

GALLERY



Sheeba Nair and Mehul Panchal beside an agricultural model at Oasis Valley

Sheeba Nair has been spearheading a feel-good initiative for farmers in India. She is showing them how to rethink and remedy rather than take their own lives. Manju Ramanan reports

HERE, THE GRASS IS GREENER



THE road we are on winds out of Dabhoi as we drive from Baroda to Mandwa, near Chanod in Gujarat, where the Narmada meets the River Orsang.

We are off to Oasis Valley — the model farm Sheeba Nair helped set up to prevent farmer suicides in India. Gujarat's share of farmer deaths is negligible when compared to Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh (the Central government has identified 31 districts as 'suicide spots', out of which 16 are in Andhra, six each in Maharashtra and Karnataka).

PHOTOGRAPHS: KAMLESH SURVE

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Why allow such suicides to happen at all, was the question that made Sheeba, managing trustee of Oasis, shake off her indifference. Her organisation operates in two cities — Baroda and Bangalore. It aims to motivate young people to take up socially relevant causes.

An organic farm activist and winner of the National Award For Excellence in Social Work (2001-02), Sheeba is accompanied by team member and friend Mehul Panchal. Mehul, an engineering graduate, quit a string of jobs to turn farmer.

Oasis Valley, their nine-acre organic farm at Mandwa, is located about 100 metres away from the Narmada River. It was acquired in 2003 at a cost of Rs 3 lakh. Sheeba herself

contributed her National Award prize money — Rs 50,000 — to the venture. Research conducted by Oasis on farmer suicides revealed that much could be amended.

Oasis found that the high cost of production in farming set off a chain reaction that led to farmer suicides. Sheeba and Mehul explain how it all starts with the hefty interest loan a farmer takes from a moneylender for seeds, labour, manure and pesticides. "If his crop fails, he is in debt and driven to suicide," says Mehul. So Oasis worked out a simple alternative — have farmers decrease the cost of production, by first producing for themselves and later for sale. Another cause is mono-cropping. "If the crop fails, the farmer is finished. Instead, if

As a model farm, Oasis Valley, largely ravine land that was dismissed as wasteland, annually grows 27 kinds of vegetables and 20 fruits

value-added crops like wheatgrass, broccoli, or mushroom are cultivated, the money could keep coming in," says Sheeba.

These findings led them to create an agricultural model at Oasis Valley that would prove farming's viability. After the land was obtained, they took a bank loan and asked to be treated no differently than regular farmers. "We cleared the land of its weeds, bought organic seeds and started farming," recalls Sheeba.

"We cultivated value-added crops — and today, the repayment has begun successfully. What's more, we have also opened up an Oasis store in Baroda that stocks our veggies and fruits," she says. As a model farm, Oasis Valley, largely ravine land that was dismissed as wasteland, annually grows 27 kinds of vegetables and 20 fruits, as well as items like wheatgrass.

"Using the Gangama Chakra model, a farmer with 1,000 sq ft of land can grow 15 to 16 varieties of vegetables, fruits, spices and medicinal plants, using 50 to 60 litres of water a day. The model is ideal for a family of four, with one member devoting an hour daily to produce two kilos each of vegetables and fruits," says Mehul.

He also has models at Oasis Valley for a farmer with more land, say 10,000 sq ft. The farmer can be self-sufficient by growing his own vegetables, fruits, grains, pulses and milk (by keeping a goat or cow), and also raise some firewood and bamboo for small constructions. Mehul is keen to have farmers from villages in Maharashtra and Karnataka visit and replicate this approach.

From filing pages to ploughing fields

How did a group of city slickers manage to change their own mindset? Striving to be the change they wanted to see, Sheeba and her team members tried to acclimatise themselves to rural

life first. It was a challenge living on a farm 60 km from Baroda. Mehul remembers how they would visit the area thrice a week only to have a senior farmer observe that those who till the soil need to be close to it, not visit like 'foreigners'.

Mehul experiments with organic farming too. He points out that this way they can create their own seeds and use as many local aids as possible, including manure and vermin compost instead of fertilisers. This is all part of a broader initiative to save the farmer. It is important that farmers recognise their own efforts and strengths and take pride in their work. So an upcoming character-building institute at Oasis Valley aims to educate them in the language of the world and hone their skills at marketing their products.

Women, who form a large percentage of farm labour, are also beneficiaries of Oasis' experiment, since they are very good at talking about their products "or marketing, as urban India calls it," says Sheeba.

In short, Oasis' aim is to equip farmers with entrepreneurial skills and knowledge about value-added crops so that they always have a market. Sheeba says this can only be achieved "if we sell organic veggies and fruits at the same price as other products. A venture like ours benefits the farmer in every way since it focuses on increasing agri-output and improving the existing economy."

Oasis' campaign for low-cost weddings, funerals and other rituals entailing loans has gathered support in the villages of Surat. It's been found that, "One marriage can take a farmer back 10 years in terms of economy."

Rural India calling

Many well-paid professionals are quitting their jobs and turning their sights to rural development. At Oasis, there are people interested in writing,



publishing, gathering funds, marketing and packaging. In Bangalore, Oasis' adolescent health and education programme focuses on slum women and children and is largely facilitated by housewives. "Urban India can really make a difference to the lives of the under-privileged if it takes the initiative," says Sheeba.

Setting up a character-building institute

The group's character-building institute at Oasis Valley aims to arm urban youth and teachers with knowledge, since, "Education too needs to be organic in nature and not a quick-fix," says Sheeba. "With greater technological progress, we are stressed out as a community. Indiscipline, insensitivity and lack of respect have become part of this lifestyle; so character building is important since it helps us understand ourselves as a race." Organic farming, farmer suicides, dowry, low-cost marriages, and character building are inextricably related, Sheeba says. "Be it the growth of a child, creating a farm, or facilitating minds, letting nature take its course has its benefits," she says. "Once the institute at Oasis Valley is set up, city-dwellers will pitch their tents there, work in the farms, cook and eat what they produce."

It's appropriate that Sheeba's exercise in suicide prevention should take place at Chanod, which is a *kriya-sthan*, a spot where ashes are immersed after Hindu cremation rites. No untimely rites are foreseen here for sure. **L**

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SHEEBA NAIR AND HER
GO ORGANIC CAMPAIGN?**

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