



## Sowing the seeds of organic farming

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When he would come home from his modest half-acre farm after sundown, Ramesh Pradhan wouldn't go near his children and wife until he had bathed and changed his clothes. As a vegetable farmer in Nayagarh district's Kiriyananji village under Nuagaon block, Pradhan, 32, would reek of pesticides and fertilisers after a day of toil at his field, about 200 metres away from his home. He would be worried since many said his uncle Gopal Pradhan was struck by paralysis due to massive use of pesticides in his fields.

"The plants, especially brinjals, would grow luxuriantly with the use of chemical fertilisers. I sprayed the pesticides just a few days before they were plucked. The yield was high, but it did not have the same taste as I knew it during my childhood. What we were eating was poisonous, but I had no alternative," said Pradhan

Five years ago, however, Pradhan and a few of his farmer friends in Kiriyananji, around 70 km away from the state capital of Bhubaneswar, took the road less travelled.

Goaded by Nirmaan, a local NGO that encouraged organic farming, he started sowing seeds of Banapuri, a locally available brinjal variety that had almost disappeared from the region. He did not use chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Sceptical nonetheless, he used vermin compost and cowdung compost in his field. To battle the wilting leaves syndrome and the stem borer disease of brinjal plants, he used the powder of dried neem leaves.

Anita Jena of Nirmaan says, "Around 34 villages in Nuagaon are growing vegetables organically. Of course, we had to cajole them into doing so. But with a good yield and less cost involved, they are now growing brinjals, tomatoes and cabbages."

"I was not convinced till the brinjal plants started bearing fruit and when the leaves did not wilt. What more, the brinjals tasted much better than the hybrid varieties," said Pradhan. The young farmer is also happy that his crop is now much in demand with only a few complaining about the price tag of Rs 12 per kilo. The hybrid ones barely sell at Rs 4 per kilo.

Till about a decade ago, vegetables were cultivated in Orissa the inorganic way with brinjals swallowing large amounts of pesticides and fertilisers. Though Orissa accounts for almost 20 per cent of the brinjal production of India, next only to West Bengal, the cost of cultivating brinjal used to be high for poor farmers, most whom had less than one acre of land.

"The costs are quite less compared to inorganic farming. If I spent Rs 5,000 on fertilisers and pesticides for growing brinjals on my one and half acre land earlier, I spend as little as Rs 800 now," said Dasarathi Sahu, another farmer of Kiriyananji.

Babu Majhi, a small farmer of Khairaput village in neighbouring **Nayagarh** Sadar blockm Khairput, where almost all the 150 families grow vegetables for a living, too, was heavily dependent on fertilisers and pesticides till six years ago.

“For several years I kept incurring losses as the yield did not match my expenditure on the crop. The hybrid seeds that the local shopkeeper peddled grew into bigger fruits, but we had to buy the seeds every year. The hybrid brinjals used to be a syrupy pulp in curries. They were tasteless and did not sell for more than Rs 5-6 per kilo in the local markets,” said Majhi.

“We were tired of spraying pesticides in our fields. Though the yield in organic farming is less than that of inorganic and the brinjals are smaller, the input costs are also very less. All of us make profits,” said another villager Chakradhar Biswal.

Having re-adopted conventional varieties like Kakedi, Tenduphula and Banapuri, farmers like Biswal are convinced that organic farming is a sustainable way of life.

For its part, the state horticulture department is also trying to make farmers interested in organic farming. Director, state horticulture department, GD Sharma said his department was now giving 50 per cent subsidy to farmers who produce vermicompost.