



Farmer suicides do make seasonal headlines but their declining incomes and high indebtedness do not reflect the full extent of India's agrarian crisis. The seasonal migration to cities and the manifest ecological distress caused by climate aberrations are some other markers of the crisis. This is the beginning of a reportage series in NATIONAL HERALD to chronicle what's broken in Indian agriculture and how we may be able to fix it.

THE 'SAHAJA AHARAM' STORY (HOW TO) THINK LOCAL

How a community enterprise driven by small farmers, including an all-women cooperative, is building local food systems and bridging the gap between small organic farmers and urban consumers

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR
in Telangana/Andhra Pradesh

What strikes you first is the stunning variety of plants on this half-acre farm—fig, guava, mango, wild berries, vegetables, flowers... As we walk past this unlikely medley of trees, V. Malleshwaramma seems to inhale my reaction with some pride tinged with amusement.

Call it a nutrition garden, she says, with the self-assured authority of an expert who knows her botany and agronomy better than any textbook might teach you. "Everything is local; no hybrid, it's all desi," she says, while walking briskly under the lush green canopy.

There is also a small weather station on the farm—and solar food dryers to convert the waste or unsold greens into dried vegetables to extend their shelf life. A stone's throw away is her own parcel of land, where she has planted a variety of grain—red gram, paddy and some millets now on the verge of extinction elsewhere in India.

She is 47 and heads an all-woman farmers' cooperative in Musalireddygaripalli village (yes, articulating that name itself is an invitation to slow down). The village is in Kadapa district of Andhra Pradesh, nearly 450 km from Hyderabad. The Gayathri Mahila Rythula Mutually-aided Cooperative Society is a caste- and age-diverse community of 250 women farmer members.

It's monsoon time, and India's main *khari* agriculture season—June through October—is in full swing. A majority of these farmers have small holdings of 1-3 hectares and they are all highly preoccupied with the farm work at hand.

Variety Diversity. Chemical-free. Collective. These are words she uses as incantations as she speaks of her journey from being an indebted farmer, who worked as a daily wage labourer to make ends meet, to a successful organic farmer-entrepreneur. She is one of several women who have together scripted this most astonishing story of an all-women farmer cooperative that produces and sells organic food to consumers in the cities.

"My father would tell me," she says: it's okay to look after your own interests, but it's not okay to gloss over the interests and well-being of the poor and the meek." The strength of the collective, she says, lies in standing together, learning together, and sharing the journey together. Alone, she says, you stand no chance in the market. "Us," she enthuses, "not me".

This was not always the case, she recalls. "Barely two decades ago, we were poor and indebted, and life seemed a never-ending struggle."

In her home-cum-cooperative society office, small beautifully decorated earthen pots hold an array of seeds that the group happily distributes free to anybody within the village. "This," she says, "is the celebration of our local food."

Most members of the group are marginal farmers, who have over the years managed to win their most important right: a land title. Like Gangadevi, who owns 3 acres, on which she grows cotton and millets; she also has a small lemon orchard.

Going organic means a lot of work, but working with soil, organic manure and everything natural makes her happy. That's why, says Malleshwaramma, more than merely producing and selling the organic produce, the collective has brought about a fundamental change in the way people view women farmers—and farming. They are

The maxim of Sahaja Aharam (literally: easy/natural food) is simple: shorter the supply chain, better it is for the farmer; the ecology and the economy. The farmer gets a better price and the entire food value chain has a much smaller ecological footprint

more confident and self-reliant now, she says, than they were, say, 20 years ago, when this journey hadn't begun.

We are now in Hyderabad, at a store run by a federation of over a dozen farmer cooperatives—including the all-women co-op Malleshwaramma heads; it's called the Sahaja Aharam Producer Company Ltd (SAPCL).

On the shelves painted green and yellow are stacked a wide array of commodities (about 150, I'm told), in easy-to-carry packs—there is rice, millets, groundnut, jaggery, dairy products, ready-to-eat snacks—and freshly harvested greens.

In a small room adjoining the outlet, two women are busy frying millet crackers, which the store sells in 50/100 gram packets. "This are all organic, poison-free," says Sandhya, the young storekeeper.

N. Kishor, a regular customer at the store, pipes in: "This food is healthier, and tastes much, much better than anything we get elsewhere." And then, with a twinkle in his eye: "You have to stay with it for some time to experience the benefits." There are other regulars here, and they nod in clubby agreement. They are also proud to be part of the local food system, where they know the growers. "We know who he is," says Kishor, a man in his 40s, who once worked in Hyderabad's IT (Information Technology) City, pointing to a sticker on the wall displaying one of the Sahaja farmers from a nearby village.

