

A Practice refreshed: Horticulture as an approach to a better life for farmers

Despite multiple risks, government support and convergence between different stakeholders facilitated horticulture to emerge as a bright spot of Odisha Agriculture.

-Adyut Anjuman

In our field as a development professional, we always wanted to explore the ideas of removing poverty out of the equation of human life cycle. We always wanted to discover other areas in agriculture towards sustainable income and a balanced environment friendly way of life. One of the methods that intrigued us was the concept of Horticulture farming. A team of Young Professionals from Poverty and Human Development Monitoring Agency (PHDMA), Government of Odisha interacted with the farmers practicing Horticulture for a long time to understand the benefits of it more clearly.

Farmers in our state are now getting conversant with the rapidly developing technology and improved sources of income for their lives. Education, health & hygiene, transport, business, etc. are more expensive than it was 10-15 years ago. Therefore, for a farmer to get in speed with the world, he/she must find alternatives apart from agriculture. Such an interesting alternative, that brought changes to many of the farmers in the district of Deogarh, Odisha is the practice of Horticulture. Horticulture is the science of growing and handling fruits, nuts, vegetables, herbs & flowers. The practice of plantation of various trees of fruits and vegetables has been done for decades. Deogarh district in specific had the most feasible ecosystem for Horticulture. With 56.08% of its land area as forests and surrounded by mountains, the district forms a perfect environment and a large watershed full of fertility and opportunities. And the concept of horticulture in the mind of the farmers was not a new one, it was a vision of patience and investment for a product that would cover for your lifetime or more.

So far the journey gives a strong sense of achievement that most of the successful farmers of horticulture had the vision at least a decade ago about the benefits they would receive now. The products of horticulture are difficult to nurture and maintain, therefore the government had launched various schemes and initiative that would help a farmer fulfil their goals. Schemes like MIDH, NHM, RKVY, etc are the pillars of the horticulture mission all over India. The government had played a crucial role in assisting the farmers technically and financially. With online portals like HORTNET, the farmers can get their costs subsidized and with technical assistance, they could bear

better and quality products. The District magistrate of Deogarh had envisioned that the farmers shall move towards non-paddy cultivation to achieve better monetary benefits. And through horticulture, the standard of living of an average farmer would improve concurrently. The government also converges with other departments like irrigation to provide borewells and fences, which in turn helps a farmer to get access to resources with ease. It is a practice that is now encouraged highly by the government as a method to alleviate poverty as well.

The farmers were quite confident about their approach to horticulture. They were obliged by the government for their support in their non-paddy practices. Some of the farmers had invested 20 years of their time and a crore of rupees towards their vision for horticultural products. Visionary farmers like Keshari Das had invested 19 years of his life towards horticulture in Deogarh. He now has 250 Mango trees, 400 Sagon trees & other trees like Lichi and oranges as well. His average sales a year reaches up to Rs.3 lakhs. Other farmers like Raj Kishore Pradhan was more inclined towards his perception of the flower business in the state. With the technical assistance of his brother, he established 8 poly houses on 12 acres of his land including flowers like Rose, gerbera, gypsophila, etc. With an investment of 21 lakhs over 6 years, 70% of his investment has been subsidized. With more time, he expects he will overcome his investments to profit and bring more diversification to his polyhouses.

Much of this can be credited to our farmers. With farmers like them, more and more small to large farmers are now understanding the importance of horticulture to bring economic improvement in their area. Even some experienced farmers like Jajati Kishore Biswal had discussed the environmental benefits of planting trees bearing fruits including the dispensing of oxygen and capturing CO₂. This shows the command of the farmers in their field and their experience leading to success. Horticulture is getting popular in practice and support by the government, but it needs more awareness in the ground. People don't take risks easily when there is a need to put plate in the table every day. Therefore, helping them understand the power of investing in future and providing them the initial push is important. With such examples in district like Deogarh, it may serve as a benchmark for other district to adapt and understand how to develop more than they already do and not just get constrained towards paddy cultivation.

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