



## Oasis Valleys: A Model Organic Farm

**Oasis Valleys:**

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## **Our Philosophy about Organic Farming:**

Almost 65% of Indian population lives in Rural India, and more than 85% of them depend on agriculture as their livelihood. Thus, Agriculture affects 900 million people in India, directly. So, the development of the agricultural sector is much more relevant for overall National Development.

After 5-6 decades of using extensive chemicals, the Green Revolution has shown its darker side. Soil fertility is reducing day by day, the underground water table is depleting faster than ever causing scarcity of drinking water, and poisonous pesticides have become a major threat to human health & environment. The figures for the yield of cereals show very nominal growth in last one decade.

Chemical farming has proven to be energy-intensive and high input farming. The increasing cost of inputs and low yields have pushed small and marginal farmer in hands of Moneylenders creating big debts. And very soon these debts reach to a level where suicide seems an easy getaway!! The figure of no. of farmers' suicide is rising every year at an alarming rate!!!

Why on earth a farmer has to suicide? And how sensitive are we as a society? Do we feel responsible for that? Why this issue becomes only a Political Agenda? Why we cannot do anything about it?

We need a solution now, a comprehensive long-lasting solution. For Healthy society, we need to balance it now. The Indian farmer has always been a Poor Peasant, last in line to get his share of good living and mostly missing it. Why prosperity hardly comes to a farmer? Why people hesitate to marry their daughters to farmers? We need to change the way we look at them and help our food growers to grow, prosper like any other Indian.

Neither big subsidies nor waiving of big loans will help farmers to become prosperous. Sustainable Agriculture has become a key issue. Organic Farming is most relevant today than ever, as Organic Farming promises high productivity for small and marginal farmers, which is the biggest fraction of farmers' community in India.

*Results from all over the world show that Organic Farming has great potential to revive Agriculture as a good, viable option to earn a livelihood, food security to small and marginal farmers and it fights larger environment issues like Global Warming, drinking water scarcity.*

***At Oasis, we have undertaken Organic Farming Initiative to help our brothers and sisters whose livelihood comes from Agriculture, and who are poor and downtrodden living in Rural India. To help them, we need first to be one of them and create models of Sustainable Agriculture.***

***We believe that any person on this earth who has a piece of land as less as 2 acres and strong will can and should live life more prosperous than an engineer in a small town; a life which is full of Joy, Health, Wealth and which is in total tune with Mother Nature.***

*We also want to prepare various models of Rural Development based on agriculture and related industries, a model of Sustainable Growth.*

*Thus we will take agriculture to a level where it is envied by well-educated city dwellers.*



## Important Milestones...

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 2001 | <b>Small Organic Products Outlet:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A small outlet to sell Organic Products opened by one of the core group members of Oasis.</li></ul>  |
| 2002 | <b>Purchase of Ravine Land:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Oasis Core Group with the help of many friends &amp; well-wishers purchased 9 acres of ravine waste land 60 km from Vadodara (Gujarat).</li></ul>  |
| 2003 | <b>Started creating Model Organic Farm:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Agricultural work began at Oasis Valleys.</li><li>• Design of Model Organic Farm was outlined and two of core group members started giving their full time for land development.</li><li>• 1000 Trees planted; Vegetable growing started after cleaning land.</li><li>• Long Term Plantation was the first step. Systematic cleaning of land and plantation begun.</li><li>• Irrigation system laid out for Ravine land.</li></ul> |
| 2004 | <b>Soil conservation:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Check-dams &amp; bamboo plantation for soil erosion prevention.</li><li>• 300 bamboos planted.</li><li>• Compost making begun.</li></ul>   |
| 2005 | <b>Other projects like Vermi-compost, Gau- sneh- shala started:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vegetables &amp; seasonal fruits like Banana, Papaya produced and started selling.</li><li>• Gau-sneh-shala was constructed. Vermi-compost unit started. 2000 more trees planted.</li></ul>  |
| 2006 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gau-sneh-shala started with 4 Gir cows, purchased from famous organization - Lokbharati, Sanosara.</li></ul>   |
| 2007 | <b>Created a model of Sustainable Organic Farm:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• We crossed the breakeven and vegetables, fruits production increased to a level that a vehicle was purchased for transportation.</li></ul>   |

