

Bharathi trust farm (ASHA site visit)

Date: 4th January 2012

ASHA volunteers: Sowmya Suryanarayanan, Vikram Iyengar

Farm members: Sidamma, driver, local village boy Kuppan, (Sidamma's family) Ashok, Anita, Usha

Sidamma is the founder and the main contact at Bharathi trust and is also in charge of the farm activities and its outreach.



Photo- 1: Folks at the farm

Our trip

Chennai, 12:00 pm

We were picked up by Sidamma from our house in Chennai. She was returning after visiting the cyclone affected village of Nellore.

The 3hr:30min road trip comprised of some nice discussions about current state of affairs of Indian farming, Sidamma's work and involvement of ASHA and some nice show and tell of the factors influencing farming in the region.

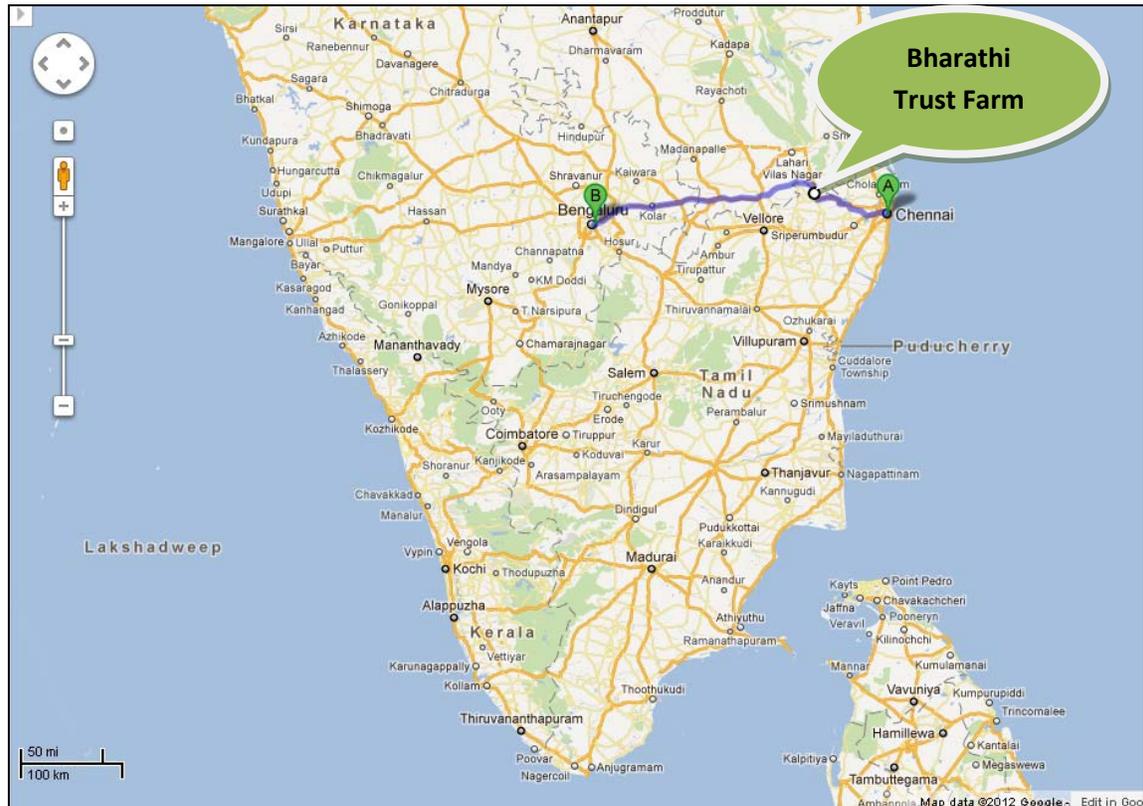


Photo- 2: Getting to the Farm

We spent about 5 hours at the farm talking to them and seeing the various indigenous farming techniques (discussed below) and took a walk with the farmers and Sidamma on their farm land.

Average Farmer's Story

The farmer borrows money to buy seeds, fertilizer, etc subsidized by the government (influenced by companies)

A cyclone or a regional vagary renders most of the produce unsellable. Ideally the bank forgives the loan or is covered by insurance. But in many cases neither happens and a couple of years of bad profits and a stigma of not paying back puts a huge burden on the farmer.

On the other hand, over use of chemical fertilizer over years without enough crop rotation reduces yield over time.

By now the stressed farmer either sells his land to the government as not-cultivable land for subsidized redevelopment projects and pursues a totally different line of work like construction, factory, etc OR in some cases chooses to "run away" from the soup he is in!

