



Bringing smiles organically

Happiness delivery: Convincing farmers to adopt organic farming and seeing their incomes increase

By ANILESH S. MAHAJAN



UMENDRA DUTTA, 58

Kheti Virasat Mission

Jaitu, Faridkot district, Punjab

GOOD SEEDS Umendra Dutt with his organic farmer friends

For the past 25 years, Umendra Dutt, 58, has made it a daily routine to get up early in the morning, flip through his diary to call up five new people with whom he can discuss organic, natural farming. They aren't just farmers but scientists, doctors, academics, economists, consumer and civil society groups, even politicians. The focus is on pushing zero chemical residue farming methods.

Based in Jaitu, a sleepy town in Faridkot district, Punjab, Dutt has devoted his entire life to introducing this method of farming to farmers of all kinds, especially small and marginal landholders, landless labourers and even the kitchen gardeners. What makes his work special is the effort is happening in Punjab where 85 per cent of the crops that come to the market are procured by central agencies like the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and Cotton Corporation of India (CCI) and hence there is extensive use of pesticides and fertilisers to boost production levels. This has not just impacted

the quality of soil and groundwater but is also damaging people's health.

Dutt has trained over 20,000 farmers who now grow organic crops in about 15,000 acres. The number might be minuscule among the million-odd farmers of the state cultivating crops on 4.2 million ha. of land, "but the change is big," says Dutt, running his fingers through his flowing beard.

In 1996, Dutt was an editor at one of the publications brought out by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) when he began researching the impact of WTO agreements on agriculture. It changed his life forever. This was the time when most agriculture experts were heartily recommending that Punjab's farmers use chemical-based products to boost productivity. "I quit my job and decided to learn more. I returned to my hometown and decided to create awareness." At the time, he says, agri experts used to call him a "mad man, but today I am a progressive farmer". In 2005, Dutt floated an NGO, Kheti Virasat Manch (KVM), to not just create awareness but show by example how

HAPPINESS MANTRA

"We humans are a part of nature, so violence against nature is violence against god. I share with our farmers a compassionate and nurturing nature. There is no option but to live in harmony with nature for us. And, in return, nature always gives us a sense of fulfillment, joy, and a spiritual connect"

organic farming can be successful and good for the Earth.

Dutt does workshops in 15-18 villages in a month. "I quickly realised that small farmers can come out of conventional farming easily and decided to focus and help them." Dutt added that the best response comes from women farmers. "The men do their calculation on the basis of output, whereas the women farmers look for *sukh* (well-being)," he says. "Even if she is a landless labourer, she understands this."

Dutt has been pushing the concept of organic kitchen gardens among the landless farmers in 60 villages of Barnala, Muktsar and Faridkot districts, so that they can feed themselves and sell the surplus in the market. KVM has already trained 6,900 such farmers, with the current target being 20,000 growers. The two waves of Covid, though, affected his plans. "March-April and September-October are seasons for sowing...we are now trying to catch up. Our campaign will take some time to regain momentum," he says.

But it's a win-win for those who opted for it. Jagmit Kaur, a landless farmer in Bhotna village in Barnala, says, "With *shuddh* (organic) vegetables, we not only get a better price but also assured consumers who don't want pesticides and hazardous chemicals in their food." Her husband Nirmal, who works as farm labour, now sells their produce at the markets. Punjab's big religious *deeras* and social trusts are also opting for organic farming now and Dutt is their go-to man.

Pushing organic farming in Punjab is difficult "but doable", says Dutt. He says many farmers attend his talks and workshops, but only a few adopt the new methods. "They are looking for a market and marketing mechanism. As an NGO, we organise weekly *kisan haats* (farmers' markets) in 22 different towns. We have also trained some shopkeepers to set up exclusive stores where only organic farmers' produce is sold," says Dutt. Fifteen such stores are open now. ■

What makes me happy



SONALI KULKARNI
Actor

"Small things make me happy. It can be my first cup of chai in the morning or my flight being on time. If my daughter writes a letter for me or draws a picture or when I am cooking for my husband, I am happy. I like throwing surprise parties for my friends, which makes me happy. If I save water or electricity, or if I complete a nice workout, I feel happy. If my co-star gives a good shot, I feel fabulous. I do not have great expectations from every day, but I really like it when we have clean communication because many a times all our issues start from minor misunderstandings."

TIPS FOR HAPPINESS

Dr Vinod Kumar (Consultant psychiatrist and psychotherapist), Head, Mpower-The Centre, Bengaluru

"Happiness is an ethereal concept. Since time immemorial, attempts have been made to define happiness. But this depends on whether one is poetic, philosophical, sociological or psychological in one's perspective. Broadly speaking, happiness can be categorised into hedonic (pleasure-oriented) or eudaimonic (meaning- or purpose-oriented).

The positive psychology movement has been constantly trying to find what makes people happy—if there are any beliefs, personality traits or ways to create more positive experiences. Some recent studies found that happiness comes from simple small everyday rewards like receiving a compliment or an unexpected gift. Other studies show that more choices lead to more unpleasant experiences. However promising these findings are, positive psychology is still in its infancy."