- 2008                    **Growing a Planned forest:**
- More 1500 trees planted. Total growing trees crossed 3000 mark.
  - Oasis Valleys began to become a planned forest, grown totally organically.
- 2009                    **Complete cow based farm:**
- Oasis valleys became complete cow based farm, zero input farming practiced.
  - Two more cows were purchased. Herd strength became 8.
  - Oasis Valleys became Model Organic Farm.
- 2010                    **Farmers started visiting:**
- Farmers started visiting Oasis Valleys and getting inspired.
  - Oasis Valleys Agri. Coordinator started visiting neighbouring village farmers to propagate organic methods.
  - ‘Gangama Circle’ became inspiring model.
- 2011                    **Regular gathering of farmers:**
- Monthly farmers' meetings began and 500-600 farmers were contacted. 50 farmers began Organic farming on trial basis on small portion of their lands.
  - More trees planted on Oasis Valleys.
  - Farmers beneficiaries - more than 500.
  - More than 1000 people visited Oasis valleys.
  - Oasis Valleys developed also as a model for Environment Education.
- 2012                    **Environment Education tours:**
- Growing trees figure touched 5000, with more than 100 species of various trees.
  - Oasis Valleys became not only a model farm but a unique centre for Environment Education for school children, farmers, citizens etc.
  - More than 2300 beneficiaries who visited model farm.
  - Components of Eco Education tour were -
    1. Agro-forestry
    2. Organic Farming & various models of Sustainable Agriculture
    3. Bio-diversity
    4. Soil Conservation & rain water recharging
    5. Composit Bio-gas plant
    6. Organic way Sewage treatment plant
    7. A balanced Eco-system with plenty of Flora-n-fauna.
- 2013                    **Oasis Valleys continues to inspire children, youths, parents & farmers.**

## Transformation of Barren, Ravine & Waste land into a Planned Forest:



Barren, Ravine and Waste land - 2002



Planned Forest -2012



Lush green Oasis Valleys

## Main features of our Organic Farm:

### 1. Agriculture:

- We grow seasonal vegetable and fruits in 1.5-2 Acres.
- We grow, in-total, 12-15 selected varieties of seasonal vegetables all round the year, and also annual fruit crops like Papaya and Banana.





## 2. Horticulture: Forest & Fruit trees:

- We have 2100 forest trees including some Medicinal varieties growing well on our land. The Jungle varieties include Bamboo, Neem, Bombex, Gulmohar, Peltophorum, Cassia, Beheda, Harde etc.
- We have more than 900 Fruit trees growing on our land. The main varieties include Sitafal & Ramfal (Custard Apple), Jamfal (Guava), Amla, Lime, Sweet-lime, Mango, Chikoo (Sapota), Dadam (Pomegranate). Some small quantity of Cashew-nut plants, Shetur, Falsa etc are also there.
- Medicinal & herbal plants include Harde, Beheda, Beal, Amla, Bijora, etc.

### 3. Vermi-compost & Leaf-mould compost Unit:

- Composting on the farm is backbone of Organic Farming. We get our Vermi-compost from our Sewage Treatment Plant, which uses farm waste as Bio-mass for filtering Sewage water. Earth-worms eat this wet bio-mass and convert it into a good quality Vermi-compost. Every year twice we get 500 kg compost from our Bio-filter.
- We also convert waste biomass of our farm into good quality leaf-mould compost. We use cow dung and urine as culture to develop micro organisms. We get Cow Urine and Dung from nearby village and also use Vermi-compost at culture.



### 4. Nature Conservation:

- At Oasis Valleys, we have not altered any of contours a bit. We believe in keeping the natural ravines as it is and we are trying to protect further erosion by various natural and time proven technologies. (Disturbed soil erodes much faster than when it is kept natural.)
- We have 22 small check-dams (Bori-bandh) & 2 big check-dams to prevent the damage from run-away rain water. We have planted local variety of Bamboo at various critical points to save the soil.
- We do not disturb the original habitat of the land creatures, like wild heir, porcupines, snakes, rats and such other small animals and try to co-live with them and do not destroy their homes, unless it's must to do for larger benefit.



