



How the Rainfed Horticulture Changed the Life of Farmers in Thar Desert: A Success Story

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Farmers live in hardship of Thar Desert. Being owner of 25 hectares land but, producing only a handful of pearl millet (Bajra), Shri Kheta Ram, surprised to know that how scare resource of Thar desert i. e. water and land if managed efficiently can turn the poor livelihood of peoples into prosperity with support of Community Development Programmes. BAIF's efforts, for which he says (in his local language) "*BAIF ra aeda padhariya ki dhora ri dharti re mayne fallon ro runkhon ro sapno maharo sach hogayo, uhone ghano ghano dhanyabad sa*" (People of BAIF so came that my dream of fruit trees on dune land became true, many-many thanks to them).

Kheta ram, who owns 25 hectares land sounds like a rich farmer but having no source of water and his total land under rainfed low productive agriculture, he could produce only a handful of pearl millet (Bajra) during rainy season. He was involved in goat farming which was also insufficient to support his family, thus living a low life. Whatever he earned from selling goats and bajra, significant part of it had to spend on purchasing of drinking water which costs Rs. 500 per tanker for only two weeks. He lived in a miserable life in his tiny village name Ranigaon with his wife, window daughter-in-law, grandson and daughter. The situation led him to send his only son to neighbouring state Gujarat in search of work to support his family. His son was working as wage labour in Patan (Gujarat) agriculture mandi (Market) who unfortunately died there due to sudden bleeding. Thus, situation became worse for him.

In 2007, BAIF (The Bhartiya Agro Industries Foundation) started a project named Strengthening Development Programme (SDP) in Ranigaon. Kheta Ram came into contact of BAIF people and enquired about the project. After knowing that fruit plantation was possible in his desert land, he joined the group of other wadi farmers. (Wadi is popular term used for farm). BAIF organized an exposure visit for Ranigaon farmers to Udaipur (Rajasthan) to give a practical experience of wadi. While interacting with tribal farmers, he was astonished to hear that their conditions of limited water and low productive soil were similar to that of his land except he had sandy soil instead of stony. These farmers also never had a fruit wadi, however they are managing and earning well from wadi system. He was inspired by their stories and thought to be a part of BAIF's SDP programme.

In 2008, he established a wadi with 80 ber plants, 6 date palms and a tanka (tank) for rain water storage. He worked hard in terms of maintaining wadi. BAIF was happy to look at the dedication and his hard work for the wadi thus, decided to establish another wadi of 80 plants in the name of his son. Currently, he has 171 fruit plants, 35 goats and 3 Tankas on his field. He saved annual Rs. 5000 from rain water harvesting which otherwise he used to purchase two water tankers per month for drinking purpose. Fodder tree plantation on border and ber (*Ziziphus* spp.) leaves enhanced fodder availability resulted in increasing his goat herd size. Earning from wadi encouraged him to establish a lemon wadi on his own. When BAIF asked why lemon, he said in kidded mood that “it is all God’s will to grow only thorny plants like ber, and lemon in this desert”. Now, Kheta Ram is happy with his farm produce, from which he earns annually about Rs. 65,000 by sale of ber fruits after two years of establishment of ber wadi at his farm.

BAIF also supported him by providing some improved seeds of vegetables like cucumber, ridge guard and water melon for sowing in his wadi during rainy season as intercropping between fruit plants. He expressed with thanks that first time he could see growing such vegetables in his field. He got water melon weight of 10 kg each. But, first year he did not sell in the market, he just distributed to his neighbours and relatives. Qualitatively as well as quantitatively produce of his ber wadi was appreciated by the District Collector, Barmer, Block Development Officer, Officials from state agriculture department and Executive Officer from Municipal Corporation on a visit to his wadi. He believed and could realise that if agriculture can give him this much of income, he would have never sent his only son to go out state for working as wage labour, he wants to call him back to work at his own farm, unfortunately he died before coming home forever. He is thankful to BAIF for helping in achieving his dream of having fruit plants in his land.



Kheta Ram in his wadi, village – Ranigoan kalan, Tehsil & District – Barmer (Rajasthan).



Ber fruits after 2 years of establishment at Kheta Ram’s ber wadi (in photo, neighbour of Kheta Ram)



Pomegranate fruit at Kheta Ram’s wadi (in photo, one of workers at Kheta Ram’s wadi)

Conclusion

The agriculture in harsh climatic condition and fragile ecosystem like Barmer in Rajasthan can also be made remunerative if right species of plant kingdom is chosen with intelligent resource management. Example in the story shows that efficient management of scarce resource can turn the poor livelihood of peoples into prosperity with support of Community Development Programmes.