

A write up about what I have observed at Timbaktu Collective and Bharathi Trust about organic farming...

At Timbaktu

Ananthapur, a district in Andhra Pradesh is a very arid region, the second most drought-affected region after Jaisalmer, Rajasthan (<http://www.timbaktu.org/conditions.html>). The region used to produce a variety of millets and pulses until the state stepped in about 3 decades ago to push farmers to grow groundnuts. They set up various structures to process and support the cultivation of groundnuts – marketing, credit facility, inputs, and production know-how. With the introduction of rice at a cheap price through the Public Distribution System (PDS), the interest in growing food crops dwindled since one could ideally make more money from a groundnut crop and then purchase their food through the PDS. Soon, farming turned into the mono-cropping of groundnut. Over the years, mono-cropping has led to an increase in pests, an increase in usage of toxic chemicals and reduced crop yields. The input costs have been soaring whereas the farmers have no control over the price at which they sell their groundnuts. The traders and processing mill owners who also double up as seed and chemical suppliers decide the price. The entire situation is very exploitative and has resulted in many farmer suicides in the last decade (<http://www.indiatogether.com/2004/aug/psa-womenfarm.htm>; <http://www.indiatogether.com/2004/aug/psa-womenfarm2.htm>).

Timbaktu is intervening here through their Timbaktu Organic initiative, which is currently working with about 160 farmers. Mono-cropping has played a big role in the agrarian crisis. As mentioned above, farmers are caught in a vicious cycle wherein they continue growing groundnuts since they see no way out of it. It has resulted in the loss of soil fertility and thus decreasing yield over the years. To improve crop diversity, Timbaktu Organic (TO) is encouraging the farmers to grow millets and pulses that were native to the region, along with the groundnut crop so the farmers can hedge their bets. The TO venture hopes to enhance the farmers' income by at least 20% in a 3-year period (According to TO, 3yrs is approximately the time needed for the soil to regain the fertility lost to decades of chemical farming). The farmers are being encouraged to slowly convert to organic. Eg: they grow crops organically on 3 acres of their 5 acre farm.

What is interesting about this initiative is that Timbaktu Organic has taken up the entire marketing aspect. They procure grains and groundnuts from the farmers, paying them more than the going market price in the region (35% more for the millets and 15% for redgram and groundnuts – found numbers in their financial statement) and then work on the marketing. Thus the farmers have a place to sell their produce at a fair price. This is important since conversion to organic usually also implies multi-cropping and thus a farmer might be growing a cash crop as before and also other crops. The mainstream market might purchase the cash crop but not the rest of the grains.

The onus of selling alternate crops like millets is now on the Timbaktu Organic. They are working on raising awareness about the importance of millets. The Public Distribution System has played a large role in changing the eating patterns of people in this region and today, eating polished paddy rice is the norm. Polished rice does not have many nutrients

left in it. They are trying to popularize the millet initiative among the people in CK Palli and people who interact with Timbaktu, like the womens thrift cooperative. A small hotel has been set up in CK Palli that serves rotis made from millets. Even the dosas and idlis here are made from millets. They try to serve food made from alternate grains in their meetings, thus presenting people with other options. As the demand for these grains increase, this experiment in multicropping might become more viable.

The venture started off in 2005 with about 27 farmers covering 80 acres and has now grown to 160 farmers and 480 acres.

References:

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2006/dec/agr-timbaktu.htm>

<http://www.indiatogether.com/2004/jul/psa-diviner.htm>

<http://www.indiatogether.com/2004/aug/psa-postdeath.htm>

At Bharathi Trust

Bharathi Trust is trying to address a similar situation in Tamil Nadu. The state has been encouraging farmers to grow sugarcane and this trend about growing cash crops is proving to be risky for the farmers. They are players in a market with volatile prices. Cash cropping is one aspect of the problem, the other being the growing input costs. Since the green revolution, farmers have been continuously brainwashed to spray chemical pesticides, fertilizer etc. Over time, the soil has lost its fertility and more and more chemicals are being pumped in, thus upping the input costs. Also, centralized seed companies have been encouraging farmers to purchase seeds that are pest-resistant, provide more yield etc. While this might work initially, these seeds have spelt a disaster for many farmers. They are not local varieties and have been found to require large amounts of chemicals and water. Further, some seeds are designed to perish after a season (terminator technology), thus ensuring that the farmer has to return to the seed company every season and not save some seeds from the crop for the next sowing season. Ironically, the resource center land was purchased from a farming family that was in debt over their sugarcane crop. They had invested in sugarcane hoping to make some profits but unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way.

I think Bharathi Trust's main motivation in going organic is that it is low investment. The input costs for chemicals are done away with. Their experiments have been generating some interest in the community since farmers are amazed the crops are coming up without any chemical input. Their sunflower crop got a lot of attention. The inputs were about Rs. 1000 for the 3 acres as against Rs. 5000 per acre had chemicals been used. These numbers were estimates at the time of my visit and we could check with BT about the actuals. The point being that this difference goes to the farmer in this case vis-à-vis some pesticide company. So the farmer earns more.

Like Timbaktu, BT is also focusing on growing food crops. Not only does this follow naturally from multi-cropping, BT believes it is important to have food security. The resource center currently grows some ragi, corn, paddy, vegetables, dals, groundnuts, sunflower and sugarcane. Again, hedging bets. If sugarcane fails, you have some food to

eat. (A clarification about what it means to lose by growing sugarcane: The crop itself comes out fine but the farmer is at the mercy of the sugar mills. The mills crush the cane at their whim and fancy since they have so much supply and the farmers often lose out in the pricing. One strategy the sugar mills use is to let the cane stand long enough, so it loses its water and becomes lighter. So the farmer gets paid a lower amount.)

Gowamma

I met Siddamma's sister, Gowamma at the resource center. She is a farmer in Karnataka and her family owns about 5-8 acres of land. They have been farming there for over 2 decades now. They had been practicing farming with the use of urea and other chemicals. Over the years, the input costs were mounting. The last two years they did not get much rain and she attempted suicide unable to face a debt of Rs. 80,000. She survived the attempt and Siddamma brought her and her family to the resource center. The stay at the resource center has helped her and her husband a lot. They are seeing crops being grown without chemical inputs and this makes them optimistic despite the grim situation they are in. Gowamma is very vocal about how they fell into a never-ending cycle of unsustainable agricultural practices. She was talking about many people in her village committing suicide being caught in this web. She wants to go there and work with them on moving towards sustainable practices like organic farming.

References:

<http://www.indiatogether.com/2005/sep/psa-seeds.htm>

In both these places, organic has not meant just substituting chemical inputs with organic inputs and continue the current mono-cropping. The importance of biodiversity is stressed on and multi-cropping is practiced. And they are interested in making farming viable for small farmers.

As far as organic farming being good for the nature is concerned, it does cut down on chemicals being pumped into farming that eventually land up in our food and water systems. However, the benefit is still from a human perspective to be able to arm twist nature into getting what we want. If we really cared about nature, we would perhaps change the way we live to coexist with nature and with what it gives, rather than try to get what we want! As I see it, both these efforts are focusing on sustainable livelihoods.