## 5. Nursery Project:

- We produce our seasonal vegetable saplings and other plant saplings in our Nursery. Sometimes we sell the excess saplings to surrounding farmers.
- We also grow long term fruit & jungle trees at our Nursery project, by purchasing small saplings from Forest Dept or other nurseries or grown from own seeds in big, empty cement or polythene bags for a year or two. When they reach a height of around 4-6 feet, we plant those ready trees on pre-defined places on our land. Thus, we reduce mortality of small saplings in the initial period of their lives, so we can have defined Orchard and Jungle.



## 6. Gangama Chakra:

Area : 1 Guntha (App. 1000 sq.ft.)

Plantation: Vegetable – 14 to 15 varieties

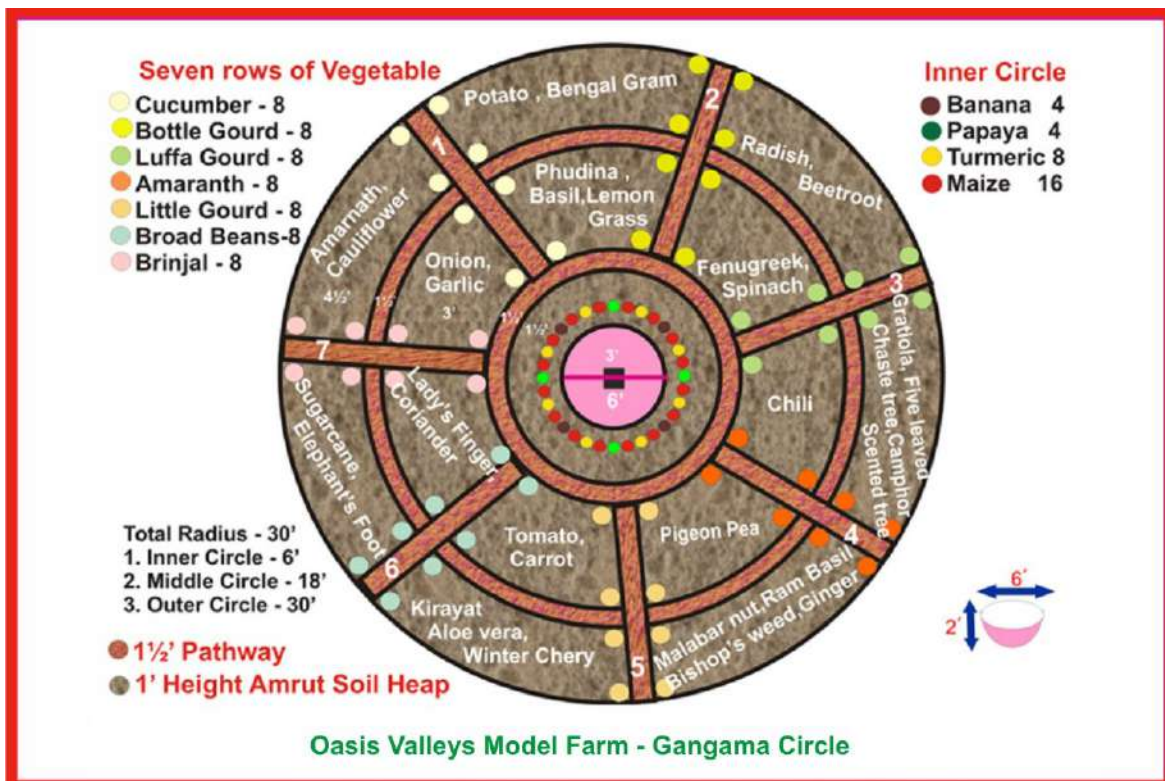
Spices – 7 to 8 varieties

Fruits – 2 to 3 varieties

Daily requirement : 50 to 100 lts. of water, 30 min. of labor

Production : starts after 6 months and optimum after 9 months. Then, lifelong production of 2.5 kg daily green.

Sustains family of 4 for their daily requirement of Green.



A conceptual 'Gangama Circle' - Vegetables & plants may vary according to requirement & season.

