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Farm Squad

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Poorva Kuber's mother in a field of Indrayani rice

By Navjyoti Dalal

A year ago when Poorva Kuber, an advertising professional, and her mother got to know of a small farm patch available 'to be adopted', the two of them had found their happy place.

Having grown vegetables on the latter's Paud Road terrace garden, they harboured a wish to take the hobby to the next level. This month marks a year, or three crop cycles, since the two have grown brinjals,

several gourds, chillies tomatoes, herbs, even paddy, and more on the 500-sq ft plot. Kuber and her mother are part of the first wave of community farming in India, which can be witnessed at an emerging stage in the country, from Pune, to Bengaluru, Delhi-NCR, Chennai, Hyderabad, Surat, Coimbatore, and growing. What looks like an idyllic retirement plan for many urban gardeners, tilling land and growing one's own food is taking shape and coming to them much earlier than they can fill their PF withdrawal forms. Catalysing the process is community farming, an inclusive farming model which banks on the community to take care of farmland, and gives back healthy and fresh produce.

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Poorva Kuber's mother in a field of Indrayani rice

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presence, when at minimum are 500 sq ft, are taken care of by the farmer in their absence," says Chakravarty, whose venture will reach Pune in three months.

He adds that there is an interest in the farmers too to collaborate and try the organic approach for it ensures some steady cash flow. Most of these enquiries (and app downloads) come from smaller cities and towns like Coimbatore, Belgaum, Jamshedpur, Aurangabad and the like.

While Farmizen is the prototype of a professional-commercial venture, others like Pallod Farms and The Farm (by Protecterra Ecological Foundation) are more inclined towards giving an experience of an eco-sensitive lifestyle. For Abhishek Pallod, owner of Pallod Farms, his 'Adopt A Harvest' venture is an extension of drawing people into what he calls a 'half-the-grid' life. Having tried living completely off the grid, on a farm with little engagement with the mainstream way of life, Pallod realised a balance is needed to understand and appreciate both these lifestyles.

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"To truly be living off-grid would mean alienating yourself from the society, which is not practical or possible. Urbanisation to isolation is not a healthy or easy thing. So I wanted to go half the grid. Eliminating the negatives of urbanisation, and soaking in the positives of isolation, and farming is a part of the latter," says Pallod, whose farm at Mulshi Road, near Chandni Chowk, offers diverse ways to absorb this median approach, like gathering for a meal cooked with freshly harvested produce, to talking shop in a glass-and-log cabin surrounded by medicinal herbs and vines, and pottery, apart from farming on 500 sq ft plots.



a colourful yield and (ab ove) a cookout at Pallod Farms

Further on this side of this spectrum is The Farm, managed and run by wildlife conservation biologist Pooja Bhale. Located on NDA Road, near Warje, Bhale's is a farm which follows principles of zero-waste, recycling (many parts of the farm made using scrap), inclusivity (co-habiting the space with domesticated cats, dogs and goats, apart from wildlife including birds, langurs, spotted deer, porcupines, wild boars) and sensitivity to nature. "We started with the vision to reconnect humanity to the earth. The Farm is a philosophy of love towards nature and ecology. These 2.5 acres are dedicated to ecological learning. Community farming allows for a long-term engagement, because you see an entire cycle of a crop, without hurry," says Bhale, who lets out 200 sq ft patches for a period of three to six months. The members of this community farming programme receive seeds and saplings, hands-on assistance, and participate in cookouts at the farm. "It is not yield per sq foot, but joy per sq ft," she adds.

Currently 25 families visit The Farm, many of these include residents from areas like Kondhwa, Kalyani Nagar and Mundhwa.

"Last season, a Mumbai resident was here, but I discontinued long-distance membership because frequent visits to your patch are important," informs Bhale who allows membership on the condition that the member visit every 7–10 days. "If they don't come for three weeks, we caution them, we'll release their plot," she adds.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in India is a variation of the original model. While CSA originated in Japan in the mid '60s as Teikei (which means cooperation), where the farmer and the consumer partner engage directly without a middleman, the model was started in the US in the '80s by two European farmers (in this the consumers became subscribers to the farmer's harvest which would reach them once or twice every week), from where it percolated to other countries. In India, though, the more widespread is a DIY version where those interested rent a patch of farmland, and grow their choice of crop with assistance, guidance and infrastructure provided by the farmer, for a monthly/quarterly fee.

From a regular supply of zero chemical organic food, to spending time working with mud, which is found to be therapeutic, there are many draws for community farming for city folks. However, one of the primary reasons includes bonding with family, and initiating the younger generation into something that they believe will help them value food better. Rupali Prasad Gurav, a marketing professional who takes care of a small patch at The Farm, explains that what triggered her to give farming a try was her four-year-old daughter, Vallari. "As part of the Unschooling philosophy, we allow the child to learn from experience and farming fit the bill. Children observe and learn. For instance, when a child uproots a carrot from the ground, she learns about the force of the earth, apart from the fact that the carrot is a root vegetable," says Gurav, who visits the patch with Vallari and her husband Prasad, whose visual impairment doesn't affect his role in the farm work. "He helps with the harvesting. It's a meditative experience for us as a family. Not only does it make you conscious and aware of what you eat, it also changes your perspective. You become more judicious with food. Despite just a 200 sq ft area we never fall short of vegetables," she says.

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The advertisement for Netshoes features two pairs of shoes. On the left is a pair of light-colored, low-heeled shoes with a price tag of 'RS 99,99' and an orange 'Compre!' button. On the right is a pair of black sneakers with a red '-48%' discount tag, a crossed-out price of 'RS 349,99', and an orange 'Compre!' button. Below the shoes is a dark purple banner with the 'NETSHOES' logo in white.

Pune Mirror

Community farming's big draw is that it can be a family activity amidst nature, and many such families are regulars at Farmizen

Another merit attributed to the community farming model is that it allows one to flex their green thumb, at the same time saving from the struggles of buying land to farm. "Buying land is not always an easy option. It requires one to be thorough about its status as agricultural, plus the financial effort, and the hassles of registration, or to keep it safe once bought," Gurav explains. Despite these advantages, one must exercise caution while choosing a farm to be a member of, feels Parikshiti Dhulugade, who quit his job in media marketing to find his calling in farming. A qualified engineer, Dhulugade turned farmer five years ago, and currently farms one part of a property without rent, in exchange for setting up an orchard for the landowner. He, along with wife Prachi Sumant, and friend Abhijeet Wagh, are stationed in Nasrapur, Khed, near Pune. The trio extensively relies on the CSA model and uses community support to work. For an extra pair of hands they employ the farm timeshare concept (sharing the farm with someone who helps on the field in lieu of the technical knowhow), the compost is produced from the wet waste they source from a housing society they have tied up with, and the manure is provided by a neighbouring farm which houses cattle. None of these interactions are monetary in nature. The only commerce that happens through the farm is via subscriptions that the produce garners.

While the charms are many, there is an equal number of pitfalls, which must be bypassed. "For instance, priority should be given to accessibility to the land, water, and the fact that the land is cultivation ready. There is an abundance of land, but you choose where you want to farm depending on these factors," says Dhulugade who also advises against quitting one's job for learning to farm. "Most importantly, work on a land whose owner has an integrated infrastructure.

And if you turn to community farming with an aim of selling your produce, understand that the market is a very tricky place. There is always uncertainty in terms of who will buy at your rates. This is where CSA helps," says Dhulugade who has tied up with 20 families, which pay a quarterly fee of Rs 5,000, for a weekly basket of produce like broccoli, lettuce (romaine, lolo rosso, iceberg), kale, nasturtiums, radishes, beets, spinach, fenugreek, cherry tomatoes and spring onions.

“ People are interested because there is an awareness around eating organic and the benefits of spending time amidst nature. Their involvement in the farm is completely up to them.

Shameek Chakravarty, Farmizen

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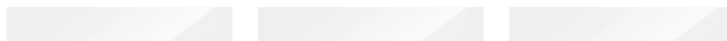
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


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