

Waste dump near Kochi is now home of new rice brand

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A collective of 17 young men worked for 3 years to revive discarded paddy fields



The reclaimed land in Aluva. (Express photo: Shaju Philip)

FROM CONSTRUCTION to engineering and IT, they came from different backgrounds, united by a passion for farming, and a dream to do good. Today, these 17 young men are the heroes of an entire panchayat beyond the outer edge of Kochi.

Guided by Kerala's agriculture department and scientists, they toiled for three years to convert nearly 50 acres of stinking garbage land that had eaten up the fading paddy fields of Choornikkara in Aluva into the lush green home of a new rice brand. They call it Choornikkara rice.

This transformation, which includes a small park with benches overlooking the fields, has also helped improve the life of local residents and even the quality of water in their wells.

Until these men came together to start Adayalam, a self-help group, residents say urbanisation had been engulfing Choornikkara, with municipal towns on three sides, leaving only about 200 of the 350 acres of fields suitable for cultivation. And with farmers shifting to other sources of income in rapidly growing Kochi, the paddy fields of Choornikkara slowly became a ground for dumping waste.

"When the Kochi Metro acquired the paddy fields for its yard, they gave Rs 1.01 lakh for one cent of land. Many land-owners then started leaving their land barren, expecting further acquisition. They were no longer interested in cultivation. We approached the land-owners, seeking their consent to hand over their fields to our group," says Ansar P M, 34, who hails from Choornikkara, like many others in the group, and is the face of the initiative.

"In 2016-17, we got 15 acres of land on lease from 40 owners for cultivation, and the sanction and subsidy from the agriculture department. The major task was waste removal. We had to spend Rs 10 lakh just to get the fields cleared of waste dumped over the years," he says.

Soon, others began to take note — and extend a helping hand.

Says Dr N K Sasidharan, a scientist who retired from the Kerala Agricultural University: "They did not have any idea about cultivation. But they diligently followed our advice on farming. Usually, farmers don't completely accept what scientists tell them. These youths were open to implement whatever we suggested."

Apart from Ansar, others in the collective include Muhasin K M (21), who works as a trainee at Travancore Cochin Chemicals; Fahad K A (29), who works as a journalist with a website; Rinshad T B (28), who works with an IT firm; and, others from the panchayat and nearby areas.

"In the first year itself, the venture fetched a good harvest with eight tonnes of paddy from 15 acres. It was branded as Choornikkara rice and sold in local markets at Rs 35 per kg. All 8,000 households in the panchayat were given two kg of rice at Rs 35. The land owners were given one-fifth of the proceedings, depending on the size of their paddy-field," says Ansar.

The first step taken, the collective started working on an alternative system to dispose waste. "We set up collection bins for plastic waste in several parts. Since 2016, Adayalam has collected 80 tonnes of plastic waste, which was shifted to recycling units," says Ansar, who works for a local cooperative that provides interest-free loans.

According to John Sherry, the state agriculture officer in Choornikkara, changes were felt in the first year of cultivation. "Before we started cultivation, most wells in the project region were not suitable for drawing drinking water. A scientific analysis showed the presence of e-coli bacteria. After the waste was removed, and cultivation started, the water profile changed. Post-harvest, we found zero e-coli bacteria in the water," he says.

For 2017-18, the collective took another 15 acres for cultivation, which was increased to 45 acres last year. In 2018-19, the total paddy cultivated added up to 115 tonnes, of which 74 tonnes were sold to the state civil supplies corporation and rest converted into rice and sold in the markets. The group is now planning to expand cultivation to 100 acres in the next season.

Local residents, meanwhile, are a happy lot.

"I had left 50 cents of land barren for the last 20 years. We cannot take up paddy cultivation in such a small area. The water in my well could not be used for drinking, either. But after this group started cultivating my land and nearby areas, the quality of water improved. Now, we draw water from the well for drinking. More people are ready to hand over land to these youngsters," says K M Ali, a land-owner in Choornikkara.

Says A P Udayakumar, panchayat member: "When waste was being dumped, the fields and nearby areas had become a haven for criminals. Now, people spend their evenings here with families."

First published by

The Indian Express

on 27 May 2019