## Propagating Organic Farming in surrounding villages:

Monthly farmers' meetings began and 500-600 farmers were contacted. 50 farmers began Organic farming on trial basis on small portion of their lands.





Our major aim in creating various model farms is to generate awareness about Organic Farming and make farmers believe that they can also be prosperous through farming and not only they can generate wealth but also health and a very good life, too. We want to help the poor farmers of not only our country but of the whole world to come out of their poverty and make farming a viable, sustainable means of livelihood. Now, once the model was created, we wanted to initiate activities for promoting Organic Farming. Soon, we started awareness campaigns in villages surrounding Oasis Valleys. Gatherings and some initial meetings with farmers were already started.

What we wanted was to create learning groups among farmers of same region, creating a system of weekly meeting and exchanging information, learning, etc. And to support such groups we created resource centers, where they can avail all the know-how of Sustainable Farming.





## Eco Education tour:

More than 2300 beneficiaries of model farm visits. Components were - 1. Agro-forestry 2. Organic Farming & various models of sustainable agriculture 3. Bio-diversity 4. Soil Conservation & rain water recharging 5. Composit Bio-gas plant 6. Organic way Sewage treatment plant 7. A balanced Eco-system with plenty of Flora-n-fauna



## **Feedback about Eco education tour:**

### **1. Amazing! How they have cultivated crops on the land full of valleys!!**

The thing I liked the most was their concept and idea about the whole farm. The farmers at Oasis Valleys have thought deeply. They try to use everything for cultivation, like - cow dung, cow urine, plant bio-mass, leaves etc. I liked the most the idea of cultivating crops on the land full of valleys. It is very hard to do this job. And the most amazing was the Gangama Circle. It has given me a brilliant idea about how to cultivate crops on just 1000 sqft. Thanks to Oasis for this tour. ~ **Harshil, Std. 8, Surat**

### **2. I enjoyed the farm visit**

From this farm visit I learnt many things about trees, their usefulness & their nutritional value. The tree names which I was not knowing, I came to know very nicely.

The vermi-compost technique was very nice. I like it the most. We saw Gaushala and from it I learnt many things like - How cow is useful to us, how bio-gas is made from cow dung, etc. ~ **Nachita, Std. 7, Surat**

### **3. I was shocked to know there were 5000 Trees on Oasis Valleys!**

The eco-tour in the morning was adventurous for a student who has visited many natural places.

The tour gave knowledge about organic farming and the importance of organic farming. I also learnt a lot about some of the micro-organisms which look simple but are very helpful to mankind. During the tour I liked the solitude point because I have never experienced that much silence ever. I was shocked when I came to know there are over 5000 trees and total 120 species! ~ **Shrey, Std. 8, Surat**



## Education workshop on Sustainable Agriculture:



The students of Bachelor of Rural Studies (BRS) from Shri Narmada Gram Vidhyapith, Mangrol (Near Rajpipala, Gujarat) were the first to have a residential camp at Oasis Valleys after it was opened in January 2012. 16 Students with their two teachers participated in the camp, organized on 2-3 January, 2012. Apart from learning about Sustainable Agriculture & Organic Farming, they also went through unique self-developmental processes of Oasis Workshops. Oasis aspires to see rural youths stand tall along with their counterparts in cities. The workshop was facilitated by Mehul Panchal, Managing Trustee, OASIS.



