmers are involved. Trainings and demonstrations on adopting improved agronomic practices, soil and water conservation techniques, inter-cropping, pest and disease management and cotton quality and marketing are regularly held for the farmers at meetings conducted in their respective villages

. “I have learnt how to make organic manure, insecticides and pesticides using locally available material,” stated Bharati. “Earlier, I used harmful and strong chemical pesticides for spraying, which affected my health. I would also indiscriminately use the sprays, not realising that frequent spraying was not good for the plants.”

The operative word being “organic”, the project emphasises the need to replace such destructive chemical pesticides and fertilizers with environmentally-friendly manures and sprays.

As more and more farmers adopt these new techniques, the results have been dramatic and instant. “Since I started applying cow dung as manure for my land and cow urine for spraying against pest attacks on my cotton saplings, I have noticed a great change in my health.

I no longer suffer from burning sensation in my eyes or itchiness and boils on my skin,” Bharati revealed. The economic gains have also been significant. As the cotton farmers rely less and less on costly chemical pesticides and fertilizers purchased at local markets, often with ill-advised counsel from the sellers on their usage, they realise they have cut down tremendously on input costs.

Bharati admits that she only harvested about one quintal of cotton from the sole acre she devoted to cotton crop and sold it for Rs 5,000 ~ the standard rate for cotton. “But my profit margin was 100 per cent as I did not incur any production costs,” she maintained proudly.

In addition, the red gram she had planted as an intercrop was a blessing as it provided more than enough food for her household’s consumption. “I got two quintals of red gram, more than sufficient for my family’s needs and sold one quintal for Rs 4,000.”

Laxmi Salami, 26, of the same village has also come to the conclusion that growing cotton the organic way will be a much more viable option economically in the years to come. “I harvested 12.5 quintals of traditional cotton in seven acres last year.

I sold it all for Rs 62,500, but my costs towards pesticides, fertilizers and labour came to almost Rs 40,000. So my net profit was not much!” But on her remaining one acre of land, which she agreed to experiment with trying organic cotton, her production costs were nil and her profit 100 per cent.

Laxmi explained how she prepared vermicompost by mixing cow dung, earthworms in the soil and vegetable waste and applied this to her one-acre devoted to organic cotton. “For the first time, I also used spray made from cow urine. The programme has opened my eyes. I am saving so much money by growing cotton the organic way.”

Laxmi has also noticed a perceptible change in the quality of her soil ever since she replaced chemicals with organic products and now plans to grow more organic cotton next year using this method.

“I am confident that my yields will be much better next time as I have been told that the quality of the land improves every time you till it organically. I have the evidence of my own eyes to know that this is true,” she added.

BACK TO NATURE

Currently, 4,000 farmers are registered under the programme as organic cotton farmers. Of these, intensive training has been given to 1,000 farmers on the organic package of practices of cultivating cotton and other inter-crops, stated Taslim Raza, Project Executive of Srijan, an NGO, which is WWF-India’s implementing partner in the district.

“We have been imparting mass awareness training programmes to the farmers on preparation of manure and soil conservation techniques which has already seen a marked improvement in the soil,” he claimed.

“Last year, about 20,000 quintals of organic cotton were produced, which contributed to the incremental income of cotton farmers’ families.”

EVADING DEBTORS’ TRAP

A total of 107 Self Help Groups (SHGs) were formed and trained in different aspects of organic cotton practices during regular meetings.

Of these, 42 SHGs consisting of 462 women farmers from nine villages established 12 organic input production units, where biosprays and manure were produced and sold to farmers at nominal rates, with the money going to a common fund.

Hemlata Ivnati, 30, of Jai Bhawani SHG talks about how the creation of this 15- member group a year back saved her from the regular trap of money lenders. “We put in Rs 20 at each weekly meeting towards a common fund and have so far amassed Rs 16,000 in the fund.

This has enabled me to take out a loan of Rs 2,000 for urgent weeding I needed to get done on my land,” she explained. “And our SHG charges a bare two per cent interest per month and we are not pressured about when to return the loan.

This has saved us from the clutches of ruthless money lenders who can charge anything from 10 to 15 per cent interest per month!” she added thankfully.

Hemlata hopes to clear her loan when her cotton crop and red gram crop are ready for harvesting in November. Farmers like Parashuram Pandhram, 35, of Mehlaari village are setting an example of income enhancement through multiple cropping in a scenario of water scarcity and marginal landholdings. He planted organic cotton on his fields for the first time in 2016.

From just half an acre that was cultivated, he earned Rs.11, 520. This success motivated him to permanently take up cotton farming on his fields. Though a hard-working farmer, he could traditionally grow only corn and toor dal on a sustenance basis from his small two-acre farm.

When first introduced to the project, he initially rejected the proposal, believing he was being lied to when told that he could begin earning a high income through new crops. But after several farmers’ meetings, where Srijan worked out a cost-benefit analysis for farmers in the village, it was discovered that they did not take into account production costs when arriving at their annual income from agriculture.

A farmer earning Rs 10,000 per annum was also spending at least Rs 7,000 during that period on farm inputs, a fact not looked into by them. In this scenario, when Srijan spoke about a cluster with 50 plants having a potential to earn at least Rs 20,000 a year, many farmers, including Parashuram were willing to give it a try.

He planted around 40 saplings of guava, jackfruit, mangoes and pomegranate. He has started reaping a small income from guava fruit since 2016, despite the continuously deficient rainfall in those years.

The same year, he also took part in the organic cotton piloting project along with five other farmers in the village. Of all five, he was most successful in this cotton experiment, having reaped 2.5 quintals of cotton right from the first year of production.

He was meticulous in following all the guidance procedures in farming methods, having set up his own vermicompost unit in his field and preparing in-house organic pesticides from neem leaves and cow urine. He was able to sustain the same production level in the second year despite water shortage hindering proper irrigation. Having seen the encouraging results, Parashuram plans to increase his area under cotton production.

ENHANCING CORRIDOR ECOLOGY

The objective of the programme is “To improve corridor ecology by making chemical-free agriculture” in the Satpuda Pench Corridor of Satpda Maikal Landscape in Chhindwara district.

The Central Indian forest landscape is one of the most important tiger conservation landscapes in the world. The Pench Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra and the Satpuda Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh are two major potential source population for tigers in the Satpuda Maikal Landscape (SML) of central India.

These two tiger reserves are connected by forest corridors which are part of the Chhindwara and Betul Forest Division of Madhya Pradesh. Under the project, farmers are encouraged to safeguard forest resources through protection from fire, grazing, illegal harvesting and shielding them from crop raiding by wild animals.

According to Murli Dhar, Director of WWF-India’s Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP), which is implementing the project, farmers may not immediately link the connection between organic farming and tiger conservation, but they understand that chemical farming is detrimental to the forest ecosystem and contaminates the soil, water and vegetation on which wildlife thrives.

The writer is a free-lance journalist

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