

# How Kanjikuzhi became Kerala's first chemical-free, vegetable-sufficient panchayat

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*Residents of Kanjikuzhi take pride in closely monitoring their crops every day. | Photo Credit: H. Vibhu*

## The village started its experiments in organic farming way back in 1994, when most of India hadn't heard of the concept

The sea breeze blows gently, laden with the smell of sand and salt, as I make my way to Kanjikuzhi, a coastal village in Kerala's Alappuzha district. Once I enter the village, the air is suddenly crisp with a new aroma. Of vegetables, gathered fresh from gardens.

Kanjikuzhi presents a picture very different from the rest of India. At a time when vegetables are getting scarce even in villages, Kanjikuzhi is brimming with surplus veggies, that too grown organically. The only vegetable-sufficient panchayat in

[Kerala.](#)

Kanjikuzhi is a model worth emulating. More so because it started its experiments in organic farming way back in 1994, when most of India hadn't heard of the concept.

How did it all start? Since Kanjikuzhi's soil was deemed unfit for **agriculture**, it had to depend chiefly on vegetables procured from other parts of Kerala. This jacked up the prices of veggies. On top of this, the villagers' income from local industries (chiefly coir) was measly. So, the then panchayat heads called for a revolution: they decided that the future lay in organic farming, undertaken by farming families of the village. "It was important that vegetables were not bought, but grown right here," says the panchayat president, M.G. Raju.

"When we hit upon the idea, challenges loomed ahead. It is not just that the soil was not good enough for cultivation but there was also the need to educate people on organic farming. More importantly, there was the need to devise a practical and efficient method to ensure the continuity of the project," he adds.

Formulating a plan, the panchayat committee invited the 8,600 families to grow vegetables — from bitter melon, red spinach, cauliflower, to beans and more — at home, in backyards and on terraces. The idea was to use every available space for farming. The initial funding came from the panchayat. "To ensure sustained practice, a smaller committee called Karshika Karmasena was trained to monitor and encourage the growers. It was an arduous process, but eventually the pH balance and nutrient levels of the soil were restored, and pest-prevention methods were implemented while techniques that support organic farming were developed locally," explains Raju.

Sanu, who has been farming in Kanjikuzhi for the past 16 years. | Photo Credit: [H. Vibhu](#)

## Farmer knows best

Once the system had been put in place, the responsibility to keep it running was vested with the villagers. So, to this day, each family monitors the amount of manure required and the pest-control procedure. "The farmers know what works best for them. They arrive at it through a trial-and-error method," says Raju. If there is one absolute rule, it is that no chemicals are to be used in cultivation.

The panchayat offers free seeds and saplings, which are grown in greenhouses by [Kudumbashree](#), a women's self-help organisation. "Last year we gave away more than 50 lakh saplings. We also provide facilities for low-cost, eco-friendly composting," says Raju.

Kanjikuzhi no longer needs to get vegetables from elsewhere. "Earlier vegetables had to be brought to the village from neighbouring cities. Now we have our fresh, organically-grown vegetables sold in the local market," says Raju. When they began to produce surplus, shanties appeared on the highway, selling the vegetables to travellers. "Our vegetables began reaching the cities from which we had once bought them. When we offer organic produce at a reasonable price, we believe we are addressing two aspects of a buyer's need — finance and health."

One of the farmers' outlets in their village. | Photo Credit: [H. Vibhu](#)

Life in the village has changed. The bounty has brought in prosperity. Some of the villagers earn as much as **₹50,000** a month, and they farm all through the year. They also give classes on organic farming; some have even developed hybrid vegetable varieties. Forty-eight-year-old Subhakeshan supports his family by selling the seeds of a local hybrid bean referred to as the Kanjikuzhi bean. "I started cultivating 2% land — this has expanded to 25% now; farming has changed my life," he says. Another farmer, 71-year-old Anandhan, says that he cultivates all year round. The trick, he explains, is to stop cultivating at 80% yield: "That is when diseases tend to strike. This way I am able to cultivate all-year through, three rounds of it."

Lessons on farming are compulsory in local schools to prepare the next generation. "The soil is rich with nutrients now and our children grow up having healthy, chemical-free food," says Raju, speaking for the village. The panchayat had an annual turnover of **₹14 crore** in the last financial year and Kanjikuzhi's produce is relished all over Kerala, no mean feat for a village that started out as a sandy beachside place.

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