This downward spiral leads to lesser number of farmers in the region and stunted knowledge transfer from one generation to next on regional organic farming practices. Unlike chemical farming, organic ways not only result in good healthy food but also keeps the regional diversity, keeps nearby water sources free of harmful chemicals and toxins and in many cases produces far more resilient crops able to withstand local vagaries.

The Farm



Photo- 3: Hills on both sides make the conditions extreme at the farm land

The farm is flanked by hills on 2 sides with a natural stream of spring water flowing beside it.

Soil: The total area is approximately 13 acres. With the help of volunteers and local labor, Bharathi trust has been able to convert approximately 11 acres of barren rocky land into a cultivable state.

Water: They have constructed 3 check-dams to tap the stream water (mentioned above). This has helped recharge the region's aquifer and has increased the level of the water-table in nearby area thereby helping other farmers as well. This has drawn the attention of the local government officials who have tried to replicate similar measures in other areas.

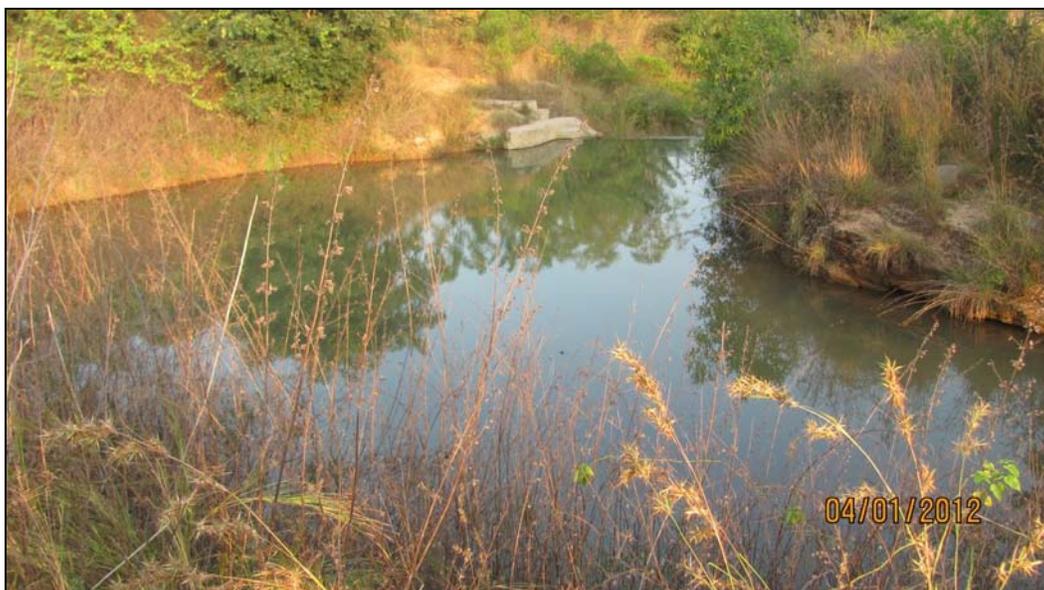


Photo- 4: (1 of 3) Check dams that tap the natural spring water

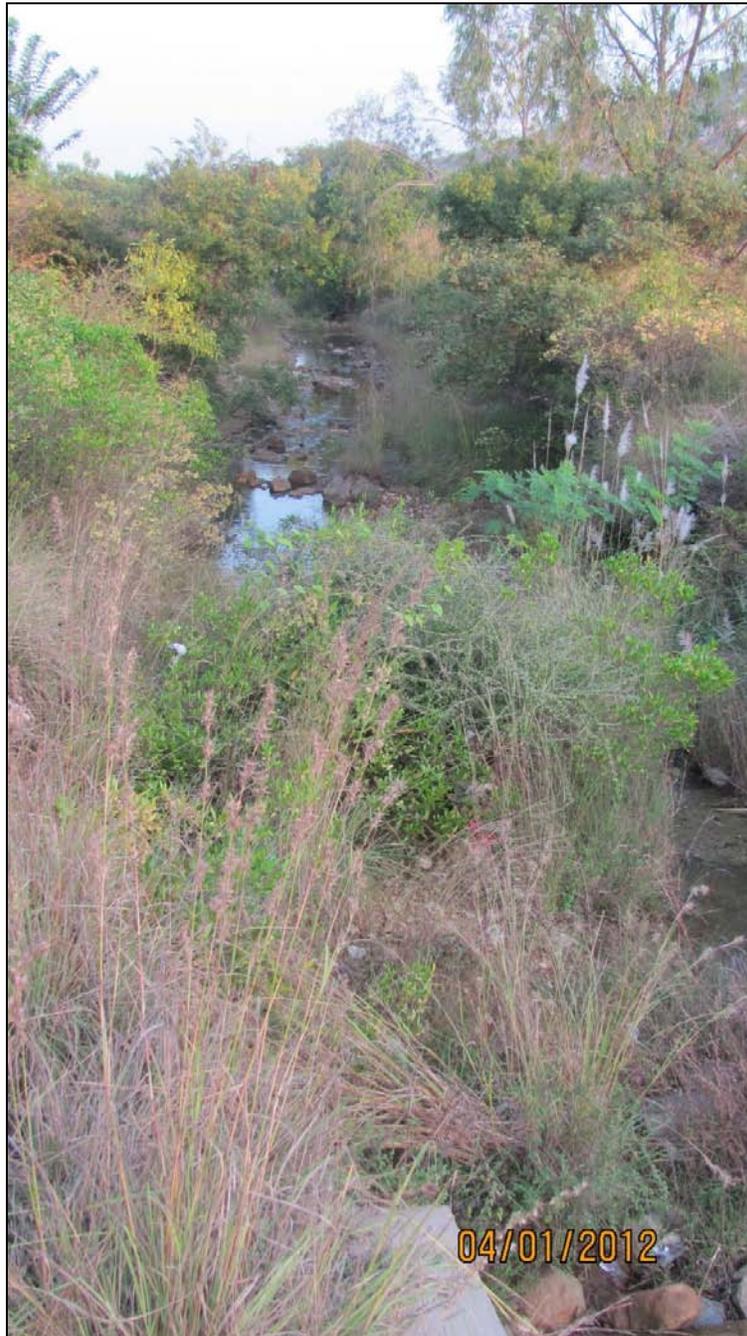


Photo- 5: Stream flowing behind the farm

Crops: The model farm can be divided into distinct food categories.

Rice: There are large areas dedicated for growing rice (paddy fields) which require a lot of water and labor.

Vegetables: There is a large multi-vegetable and herb garden behind the farmhouse bordered by fruit trees. There are some fast-growing trees and shrubs which are natural fertilizers and are used to feed the plants. The vegetables include tomatoes, lemon, brinjal (egg-plant), chillies, drum sticks potatoes, leafy vegetables like spinach to name a few. The fruits include mango, guava, sita-fal (sugar-apple), coconut, orange and pomegranate.

Lentils: They also had sections of land growing lentils and nuts like wheat, black gram, peanut.



Photo- 6: Preparing paddy fields and the saplings as per SRI

Current Issues

1. One of the 3 check dams got silted during the recent cyclone (Thane) which is preventing the water table from recharging.



Photo- 7: One of the check-dams heavily silted

