

MBA Grad Turns 7.5 Acres of Barren Land Fertile; Grows Tonnes of Turmeric, Wheat

MBA graduate Chintan Shah has been practising organic farming in Deva Pura village in Gujarat. Through his venture, Radhey Krishna Farms, he grew 1 tonne of turmeric in 2019 and sold it across four cities – Surat, Vadodara, Anand and Mumbai

By HIMANSHU NITNAWARE

In 2015, Chintan Shah purchased a 10-acre land for organic farming in Deva Pura village in Gujarat. The only problem was that the land was barren, and Chintan had no agricultural experience. However, by 2020, not only had Chintan made the land fertile but he now also grows large amounts of ginger, turmeric and wheat – which are all unconventional crops in the traditional tobacco belt of the state.

After completing his MBA degree from Mumbai in 2011, the 33-year-old joined his family's textile business. However, this venture did not interest him for too long, and Chintan decided to try farming.

“The textile business did not flourish as expected, so I decided to experiment with organic farming, considering its increasing demand in the market. My younger brother, Parth, is pursuing agriculture from the Netherlands, and told me he would help me connect with other farmers in the sector,” Chintan says. With Parth's help, he spoke to organic farmers on the phone, and would sometimes visit them, or join social media groups to absorb as much information as he could.

He joined organic farming groups to gain technical expertise and a better understanding of the method. However, despite all the help he was receiving, Chintan's efforts to make his land suitable for agriculture were not easy. “I spent a year getting 7.5 acres of the land levelled, which took longer than I expected. There were 20-foot tall hillocks and equally deep pits across the land. Moreover, in the process, whatever was remaining of the fertile layer of the soil for farming was also buried,” he says.

An arduous journey, Chintan says he used a lot of cow dung, organic manure, jeevamrut and compost to increase soil fertility. He started by growing bananas, vegetables, millets and turmeric, but with little success.

“Tobacco, vegetables, rice and millets dominate agriculture in the area,” he says, adding, “Some farmers doubted that bananas would grow, but I succeeded in my efforts, and reached an average produce of 25 kg. Millet and vegetables production did not meet my expectations, but growing something gave me confidence.”

After two years of experimenting with and successfully growing turmeric, Chintan decided to also produce ginger and wheat. But the process took long, as he, as well as the labourers on his farm, had no professional organic farming experience. The labourers doubted if growing new crops using organic methods would work in the region. “Using so much organic matter in the soil enables weeds to grow. Using herbicides and chemicals is not allowed in organic farming. So we worked for four months to create manure compost, which reduced the weeds by 60%,” he says.

He adds, "I made many mistakes, which caused me financial troubles at times, but I learned the process. By 2019, I could produce 1 tonne of turmeric, 300 kilos of ginger, and 2.5 tonnes of wheat."

To market his produce, Chintan distributed free samples of turmeric and ginger to potential customers. "Without a certification in organic farming, it was difficult to convince them. To overcome this, I made small ziplock pouches as samples to send to close friends and relatives. I requested them to buy the product if they liked it. Now, they're getting me new customers," he tells The Better India.

Ginger and turmeric powder sold by the brand name Radhey Krishna Farm

With the increase in customers, Chintan has created his brand, 'Radhey Krishna Farm', to promote turmeric. The farmer says that in the last two years, he has sold his produce in cities like Anand, Vadodara, Surat and Mumbai. "Most of the farm produce was sold. Customers prefer to buy small amounts, as against the traditional psyche of buying in bulk for a year. Some new customers also wish to simply sample the product, and so some stock needs to be available at all times," he says.

The venture earns him Rs 7 lakh a year, but Chintan says a lot more work has to be done before he starts churning more profits.

"I am in the process of getting certified as an organic farmer," he says, adding, "The fertility of the soil also needs to improve, and the remaining land requires levelling. I yield 1 tonne of turmeric, as against the average of 3.5 tonnes. I need to achieve this level of production to make profits. For now, I have only been able to cover expenses and earn a decent livelihood. But I'm far from making the venture more profitable."

Chintan adds that he's also thinking of adding value to his wheat and selling it at a better price. "I have planted medicinal plants around the periphery of the farm to control pests and promote biodiversity. I hope the birds feed on pests and insects to protect my farm, and that in the coming years, the medicinal plants fetch me additional income," he says.

He adds that around five farmers in the area have taken inspiration from him and started growing turmeric as well. "I advise them on how to go about it, in the same way I learned from other organic farmers. But I do not want to buy from them and market the produce under my name. I want them to be independent and create their own brands," he says.

"It's difficult for a farmer to grow his produce and market it while competing with established players in the market," Chintan says, and adds, "But farmers need to learn how to do it."