"People stepping into our stores get to know who is growing food for them," says the Sahaja Aharam CEO T.P. Prasanna Kumar. Consumers are informed about the ecological footprint of their food—from where and how it comes to them and what growing the food does to the environment and its growers, he adds. Local customers are partners in this enterprise. For a socially conscious urban clientele, the call to 'eat poison-free local food' is persuasive.

G.V. Ramanjaneyulu, executive director of the not-for-profit Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) in Hyderabad is a plant scientist, formerly with the government-run Indian Institute of Oilseeds Research. CSA, he explains, acts as a bridge between food growers and consumers.

Formed in 2014 as a federation of cooperatives to create a small farmers' organic brand, Sahaja Aharam also translates as 'natural food' and uses the tagline 'Add health to your life'. Eight years later, it has not only earned the trust of consumers but has also positioned itself as one of the best in the vast and competitive Indian organic marketplace.

This is the story of an organic brand evolving out of the collectivisation of small and marginal farmers and a local food system that aspires to be sustainable and chemical-free. On the one end is the urban consumer, oblivious of the complexities of food systems, on the other is the grower herself.

"We are like service providers—we mobilise farmers, build their capacity in new and sustainable systems of production, create market linkages, help farmers with integration of farm and human resources, intervene strategically in production systems, markets and policy," Ramanjaneyulu explains.

This is how it works: CSA handholds producer collectives, builds capacities and provides important services and connects them to markets and end-consumers, willing to pay an extra buck for chemical-free food.

"While we handhold farmers and build

10,000
certified organic growers across 16 cooperatives are part of the Sahaja Aharam Producer Company Ltd (SAPCL)

₹50 crore
is the average annual turnover of all the cooperatives and their federation put together

₹3 crore
is the average annual turnover of SAPCL

50,000
is the number of members the Sahaja group expects to have over the next five years

150
different organic products—from grain to fruits to greens to dairy products, things that consumers need every day—are grown by the cooperatives

their capacities, we also hold awareness programmes and events for urban consumers to educate them about their food systems," Ramanjaneyulu explains. To that end, his TED Talk remains one of the most viewed sessions on the popular website. The maxim is simple, he explains: "Shorter the supply chain, better it is for the ecology and economy; farmers get a better price with a smaller ecological footprint."

Sahaja has decentralised systems: aggregation, primary processing, secondary value addition at local village or cluster-level hubs that are cost-effective and manageable. For instance, Malleshwaramma's cooperative aggregates the organic produce of all its members, does the primary processing and grading at the village level, and sends them off to the Sahaja warehouse in Hyderabad, a facility that stores, sometimes packages, and labels its products. Dedicated staff dispatch the products to retail outlets. "It's about efficiency at all levels," Ramanjaneyulu says, "... and we work on it tirelessly."

Sahaja does not allow its perishables to go waste. "We have installed solar dryers; unbought perishables are dried and sold in a different way to different buyers," he says. Each of the Sahaja cooperatives is unique, non-replicable but scalable; the structures and designs of the organisations adaptable to different conditions.

As of today, the federation has 16 cooperatives with a combined membership of around 10,000 certified organic growers, supplying over 150 products—from grain to fruits to greens to dairy products, things that consumers need every day. The average annual turnover of SAPCL is Rs 3 crore and of all the cooperatives and their federation put together about Rs 50 crore.

Over the next five years, Sahaja groups will have nearly 50-60 farmer cooperatives with 50,000 members, growing at least 150 different organic products—rice, millets, vegetables, fruits, jaggery, milk products, and a personal care and healthcare range as well, including soap, skin creams and lotions.

CSA in 2004 began addressing how to bring down production costs by switching to sustainable practices. That's when NPM (non-pesticide management) was born.



Photos: Jaideep Hardikar

V. Malleshwaramma on her multi-crop farm in Musalireddygaripalli village of Kadapa district in Andhra Pradesh

Enebavi, a small village of 54 farm households, was the first experiment. It took five years for the CSA to convince farmers and demonstrate the benefits of organic practices. The transition required time and multiple resources, involvement of trained staff, close monitoring and training of villagers. "We haven't gone back to chemicals since," says Ponnamm Parameshwar, 50, former chief of the village farmers' cooperative society, the first in the Sahaja producers' company.

After the initial decline in productivity, Enebavi farmers saw their yields getting better, soils nourished, and demand for their produce go up. It needed multiple efforts: from conserving and efficiently using rainwater to improvements in the use of bio-fertilisers to crop diversification.