2. One of the paddy fields was also leveled due to heavy flooding in the area. Some seeds could be reused but the damage estimation (%) was unknown



Photo- 8: Paddy field affected by flooding from cyclone 'Thane'

3. 3 acres of the farm remains barren.
4. The farm was scheduled to receive a number of cows from the temple nearby for use in the farm. However, the local government wanted proof that the cows were not going to be slaughtered for meat and thereby issued a stay order

Bharathi Trust Resource Center's Outreach

Bharathi Trust is conducting a number of outreach activities to spread awareness about organic farming. Some of them are:

1. Bharathi Trust invites local Govt officials to attend training sessions and meetings. These officials are also invited to stay at the farm and learn more about organic farming,
2. The farm is also training other local farmers thereby helping them adopt organic ways of farming
3. The farm also successfully sold its organic seeds for Rs.50,000 to the government which then redistributes the seeds to the local farmers at subsidized rates.
4. The farm sells its produce to the locals and the surplus harvest makes its way to organic stores in Chennai like Restore.

Is Organic Farming the answer to the Average Farmer's story?

1. A year back, the government subsidized a particular wheat seed (company name unknown) touting it to be draught-resilient with a promise of better yield. Sidamma and other farmers bought and sowed these seeds. It rained quite heavily that year and the entire govt-subsidized crop succumbed to the extreme conditions. Kuppan and his father (also farmers) used 1 Kg of previous year's seeds in a portion of their land. Though affected to some extent by the rains, their natural-seed based crop yielded close to 10 kg of wheat that year.

2. Most hybrid (commercially bought) seeds cannot be reused and have to be bought each year.
3. Paddy grown as per the SRI (System of Rice Intensification), an ancient & recently revived technique results:
 - a. In higher yield
 - b. At lower initial costs
 - c. Lower water consumption
 - d. Thus increasing the per-acre profit and feeding more people!
4. Lab grown seeds from across the world can never replace thousands of years of local evolution by natural selection
5. It tastes much better!



Photo- 9: Amla/ Indian gooseberry from the farm