Mehul Panchal at Shrishti exhibition: 18,19 2010

## 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. **E**

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**HAVE AN OPINION ON  
SHEEBA NAIR AND HER  
GO ORGANIC CAMPAIGN?**

SMS us at 3636 (type <SPACE> F0087  
then your response, name and city

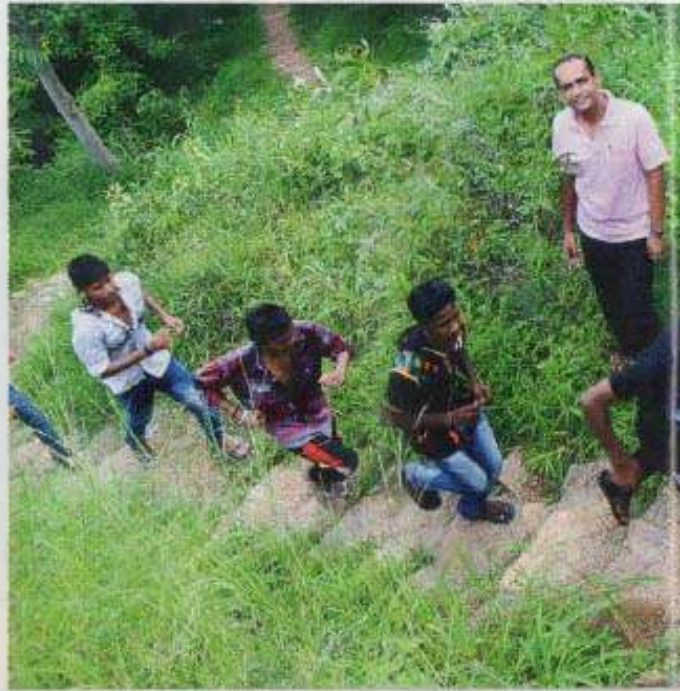
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**MEHUL  
PANCHAL 40**  
CHANDOD, GUJARAT  
Agriculture  
Coordinator

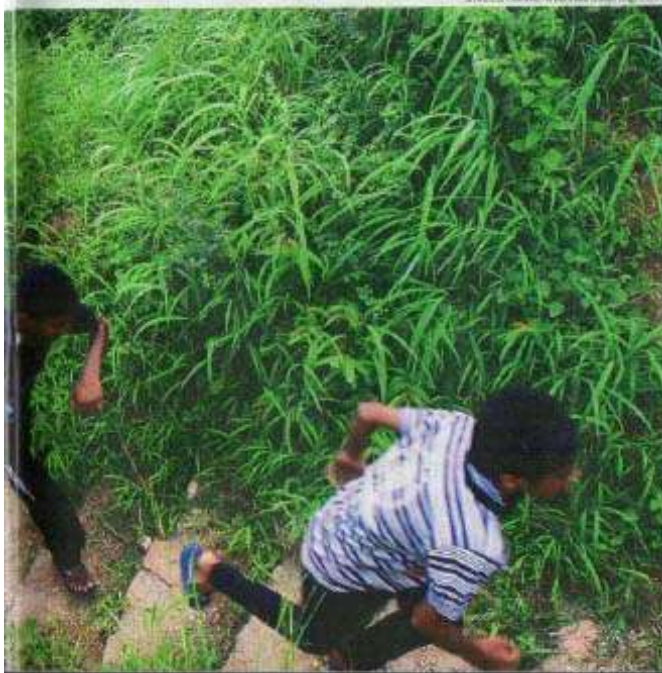
IN MANDVA, A VILLAGE of about 11,000 people on the banks of the Narmada near Chandod, Vadodara district, Gujarat, Mehul Panchal Chand has created a forested ravine in the midst of barren land, appropriately called Oasis Valley. Racked by guilt at farmer

suicides in Gujarat, this organic farm was his gift to the community he feels he belongs to. Panchal qualified as an electronics engineer from M.S. University, Vadodara, in 1993. He landed a job at an IT firm in Bangalore, but unhappy with it, a year on he made a life-changing decision to move back to Vadodara and immerse himself in the uplift of the nearby villages.

He bought a nine-acre barren plot nearby for a meagre Rs 35,000 in 2002. With continuous experiments over 10 years, he



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has turned it into a fertile valley, and has inspired over 400 farmers to his cause, that of sustainable but economically viable organic farming. "I'm inspired by India's organic farming pioneers Ashok Sanghavi, Bhaskar Hiraji Save and Subhash Palekar," he says. Organic farmers like Panchal rear earthworms to turn compost to manure,

and use cow urine as insecticide. He says: "With chemicals, the land needs more fertilisers in the next period. Pests become immune, and a ruinous downward spiral ensues." Panchal believes a farmer with just two acres can be richer than a small-town engineer. But first, "you need to be one of them".

by Devika Chaturvedi

**"THE MOST INSPIRING THING ABOUT HIM IS HIS CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, AND LOVE FOR AGRICULTURE."**

Dr Neha Vakharia, Physician and Social Worker

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**Growth is**  
the only evidence of **Life.**

~ John Henry Newman