

Back to the aboriginal

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What does sustainable living with minimal money look like? Especially after you settle to live on a tenth of your last pay cheque?

About 100 km south of Chennai's coastline, down East Coast Road, is a sleepy hamlet called Netrampakkam. On a hot April afternoon, chances are you'll run into a group of women and men harvesting millets. While the local men are dressed in shirts and cargos with baseball hats and sandals on their feet, it's easy to spot Siddharth. He is the only one in a veshti which flutters in the breeze as he walks barefoot through his patches of groundnut and sesame.

The doors of his small thatched-roof home are open on either end, allowing for healthy air circulation. A bamboo-jute ladder leads to the single bedroom, the red-oxide floor of which is piled with books. An Amma table fan is one of the only two things — a light bulb in the kitchen being the other — in this self-made house that runs on electricity. The bedroom stares into the hollow inside of a pyramid roof that he helped build with palmyra leaves and tin sheets.

In the kitchen below, cats lie lazily around a dish rack of steel tumblers and dabaras while the stove splutters with a pot full of vathakozhambu made with vegetables — pumpkin, lady's fingers, potato, carrot and beans — from Siddharth's own garden. There is no ceiling fan, air conditioner, fridge, laptop or internet. Outside the house lies a diesel pump, which is used to draw water from a well.

It's hard to not feel a pang of surprise when your body doesn't protest to the threadbare surroundings; that it can feel fulfilled drawing so little from the world outside. "Yes, for a visitor, it is easy to romanticise farm life," says Siddharth, his cheeks gaunt and sunburnt.

Ten years ago Siddharth, an IIT-IIM alumnus, put the brakes on his corporate career — that of a vice-president for a technology R&D firm, jetsetting between Silicon Valley and Chennai's IT hub. He was 35 when he picked up a shovel to become an organic farmer instead. Not a landlord who employs labour but, quite literally, a subsistence farmer, who works to the bone to grow food for himself and some extra that he sells to friends and family. "I live in the least environmentally disruptive way I know as possible," says Siddharth.

Living on a sliver

Initially, it wasn't clear what he quit his job and the lifestyle that came with it for. All Siddharth knew was that he had earned enough. It seemed important to draw a line. "I wanted to learn and conserve that intimate knowledge of farming ecology, which was getting lost in the cusp of green revolution and market-driven monocropping".

About eight years of farming experiments later he moved to Netrampakkam in 2014 and purchased two and a quarter acres of land on which he grows cereals (rice and ragi), oilseeds (sesame and groundnut), pulses (green and black gram), fruits (banana and chikoo) and vegetables (string beans, cowpea, chilli, spinach, pumpkin and more). Input costs are reduced by avoiding till farming and employing methods such as crop rotation and growing a rich bed of sun hemp (green manure).

Siddharth only keeps a fourth of the produce for himself. He sells the rest mostly to friends and family directly, albeit, with several self-imposed rules: such as not to mechanise where possible, make farming decisions based on his soil's ecology and never with a motive for profit. Mappillai samba, one of the prized varieties of organic grains, known for its properties that fight cancer and boost haemoglobin, sells in Chennai for Rs.120 a kilo while Siddharth pegs his price at Rs.90.

"I use money with restraint and avoid its use when possible. The motive isn't to profit. I want to be that human face behind organic food," he says, stressing that food production has become a faceless sterile process. Some of his friends drive down to the farm to witness the life he leads. They also buy from him. "An interaction with the farmer connects us more to our food," he adds.

But what does such a life give? In terms of income, under Rs.2 lakh per annum, which is less than a 10th of the salary Siddharth made a decade ago. And when there is a year of drought — the current one, for instance — he can expect only half the sum. Usually, Siddharth makes just enough to meet the running expenses — hiring minimal labour, bullocks for ploughing, renting tractor, and the purchase of some food commodities, non-chemical toiletries and occasional travel. Savings are rarely tapped into. But money isn't the point at all, argues Siddharth. It is about quality of living, with meaning and purpose.

A marriage on a farm

When I meet Sriram (43), Siddharth's neighbour-farmer, he is gently lifting two hot black boxes out of his glass-top solar cooker. The red-and-white rice, soaked in the morning, has, by sunset, cooked to perfection. Such moments are not rare on this farm, but Sriram, who settled here with wife Karpagam seven years ago, still shows childlike excitement. The couple quit cushy sales and customer-interface jobs in Chennai to choose a life that is radically different.

