**Livelihood to Business: Mann Deshi’s Farmer Producer Company for Women leads the way.**

***A farming crisis***

*"*The soul of India lives in its villages*,”* saidMahatma Gandhi. That soul now seems to be in grave danger. According to the 2017-18 Economic Survey, income from farming is expected to fall by 25 per cent in non-irrigated areas because of climate change and in Maharashtra alone, agriculture is expected to witness a negative growth rate of 8.3 per cent this year. 147 talukas out of a total of 355 received less rainfall in 2018 than in the previous year.

Decreasing sizes of land holdings,inadequate access to markets, technology and information, along with poor harvests and insufficient access to irrigation have all resulted in indebtedness, low incomes and a high suicide rate among farmers.

No wonder then that the younger generation wants to move out of agriculture.

But there are some encouraging initiatives to address this issue. Mann Deshi, an organization based in the drought prone region of Mann taluka in Maharashtra’s Satara district, best known for establishing India’s first cooperative bank for rural women, has also begun working with small and marginal farmers. In fact, they have recently set up a Farmers’ Producer Company that has predominantly women farmers as its members.

“If we want the younger generation to continue farming, we must boost agriculture so that it’s seen as a business opportunity and not just a livelihood,” says Vandana Bhansali, head of the foundation’s innovation and special projects division. “We are working with small and marginal farmers, supporting them improve their yields, make more informed decisions about their farming practices, aggregating their produce and linking them directly to markets so that they can increase their incomes.”

***Developing a Business Mindset***

Until about a year ago, Anita Khasbage sold her farm’s produce at the Mhaswad weekly market, making barely enough to run her home. Today, her produce sells in Satara, Pune, Mumbai and Kolhapur.

"I now get Rs 5-7 more per kilo for my produce,” Khasbage says.“My daily profit has gone up tobetween Rs1,000 to Rs 1,500. I feel proud to be a farmer now.”

Rukmini Shankar Doiphode studied up to the 4th standard. On the three acres she owned, she grew soyabean, sprouts, jowar, and gram. Life for her and her five children was a struggle. She was always in debt.

Then one day, she attended a meeting conducted by Mann Deshi’s Farm to Market team where she and farmers like her were given technical inputs on better cultivation practices and marketing strategies for cereals and onions. Rukmini applied that advice—with excellent results. “On 30 guntas of land, not only was I able to harvest substantially more sprouts this year, but my overall profit increased by 40 per cent.”

Launched in January 2017, the Farm to Market initiative which is now registered as a Farmers’ Producer Company (FPC), has worked with more than 2000 farmers, 70 per cent of whom are women. Rather than the weekly market, members now sell their produce in Pune, Mumbai, Kolhapur, Solapur, Akluj, Pandharpur, Indapur, Sangola, Aatpadi, Phaltan, Turbhe, Umarga and Gudimalkapur, and other towns.

Vanita Pise, a local farmer, who leads the FPC, says that when her team first began work, they found that while the government had several measures to help agriculturists, these benefits did not reach small farmers on the ground. Moreover, women farmers, who sat in the sun all day waiting to sell their stock, often sold their produce at rock bottom prices at the end of the day rather than carry it back home.

“Initially, in order to build a rapport with the farmers, our team members sat with them in the market,” Pise says. “We bought their entire produce at one rupee more than they were getting. It was a tiny increase, but many women thanked us, relieved that they didn’t have to sit in the heat the entire day.”

The team also encouraged many women, who grew corn to cultivate baby corn instead. As a result, earnings more than doubled and farmers became open to new ideas. For instance, 45-year-old Sindhutai Kalel, who had been growing pomegranates, sugarcane, and jowar for over three decades, began to cultivate bananas on the advice of the Mann Deshi team. "Not only did I earn Rs. 65,000 from the bananas, but I also sold my pomegranates in Mumbai and made more money as well!”

Dipali Pise is also very pleased. “Now I am confident that if I don’t get a good rate locally, I will be able to elsewhere. Earlier, because there isn’t a large local market, I didn’t grow vegetables like spinach, mint and coriander. But I’m growing hundreds of bundles now and every week!” says Dipali. Her neighbour, Jayshree Khasbage, has started growing vegetables like brinjal, spring onions and bitter gourd as well.“From my increased earnings, we bought a new motorbike,” she says proudly.

***The way forward***

Apart from technical inputs and market linkages, farmers are encouraged to attend exhibitions and learn about the latest trends in agriculture. They are also taught how to map their land and avoid the overuse of seeds and fertilizers. The Mann Deshi Foundation has also built a cold storage and warehouse for farmers to store their produce.

In order to maintain transparency, data about all transactions are recorded on a mobile app that every farmer can access. The team has also set up a vegetable sapling nursery in Mhaswad that will offer over a dozen different varieties of vegetables. Plans are also underway to create a seed bank.

The main issue the Farmer Producer Company faces is finding affordable ways to transport their produce to far-away markets. More work is also required on quality control, packaging, and a host of other good practices.

“Most women farmers are quick learners and are ready to go the extra mile to improve their earnings,” Pise says. “All they need is a little guidance.”

By Garima Mishra
*Independent journalist*