

Organically Bound

The Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu is home to a growing movement of organic farming, now egged on by the district administration.

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Gloom descends over the farmers of Ramanathapuram, the district in Tamil Nadu famed for the Pamban Bridge, where hopes of a good harvest have been dashed to smithereens by the long dry spell brought on by the failure of the north-east monsoon.

Not all farmers are despondent, though. R Murugesan, for one, is all smiles. This year, despite a bad monsoon, he expects a bountiful yield from his farm. A former government employee, Murugesan is one of the few farmers who have bucked the trend to turn around his organic farm at Ethhivayal, 10 km from Ramnad (Ramanathapuram). He was originally tempted to buy the property on account of the sorry fact that vast amounts of agricultural land were being diverted for real-estate speculation. He wished to farm the land, instead.

India was then in the throes of the “Green Revolution”, when farmers, smothered with pesticides and fertilisers, produced bumper harvests and a general bonhomie – though at a price, which was a gradual decline in soil fertility.

Aware of that threat, G Nammalvar, an agricultural scientist, embarked on a lifelong crusade to spread the message of sustainable agriculture throughout Tamil Nadu. As the founder of Nammalvar Ecological Foundation, which supports traditional agricultural practices, he launched an ambitious mission to convince the farmers of the area to take up organic farming. He also conducted a workshop at Ramnad which 30-year-old Shiva from Vazathur, a village 15 km from Ramnad, attended. Like many of his neighbours, Shiva migrated to Dubai in search of a job five years ago. But, he recalls, “There was no dignity in the work. I was upset and came back.” Desperate to eke out a living, he took up farming on the two acres of land he owned – with the kit of seeds he got for free

from the workshop. Today he sells his organic produce to a retail shop in Rameshwaram, and, working six hours a day, earns around Rs 25,000 a month.

Ramanathapuram is among the driest regions of Tamil Nadu where, for the past two decades, the monsoon has been erratic. In the absence of plentiful rain, farming is arduous. Murugesan says: “No one believed me when I said that organic farming would be a success.” He also had to contend with the ubiquitous *karuvelam* (*prosopis juliflora*) trees which deplete groundwater. Another problem was waiting for the land to neutralise chemical residues arising from the use of fertilisers and pesticides. This difficult period of waiting results in several direct and indirect costs for farmers. Murugesan recalls: “When I bought the land, it was a dry patch full of karuvelam trees. In three years, it’s been transformed into a fertile area.” Though he had to invest around Rs 75 lakh to reconstitute the land, he is already reaping the gains. Today, his farm, equipped with a 60-hp tractor, an electricity generator and solar power, is self-sufficient, and Murugesan hopes to rake in profits soon.

He depends on 80 cows and goats for the biomass for the farm. “I’ve also started a dairy farm which produces 60-65 litres of milk daily”, says Murugesan. Looking forward, he plans to introduce aquaculture into the pond next season.

Shiva, another farmer in the area, grows around nine varieties of vegetables like lady’s finger, pumpkin and cucumber in his two-acre integrated farm. He says: “Besides coconut, we experimented with other plants like areca nut and banana and it proved to be a success.”

Being labour-intensive, organic farming involves high wages. Around 15 people are permanently employed in Murugesan’s farm, while Shiva occasionally also employs daily-wage labourers. Both bemoan the wage outlay that results.

The Ramnad district administration supports the farmers in organic farming through the Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA), which provides free seeds and training. M Ekambaram, special project coordinator, ATMA, says: “Earlier, we used to give cash subsidies; now there is more focus on providing materials that will be used for agriculture.” Yet he feels the procurement policies of the government need to be biased more towards farmers who embrace the technology of the green revolution. “Organic farmers are unable to sell their produce at a premium price due to the presence of middlemen”, he says. Within a few years, he feels, the demand for organic food products will rise manifold and farmers will increasingly embrace organic farming.

As Murugesan concludes optimistically, pointing towards his farm: “Within a few years, this will be a globally recognised model farm!”

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