In their seven-and-half acres, Sriram and Karpagam grow different kinds of trees (fruit, timber, forest), paddy, legumes, oilseeds and vegetables. Their purpose too is to live minimally, reuse all waste and, in Sriram's words, "ensure that the very act of farming is a worship of Mother Nature".

They took only 25 days and minimal labour to build the 300 sq ft one-bedroom structure they call home. It cost them less than Rs.2 lakh, thanks to the hours of work they themselves put in. Sriram and Karpagam are also expert waste managers. The ash from their cooking goes into cleaning vessels; weeds and post-harvest waste are ploughed back as mulch for the soil, and they even use a charcoal bed for urination.

The duo, unlike Siddharth, has not set any rules on commerce. And their connection with the outside world is relatively higher. For instance, they own a tractor, they consume electricity, they own a dial-up internet connection, they hire labour while transplanting paddy and harvesting, and they also make a modest profit by putting their produce on the market for sale.

And yet, their income last year was Rs.1.3 lakh. That is less than five per cent of what their peers make in the corporate industry today or what they chose to forego. "But our costs are so low!" quickly adds Sriram, before waves of pity come his way. Their food and travel costs are almost nil. Their only real expenses are farm inputs and labour. "We treat money like it was designed to be — a medium of exchange. Not to be hoarded. It is like a sharp tool... handle with care!" he says.

The radical

A tall swirling light-metal windmill overlooks Point Return, a 17-acre farm in Madurantakam, not far from the ones owned by Siddharth, and Sriram and Karpagam.

In 2002, DV Sreedharan, former marine engineer-turned-environmentalist, bought this fallow, barren land with the aim of restoring it into a fully organic, community-run sustainable farm. It was a project in sustainability, to show that the unthinkable could be done with collective human effort. "The point is to return to nature," says Sreedharan, 75, who divides his time between his home in Chennai's Adyar and Point Return.

With a handful of volunteers disillusioned with corporate life (read: Siddharth, Sriram and Karpagam), Sreedharan set out with a few maxims: He would provide food, shelter, water and energy for 40 heads. The aim was to return these back to nature — food in the form of grains and vegetables, shelter by growing wood, water by recharging groundwater, and energy in the form of biofuel generated from the oilseeds of 400 Pongamia Pinnata trees (known locally as karanj).

"I look at nature as a banker from whom I only borrow resources. The world views nature as a resource meant to be exploited. That's the reason we are digging into our Gangetic plains today for fossil water. I want to be that ancestor who left behind water, trees and topsoil," he says.

Today, Point Return's windmill generates enough energy to pump 5,000 litres of groundwater a day to irrigate the farm. Rainwater is trapped through six large swales criss-crossing the farm. A house made of bamboo and thatched roof is where volunteers live, and a large solar panel provides the energy to light a few bulbs.

Sreedharan used his real estate gains to invest a crore into Point Return's land and durable technology, such as the windmill, solar panels, a tractor-weeder and post-harvest crusher. Add to that a recurring monthly investment of Rs.30,000-40,000. It sounds even more ironic that each month the grains, vegetables, fruits and oilseeds are promptly weighed, recorded, partially consumed and then distributed among people in villages nearby. Over the last six years, Point Return has grown over two tonnes of food, without selling a grain. "The measure of success is how much food I produce, not how much money I made," insists Sreedharan.

But how can there be no money motive?

"You require a perverse kind of thinking. That groundwater, those trees and quarter inch of topsoil is my wealth, which didn't exist before Point Return," he says in all seriousness, monetising his "wealth" by putting a value of Rs.2 per litre of groundwater. "That's worth eight million a year," he says.

But is the economics of what Siddharth, Sriram, Karpagam and Sreedharan do sustainable? Their answers range from "barely" to downright "no".

As Siddharth says, the life-changing decision wasn't about money at all. It was about the quiet joy of growing food, for the chance to embrace traditional knowledge, for good health, clean air and peace. But most of all for that indescribable feeling of winging it on your own — as a farmer, harvester, cook, mason, builder, labourer, electrician, plumber, doctor and everything in between — and becoming, finally, that aboriginal he always admired. These are things that money can't buy.

First published by *The Hindu Businessline*