

Traditional crops: hurdles faced in going beyond them



Farmers in the field at Tenangoor, Tamil Nadu with the korai grass ready for harvest.

FARMERS INCUR two major expenses in cultivation. One, input cost (including price of the seeds), and two, wages to be paid for labour. But several farmers in Wandiwash taluk, Tiruvannamalai district, Tamil Nadu, do not seem to bother about them. Almost all of them cultivate Nutsedge weed, called, *Korai* (Tamil name) - a grass used for mat weaving. "Three generations of our family cultivated the usual paddy, sugarcane and groundnut. But after harvest, when we checked our accounts we realized that only little money was left, which needed to be used for the ensuing cultivation.

Quite remunerative

"This situation prevailed for a long time. When I took over, I switched to korai grass and found it to be quite remunerative," says Mr. M. Dharman, a farmer. "I don't need to spend much in terms of seeds, fertilizer or labour. We source the seeds from the neighbouring river banks during the monsoon and hire a cart to bring it to our fields. The cost of transport, field preparation and planting works out to Rs. 4,000," he says.

Farmers dig a shallow trench on all the four sides (inside the field) and irrigated water is allowed to stand in it. The seeds are then planted in straight rows inside the field. During summer, irrigation is done every 4-5 days and during monsoon it is stopped. After a month one bag of DAP and urea is broadcasted and weeding done whenever required. The grass comes to harvest after 6 months of planting and subsequent harvests are done every 6 months.

From an acre, farmers get about Rs.10,000 as gross profit and after deducting expenses they net Rs. 5,000 as profit.

This type of grass farming proves quite lucrative to them. Another farmer Mr.T.P. Murugan says :

Minimal expense

"In today's scenario we are able to get some money with minimal expense, which other crops do not guarantee."

Sometimes the farmers lease their fields to commercial mat weavers who pay the entire amount to them and harvest the weeds. The weeds are then split manually or in a machine and sun dried after which they are woven or sold to other mat weaving companies. "We face no problems regarding pest infestation, theft or marketing with this crop," says Mr. Dharman.

Ready market

"If it is paddy or sugarcane the cost of cultivation will be manifold and also regular maintenance is required. After harvest we have to be at the mercy of the middlemen or the crushing mills. But in this weed cultivation we are our own masters. Once news spreads that we are growing this weed, traders and buyers flock to us," he says.

But for Mr. M. Alaudeen (mobile: 9443098914), kora farmer and mat merchant in Wandiwash, the situation is quite different."If a farmer grows only the grass, he gets the money. But for people like us who grow and also weave the grass in our own mills the going is tough. Especially with the Government not extending an encouraging hand, a number of weavers have shut shop and also sold their machineries." Mr. Alaudeen feels that the Government should start encouraging this cultivation as export value for the grass mat is good.

Dull period

"Though at present we get some orders during the festival season, government functions and weddings, the mat market faces a dull period during most of the year. With labour problem on the rise, we cannot supply when urgent orders are placed." Farmers say that they invest their own capital for growing and weaving the mats as banks are not forthcoming in giving loans. The common reason they cite is that "korai farming does not come under agricultural crops." When contacted, Agricultural University experts said, "This crop is listed under the weed category and does not come under agricultural crops.

Government decision

"If the Government takes a policy decision which is favourable to the grass growers then it will be possible for the banks to grant loans to farmers." Meanwhile the mat weavers association is making representations to the Government to recognise it as a crop, as in the present prevailing condition, it gives good revenue with minimal investment.

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