Besides growing paddy, cotton, green vegetables and red gram, the Enebavi collective also has a dairy. Apart from selling under their own brand, the farmers sell their produce to steady and bulk buyers such as a canteen or a hostel in a nearby college, says Ponnamm Mallaiyya, a former president of this cooperative.

By 2009, Enebavi became the first fully organic village. Over the next five years, the efforts gained momentum as state governments and donor agencies began backing the experiment with funds and resources. More and more farmers began to take to the organic method, if only first to escape the distress of the old system.

Then the question arose: now that farmers are growing organic, collectivising themselves into cooperatives, where and how do we sell this produce? "We realised that farmers do not benefit much merely by reducing production costs," says CSA's chief operating officer (operations) G. Rajashekhar. "They had to be collectivised and integrated into an end-to-end value chain—an audacious but not impossible dream."

While reducing chemical use also brought down production costs, the real benefit lay in the entire value chain. Other systems needed a fix: the unproductive soils, the seed systems, credit and other financial support, primary and secondary processing—and the market.

Small manageable groups of 10-15 farmers were brought together for what sociologists call 'mutually beneficial community action'. For scale and viability, several small groups were yoked together to form bigger groups to build a sustainable and efficient value chain. There are thus small groups within a cooperative of 300-500 organic growers scattered in villages, under the Sahaja umbrella, which connects them and coordinates their operations.

Sharing is the essence of the Sahaja existence. The members share their seeds and their learnings with each other: During the Covid-19 lockdown, most cooperatives under the Sahaja umbrella sourced fresh vegetables and grain and distributed them to needy people in and around their villages.

With a footprint in over 200 villages of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and about 40,000 members, the CSA has been able, Ramanjaneyulu says, to bring down farmer suicides in these villages. "That itself has been a big takeaway," he says.

"What's really remarkable is that despite no previous experience of marketing, small farmers have successfully created a market for organic products," remarks Prof. Antonia Marika Vicziany, Emeritus Professor and currently Director of the National Centre for South Asia Studies at the Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Australia.

In 2016-17, she and her colleague Prof. Jagjit Plahe studied the Sahaja Aharam model as part of their larger study on community-managed local food systems. "Producing organic produce is one thing, marketing quite another, but Sahaja succeeded in tapping markets at a time when the

Small manageable groups of 10-15 farmers are brought together for 'mutually beneficial community action'. Small groups are yoked together to form bigger groups to build an efficient value chain. There are small groups within a cooperative of 300-500 organic growers across villages, under the Sahaja umbrella

Indian government is opening up food retail to multinational corporations."

Sahaja now has four retail stores—three in Hyderabad (Telangana) and one in the coastal city of Vishakhapatnam—which account for 43 per cent of its revenues. It makes bulk sales to partner aggregators of organic produce. It makes online deliveries and has mobile vans that go into neighbourhoods twice a week with supplies of perishables and grain. It has WhatsApp groups of regular consumers, and the latest initiative is B2B sales, where Sahaja products compete with other organic brands, increasing their visibility and market access.

"I don't want to leave this initiative because I'm part of something important," says Paradesi Das, a 27-year-old marketing executive of Sahaja, who handles stores and sales. A team of 45 professionals like Das manage the stores, the back-end operations and sales.

In the villages, CSA has trained the cooperatives to deliver six big services to members, including custom hiring of farm equipment, sourcing inputs and sundry financial services. "We do oversee things but we want to ensure that the farmers are able to manage the entire enterprise on their own," says K. Adinarayana, in charge of CSA's Rayalaseema hub in Pulivendula town of Andhra Pradesh.

Next on the horizon? The CEO of Sahaja Aharam in Hyderabad Prasanna Kumar says: "We are exploring export markets and a franchisee model to expand our market footprint."

Over the next three to four years, about 40 newly formed farmer/producer companies the CSA is handholding will bring in their fully organic commodities for sales. Sahaja Aharam is on a growth path, which is "why we are [now] tapping export markets," says Prasanna.

The CSA is now consulted by state governments and other groups on organic farming. It is also a recognised agency for organic certification, thanks to its modern laboratories and acknowledged knowhow.

New independent entities are sprouting, inspired by the Sahaja initiative. Last year, a group of women farmers in and around Hyderabad created their own collective called 'BeNishan' (meaning in this case: without a symbol). They grow organic mango.

The Sahaja enterprise has shattered the myth that small farmers cannot be entrepreneurs, but the idea is not to create a beehive, says Prasanna Kumar, but self-sustaining local enterprises. ■

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A Sahaja Aharam store in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh