

Placing faith in the farmer

Author - Shiba Desor, Published on - 28.8.2015

Gorus Organic Farming Association, supplying to more than 200 consumers in Pune, works on the model of Community supported agriculture (CSA), meaning that by advanced bookings from consumers, organic farmers get a year around guarantee of purchase at an assured price. The following piece, based on a conversation with Gorus's founder and managing director, Ashwin Paranjpe, describes the journey, the ideas and the challenges faced by Gorus.

[How did you get involved with this? Why?](#)

Ashwin: I did my BSc in Agriculture from Pune in 1998. I was interested in farming after my education but felt the course to be outdated with too much focus on chemical agriculture and little depth. The degree was in fact seen by most people as merely a ticket for getting into government service. I went to Florida for my Master's where I studied hydroponic vegetable production. For my experiment I was doing strawberry production using hydroponics which required a huge amount of pesticide spraying every alternate day. I experienced health problems firsthand because of the spraying. I also felt a great discomfort as the project was funded under the pretext of looking for alternatives for methyl bromide but the alternatives themselves were again based on a dependence on harmful chemicals. So in the middle of the course I changed direction, wrote to USDA for a project on organic strawberry production and got a funding from 3rd year onwards. It took me to hit the rock bottom, see the worst impact of chemicals, to be able to make me change my direction.

In my last year of studies, I spent 6 months at a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm which used to supply vegetables through organic farming to 60 families. The time at the farm had an impact on my thinking and got me interested in the CSA model. I came back to India and worked for a year in watershed development with Gomukh Environmental Trust. I then got married in Spain and was there for 4 months. During that time I decided to start farming on an abandoned olive orchard. While farming in Spain, I interacted with several organic farmers and CSA groups. These interactions have also had a lasting impact. These people had an alternative undercurrent, an underlying philosophy which was opposed to genetic modification and looking at an alternative politics for food and agriculture.

In 2007, I came back to India with a clear idea of wanting to establish a CSA network in Pune.

What does CSA mean? Once you were back in India, how did you go about it?

Ashwin: CSA means that consumers understand that agriculture has its inherent risks and uncertainties of water, labour, pest, disease, etc. due to which the quantity, quality, and consistency of supply of the farm produce cannot be guaranteed. Such systems are important if we want to keep small scale agriculture as a viable livelihood for people engaged in it.

Consumers speaking with farmers

It helped that we already had a prior relationship with many local farmers because of my prior association with Gomukh. Explaining to them about the possibilities for selling organic food was also not that hard. Getting them to make the actual shift was the really challenging task.

We took them for visits to a number of organic farmers. Then we asked them if they would make the shift if they got a market. So with the help of three farmers we set up a quarter acre demonstration plot at Gomukh Trust's farm in Mulshi Taluka where we grew 15-20 vegetables in summer on raised beds. We used cattle manure, compost, drip irrigation and used weeds for mulching. On the consumer side, we could get 7-8 families to promise support. The objective was to demonstrate to local farmers the viability of organic cultivation. After the demonstration a few farmers agreed to try on their land. We provided drip irrigation systems as an incentive.

By 2008, Gorus had informally started.

In the first year itself they could get a gross income of Rs 1000 per

guntha

(100 square metre) and were able to replay the cost of the drip irrigation system. We were supplying to 15-20 families in Pune at Rs 32 per kg for common vegetables and Rs. 80 per kg for continental vegetables.

As far as possible, we verify and ascertain the authenticity of the farm produce and other groceries. For fresh produce, this is done by following the PGS (Participatory Guarantee Scheme) protocol based on peer pressure and trust, where a local group visits all farms at least once a year.

Gorus team photograph

[How has Gorus evolved?](#)

Ashwin: At present we have 35-40 farmers growing vegetables and fruits (and about 100 growing cereals, pulses, millets and oilseeds) and distribute food to 200 families. The farmers have an average landholding of 3-4 acres. We provide baskets of seasonal vegetables (containing 8-15 seasonal vegetable) apart from other groceries. The bookings can be made online and need to be for one season (9 weeks) in advance.

It requires meticulous planning at each step, for crop pattern, how much to harvest and when (based on orders), packaging (in canvas bags) and home-delivery. Different crops and vegetables on a small land implies a system of multicropping. This is not always preferred by farmers since it requires constant management and tending, and a lot of hours of manual labour. Transport costs are high. Meeting customer expectations can also be a challenge, since our palates have become 'unseasonal' and in a constant need of variety.

An alternative market arrangement is an important aspect of this initiative. It is independent of the conventional market dynamics. It focuses on fixing price through farmers, and then adding grading, sorting, transporting costs. When we formalised in 2014, deliberately kept that as a rule that farmers have to get atleast

50% share of the price being paid by the consumer for fresh vegetables, and more than 60% for grain. We have tried to keep work within ethical commerce-sustainable agricultural practices along with humane 'Human Resources'.

For bridging the widening gaps between consumers and producers, we have organized many interactions between them, as well as visits to organic farms, where people can talk of recipes, food and farming.

Gorus has a committed staff that coordinates between the farmers and the consumers: 6 men, 4 women. All are from the village. Only one doesn't own land, rest supply to Gorus as farmers apart from being staff.

It started with Gomukh's support but has become financially independent now (except for some infrastructural support). In 2013, Gorus was registered as a Not for Profit Company.

At present, we are focusing more on diversifying product range rather than expanding in numbers. Apart from the cereals and vegetables sourced from local farmers, for some products, we have established connections with organic ecofriendly products across 5 states (Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala)

Sundried products from Gorus

What are the major challenges being faced by organic agriculture?

Ashwin: Organic farming has a history of 10000 years. As per FAO figures (counting only certified organic farm land), 35 million hectare land comes under organic farming. Apart from that there is an estimated 60 million ha. non certified organic land. This land is currently under threat of being dictated by the mainstream policies favouring irrigation, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, GM crops. So looking at the overall scenario in India, the picture is a dismal one. While Genetically Modified crops are one big concern, even a more serious one is regarding the large-scale move towards factory farming creating monocultural patterns based on mechanisation, farm aggregation rather than the small biodiverse farms India traditionally had. Food will then be mass-produced. Practically speaking, this is unfortunately likely to happen in India. Only around 5% may remain as small farms which might turn organic- catering to small pockets of conscious consumers.

For the whole thing to work, it needs to be driven by commerce rather than just ideology. Market system has to be restructured to value the farmer and his produce. This is happening in some places where urban consumers have started taking a deep interest in their food and its production, connecting with farmers and doing some farming themselves through movements towards urban rooftop gardening and kitchen gardens. If nothing else, such initiatives provide a hope, a glimpse of a potential to change the way in which a society produces, consumes and shares food.

(The author thanks Ashwin Paranjpe for the information, and for providing the photographs)

Contact **the author**

First published on the *author's blog*

Crazy Carrots

Read the author's piece on an

Urban Food Swap in Australia that she attended

on this page