

# SPANDAN

System of Promoting Appropriate National Dynamism for Agriculture and Nutrition

April 2018

## A Techie-Turned-Organic Farmer

An Interview with Mr. Venkat Iyer

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*Venkat Iyer was living a fast-paced life in the IT world in Mumbai when he decided to stop and take a long, hard look at where he was headed. Disheartened by his stressful existence in the city, he decided to give it all up and take up organic farming in a small village near Mumbai. But it wasn't easy. With no experience in agriculture, his journey was fraught with uncertainty. He soon went from negotiating tough clients, strict deadlines and traffic to looking forward to his first bumper crop of moong. As he battled erratic weather conditions and stubborn farm animals, he discovered a world with fresh air and organic food, one where he could lead a more wholesome existence. Recently, his book named "Moong over Microchips: Adventures of a Techie-Turned-Farmer" has been launched, in which he has mentioned all his experience and the adventure he has gone through while the transition was taking place in his life. In the interview with him, he shared his experiences in agriculture while highlighting certain points which are responsible making condition of farmer more stressful and difficult. He himself being an organic farmer mentioned the importance of organic farming.*

**We have learned that you practice organic farming. Is it true that it gives lesser yields than what by using chemical fertilizers? And does it require more money in comparison to the latter? These conceptions are widespread among people.**

Yes, it is true that initially the yields can be lower than conventional farming when you switch to organic farming and it takes three years at a minimum for the land to recover. The reason for this is that the land has been abused and chemical inputs have made it harder, more saline and all the essential microbes and earthworms have been killed. It takes time for the soil to recover and most farmers are hesitant to wait for three years and cannot afford the initial period of low yields since they are dependent on the harvest and sale. According to me it does not take more money to farm organically but it does require more work to be done at the farm. The so called modern practices promoted by the government have prevailed over farmers....who have become increasingly dependent on the private sector for most things including seeds which they don't save and reuse every year. Farmers are in a trap of hybrid seeds and chemicals and pesticides. They have lost the traditional knowledge. Now it's easy to buy hybrid seeds and a bottle of pesticide rather than search for the correct natural solution and then make it themselves at the

farm. Besides years of cutting trees have made it difficult for them to access organic matter which is essential for doing farming.

**In your interviews you have mentioned that corruption is rampant at root level. Is unawareness among farmers regarding government subsidy rates and MSP one of the reasons for it? Can you elaborate on this?**

No, there is awareness among the farmers at least in my area. It is just that for every governmental transaction there is someone or the other demanding a cut...for instance even for land records.... you have to pay 100 rupees. It is difficult for an average farmer to fight corruption at every level and they tend to give in to the demands as otherwise they don't get documents or materials or even money.

**For awareness among farmers regarding their rights what can be done according to you?**

Availability of information on a timely basis is extremely important. One finds the authority concerned visiting the village a day before the deadline, announcing some scheme like say crop insurance, it is difficult for the farmer to rush around on the last day and submit all the required documents and avail of the scheme. I also feel that the extensive documentation required should be reduced considering that all information is online now in almost all states.

**What are your views on farmers' suicides in India?**

The erratic monsoon, crop failure, incorrect government policies, lack of credit availability, low pricing of produce and the need for more money in our cash based economy is what pushes the farmers to think of suicide. Unless we have major policy corrections and better prices and more institutional credit and improved rural infrastructure, these cases of suicide will continue.

**Soon millets are going to be procured at minimum support price for public distribution system....will this initiative by the government help farmers to move from crop specific farming to crop diversification?**

Yes, it is a good move. More than the government buying millets, I feel it is increase in the awareness of millets in the consumer's mind that will increase the demand for them. This in turn will make farmers think of growing them. Once the market is created and there is a good price, most farmers will start growing millets.

**Can you elaborate on crop diversification and its benefits to farmers?**

Crop diversity has immense benefit to the farmer in terms of building the soil health and making him more economically independent. Unfortunately this is easier said than done as there are a lot of issues at the ground level that needs to be addressed. Land fragmentation is one major issue which makes it difficult for crop diversification. This fragmentation also leads to irrigation issues as sometimes the land is spread across the village and irrigating it can be quite expensive. Also the fact that their land is not secured from cattle, it makes a lot of sense to follow the community in selecting the crops, leaving them with hardly any room to experiment or even think of alternate crops or horticulture.

**How did you get inspiration to write a book ‘Moong over Microchips: Adventure of Techie-Turned- Farmer’ on your adventure?**

After I quit my corporate job with IBM, my ex-colleagues were very keen on following my transition. I started writing emails at regular intervals giving updates of my farm and the journey that I had undertaken. Many found this communication interesting and soon the list of people who wanted to be in the loop about my experiences grew to hundreds. Some of them suggested that I collate my experiences into a book so more people could read and enjoy them. It wasn't till late 2009 that I actually started writing the book after encouragement from my wife Meena who had already written several books.