

## **Orchard cultivation with beans as intercrop to stop farm migration**

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Good start: Five communities-managed resource centres provide technical information on time.-Photo: Special Arrangement

Bejjalatti village in Erode, Tamil Nadu, is mainly dominated by tribal population. Being a predominantly dry area, ragi and maize are the main crops grown, intercropped with mustard. Since farm activities are only for six to seven months the farming population moves out to nearby towns in search of work for the rest of the year leaving the fields fallow. After monsoon they would come back and start working on their lands again. "This annual migration was a result of no work or income during the lean season. If some sort of agriculture work could be provided during this time, then the tribals would not move to towns in search of work," says Dr.P.Alagesan, Programme Coordinator, MYRADA (The Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency) in the region who came up with an idea of setting up orchards since this would need constant attention during the first two years and also can provide a perennial income.

### **Crop varieties**

Accordingly, amla, mango and citrus were selected to be grown in orchards and trees like silver oak, tamarind and some cassia species were to be planted as fence crops on the borders of the fields. Since the area is bone dry during summer three conditions were essential to keep the orchard development programme alive – one, the farmer must be made to stay back in his field and work. For this he should be remunerated well so that he doesn't feel the need to leave his field barren and till the orchards come to bearing an alternate source of income for the waiting period must be introduced.

### **Economics**

After a thorough study of the economics and the climatic conditions of the region, vegetable beans was selected to be grown as an intercrop in the orchards because the crop thrives well in hilly regions and being a short duration variety, it can be harvested within 90 days, filling the income gap till the trees start bearing. "Usually, in this region, beans sowing starts in late April and all the farmers complete their last picking by mid July. When optimum conditions prevail, an average of 1.5 to 2 tonnes of beans can be harvested in an acre. "Based on personal interaction with 25 farmers in the village it was found that the total yield after four pickings was 49,985 kg. On an average, farmers were able to harvest around 1,800 – 2,100 kg of beans from a one acre plot." The highest yield from a single plot was that of farmer Manian. The yield from his one acre plot was 2,480 kg, fetching him a gross income of Rs. 55,830. After deducting the input costs, the net income was Rs. 48,480. "All the farmers uniformly spent Rs.1,500 for buying seeds and Rs.1,650 on fertilizers. Labour costs varied from Rs.3,500 to Rs.4,000 on an average. Overall, the total expenditure on the crop for three months was between Rs.5,000 and Rs.7,000. This is a huge sum, given the fact that the tribals move out of their village during this season looking for casual employment outside, before this project was introduced," says Dr. Alagesan.

### **Women involved**

The women too have evinced great interest in tending to the crops and taking care of the entire process right from sowing till the vegetable is harvested. Wild animals like boar, which are common in the area, are also kept at bay since the tribals maintain constant vigil over the crops. "Being rain fed, non-availability of water had been a problem initially. Only farmers having their fields along the stream used to take up vegetable cultivation, that too, only on a small scale. After the introduction of community irrigation like checkdams and water percolation pits, glitches in water availability have become an issue of the past. When rains fail, irrigation from a perennial stream close by comes to the rescue," explains Dr. Alagesan. Five communities-managed resource centres (CMRC) have been set up and they provide information on seed availability and technical information on time.

### **Revolving fund**

In order to get the initial impetus, Myrada helped to set up a revolving fund to assist farmers in dealing with the initial fund crunch. Farmers took an initial loan of Rs.1,500 per acre from group corpus for the purchase of seeds, and once the harvest was completed and sold, they returned the loan along with a

nominal service charge. This system was designed to keep the community cushioned when it comes to critical fund availability.

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