



Several women farmers are part of the Safe Harvest initiative.

## SOWING GOODNESS

Finding the middle ground between conventional- and organic-farming practices, home-grown food company, Safe Harvest, works with farmers to ensure that the food we eat is indeed safe to consume.

By AAKRITI JASWANT

IN THE LAST FEW DECADES, THE quality of our food has declined considerably, largely due to unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable farm practices. Despite being aware of this issue, many choose to ignore it, while others opt for expensive, organic-labelled variants. However, there is a third option—one that offers a middle ground in pesticide-free farming. And no, it doesn't involve the latest innovation to hit the market; it's about returning to roots and applying traditional farming methods. It is with this ethos in mind

that Telangana-based food company Safe Harvest has been working on boosting Non-Pesticidal Management of Agriculture (NPM) and helping marginal farmers by creating a market for their 'pesticide-free' produce.

Safe Harvest CEO Raghu Rao says, "Small and marginal farmers in India don't use expensive chemical pesticides, so a significant portion of their produce is largely 'pesticide residues free'. However, as part of an unorganised sector, they have poor access to markets, their products do not carry any certification, and they

rarely obtain a premium on their products. Moreover, policies regulating and promoting agri-products coming out of farms that engage in safe cultivation practices are centralised and costly. This leads to exclusion of a majority of smallholder farmers. On the consumer end, despite awareness about the health implications of pesticide contamination, safe food is hard to come by. It was, therefore, necessary to create a viable alternative that offers customers credible proof of the agri-product being safe, and enables farmers to sell their produce."



## PESTICIDE WOES

Pesticides are hazardous for both health and environment. Farmers who are constantly exposed to these chemical toxins often suffer from eye and skin irritations, and even cancer in the long run. The high concentration of chemicals present in edibles poses serious health risks for consumers, too. Environmentally, these stubborn fertilisers do not break down in the soil and, therefore, erode soil fertility. And when these chemicals seep into the groundwater, they cause further health problems for all.

Thankfully, nature has provided us an abundance of natural repellents to protect our crops—think neem, *datura*, and custard apple leaves. Safe Harvest uses all these natural remedies in its agricultural processes, which ultimately helps farmers cut down their input costs, as well.

## ALL FOR A CAUSE

Farmers who practise NPM and work with Safe Harvest earn about 20 per cent more than those cultivating conventionally. Assured purchases and working through Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) have helped them command greater financial security and better negotiation power. Through market-focussed training, bookkeeping, setting up protocols and management structures, Safe Harvest has instilled a sense of confidence and empowerment among the farmers, the majority of whom are women.

## LEADING THE WAY

Safe Harvest procures directly from a network of small and marginal farmers across 12 states in India,

through FPOs. After the first round of pesticide testing, the harvest undergoes minimal processing like de-husking and grinding, followed by another round of testing. The produce is first kept in cold storage, then in cocoon storage that increases the shelf life of the grains. Finally, the products are machine-cleaned to remove dust and stones and packed for retail. All Safe Harvest products are tested for synthetic pesticide residues in FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) accredited laboratories before being packed and marketed.

Safe Harvest currently markets its products in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, and the National Capital Region, with plans to expand to Mumbai, Pune, and Ahmedabad by 2023. As per Rao, “Today, the company has a base of one lakh farmers who are members of 30 farmer organisations spread across 12 states of India. Notably, all the FPOs associated with the company have climbed up the value chain and, hence, command a higher share of the consumer rupee today. This has helped the farmer organisations become stable and stronger.”

Clearly, pesticide-free food is the most practical, healthy, and sustainable option for farmers as well as consumers. 🌱



Raghu Rao, CEO of Safe Harvest.

## SNIPPETS FROM THE FIELD

### BASUMATI DARYAV (Dewas, Madhya Pradesh)

“I grow *tuar* (red gram) and, earlier, used to spend ₹200–300 for a litre on *dawa* (synthetic pesticides) to be applied on the crop. I was very scared of them. The efficacy of these pesticides began to drop over the years. This drove me into debt. Members from Samaj Pragati Sahayog (Safe Harvest’s partner NGO) visited my farm and told me to try out NPM on a part of my land, which I did. I noticed that there was no significant drop in the yield as compared to the past.”

### CHANDRAMAPPA (Raichur, Karnataka)

“I started practising NPM in 2014 through the Janara Samuha Mutual Benefit Trust (a local community-based organisation with over 7,200 rural women members). JSMBT has formed an NPM farmers group in our village and trained us on NPM paddy cultivation. This method has helped me maintain additional savings of ₹3,000 per acre due to a reduction in the cost of nutrient and pest management. I also use less water to grow my crop. I grow paddy, groundnuts, and onions on my 2.5 acres of land.”