

## **A sustainable model for small and marginal ryots**

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The change: what began as curiosity, transformed into a conviction making Mr. Patel join Chetna Organic in 2005.—Photo: Special Arrangemen

Adilabad is one of the largest cotton growing districts in the country. As a consumption oriented development model took root, small farmers in the region took to cultivating cash crops like cotton, to meet social needs beyond food requirements.

### **Monocropping**

However, over the last two decades, hunger for higher cotton yields gradually transformed into a monocropping culture, in which farmers completely stopped growing food crops and were growing only cotton, making Adilabad one of the largest cotton growing districts in the country. “This appetite for higher yields, led to indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, devastating soil health in the process. Like most other villages in the region, even here, small and marginal farmers could not withstand the “mighty will” of the State to impose a regime of subsidised chemical fertilizers and pesticides,” says Mr. Ambadass Sonkamble, Block co-ordinator, Chetna Organic, Secunderabad.

### **Compromised**

The monocropping culture severely compromised on food security of small farmers. In the years when crops failed, they were left with no cash and had to depend on money lenders. Debts kept piling, pushing many farmers over the brink. Today the region is a farmers’ suicide hotspot, according to him. However, in this narrative of loss and despair there is a story of hope that stands up like a candle in the dark. Like many others a tribal farmer Madavi Mahadu Patel in the village detested the use of chemicals but was forced into the system. Productivity of his land was declining every year and yields were low. Traditional wisdom and common sense told him that organic life in soil was critical for healthy growth of crops. But the extension system was telling him otherwise. It was a time when farmers in neighbouring villages were committing suicides. The alarm bells were ringing — loud and clear.

### **Chetna organic**

In 2004 as part of a Supply Chain Intervention Programme, Chetna Organic initiated activities in neighbouring Choupanguda village, organising farmers into self-help groups (SHG) and offered socio-technical and marketing support for organic cotton. Chetna was organising Farmer Field Schools (FFS) training, workshops, field days and demo plots to encourage farmers to take up soil and water conservation measures, diversified cropping and mixed cropping practices where food crops like jowar, paddy, red gram, vegetables, maize, green gram and others could be grown alongside cotton.

### **Curiosity**

Mr. Patel was curious to know how realistic this approach was. Apparently, this initiative seemed to address all his concerns — no chemicals, improved soil fertility, low input costs, good income and food

security for the entire year. Interested, he attended the trainings, and what began as curiosity, transformed into a conviction making him join Chetna Organic in 2005 as a member farmer. Today, his seven acre field is a manifestation of Chetna's vision. In six acres he has created a model that can teach the world what sustainable agriculture means, and how it can change the script for farmers with small holdings.

In four acres, following intercropping and mixed cropping patterns, the farmer grows a combination of food crops and cash crops like cotton, wheat, maize, groundnut and millets like jowar and sorghum. Legumes, vegetables like tomato, brinjal, chilli, gourds, beans, onion, garlic and leafy vegetables and oil seed crops are grown organically.

In one acre teak and henna are planted. In the remaining acre mango, guava, custard apple, berries and orange are grown. glyricidia, pongamia and neem are also grown for mulching into the soil for biomass. Their open well serves to irrigate the crops during summer and other seasons.

Mr. Patel has devised a strategy to ward off contamination from hybrid cotton crops to the ones grown in his field, an approach he feels is critical to market his cotton at a higher price. He has created layers of shields, restricting the cotton crop to the inner circle of the farm and surrounded it with trap crops like castor, okra and marigold. In the second circle he grows vegetables and other crops and in the outermost periphery he grows trees like Teak. This strategy has worked well for him and there has been no contamination issue while the rest of the State was struggling with it.

### **Expansion**

During the year 2012-13 the family expanded their basket of income to include fisheries. He was given 1,000 young fingerlings which after 180 days yielded 30 kg fetching him Rs. 2,400 at Rs. 80 per kg. The remarkable aspect of this family has been that they have achieved all this in an economically viable structure which is replicable without large financial investments and dependence on local money lenders.

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