

'India has rich indigenous crops. I grow 70 kinds of rice'



Shamika Mone is an organic farmer who moved fields from academia to agriculture. Sharing her experiences with *Times Evoke*, she discusses becoming a cultivator, the three pillars of sustainable farming — and the moment she tasted the fruits of her first harvest:

In the mid-2000s, I was studying for my masters at Garware College in Pune where I found a course on biodiversity in agriculture very interesting. In 2008, I joined an NGO in Vidarbha, eastern Maharashtra. This was a suicide-prone belt, suffering from acute farmer distress. I saw how farmers got trapped in a vicious cycle of buying chemical fertilisers, pesticides and modified seeds — they'd sink deeper into debt, with little knowledge of how to manage their finances. Later, I started working with an NGO in Wardha which spread information about sustainable farming. I began researching cotton yields in the chemical-based system versus organically grown cotton — organic yields were actually comparable to the chemical ones. Investing in these would save farmers distress.

But there was a challenge in getting farmers to see this. Cultivators spent more on modified seeds, so they'd give them more care, planting them in fertile fields with good irrigation. In contrast, non-modified seeds were freely available and didn't cost much, so farmers would plant these in less fertile land with little irrigation. That's why these yields wouldn't be as high but this was explained by a mentality issue which could be solved. I began approaching the field from the perspective of a farmer.

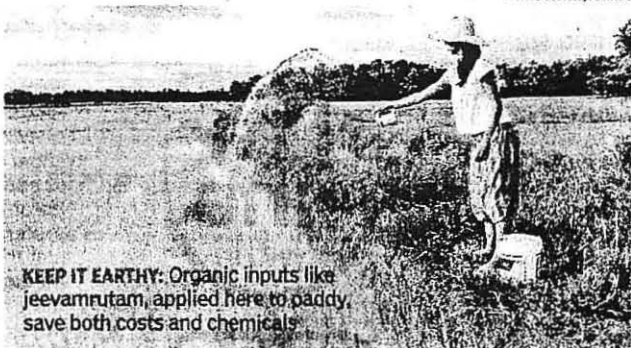
Today, I work at three levels. I'm a cultivator on a personal farm of four leased acres in Shoranur, Palakkad, Kerala. Here, we grow traditional rice varieties alongside two farmer-bred kinds, kunjukunju and HMT. We also have a biodiversity conservation plot, growing 70 traditional rice varieties maintained via floral asynchrony where the flowering dates of neighbouring varieties don't overlap. We have an organic shop where we sell our produce and that from organic growers in Kerala and Maharashtra. In addition, we are members of the Kerala Jaiwa Karshaka Samithi or the Kerala Organic Farmers Association, the Kerala chapter of OFAI, the

Organic Farming Association of India. This is a member of INOFO, the Intercontinental Network of Organic Farmers Organisations, of which I'm the President.

All these activities mean working intensively with farmer communities, from our district to across Kerala to an all-India level and a worldwide network. We're constantly working to strengthen sustainable farming. For instance, inspired by South

India has amazingly rich sustainable crops. I wrote a book on traditional seed keepers across the country and I was stunned by the knowledge these individuals hold. This is very important as every traditional crop variety has science intricately woven into it. A rice variety with a bit more iron or zinc would traditionally be used to cure stomach ailments. We grow Raktashali, a traditional red variety. It has more iron and

Picture Courtesy: S Mone



KEEP IT EARTHY: Organic inputs like jeevamrutam, applied here to paddy, save both costs and chemicals

Korea's Hansalim model, we are starting a cooperative structure between farmers and consumers. Here, farmers take on the responsibility to give consumers nutritious food while consumers take the responsibility to ensure farmers are in a position to grow

vitamin B5 and it's helped boost my haemoglobin levels. Our farmers know about hundreds of such varieties and their benefits. Their knowledge must be properly documented.

It gives me joy to represent India's farmers at international summits. When I tell a farmer the responses to their insights at global conferences, the farmer realises, 'I'm not just a farmer, I'm also a storehouse of expertise.' Being a channel for that empowering moment gives me a very special happiness.

There are challenges galore but sustainable agriculture connects you to the earth and pulls you through. When we grew our first harvest with the kuruva rice variety, we used no machinery — it was very tough to work in the mud and water for hours. It took real endurance from planting to tending, harvesting, drying, milling and finally getting the rice in our hands. When I cooked that rice and tasted it, it felt magical. It was nature at its purest — I encourage everyone to experience this at least once in life. The joy will truly sustain you.

DEEP ROOTS

food for them. This model is based on mutual understanding and we're first trying to establish this in Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Sustainable agriculture has three main aspects. People's health, well-being and nutrition is its first pillar. The second is conserving biodiversity. The third is balancing finances — our indigenous techniques help organic farmers do this. To reduce costs, for instance, we use formulations like jeevamrutam and beejamrutha made from cow products. This works economically and circles back to the first and second pillars — if we allow chemicals in crops, neither people's health, nor biodiversity can remain healthy.