

Marketing of Natural Farming Produce: Challenges and Opportunities

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PROLOGUE

Indian agriculture moving towards sustainability and agroecology conservation is putting its steps ahead into new regenerative agriculture techniques such as natural farming. Natural farming being the most unique method of regenerative agriculture has its roots in traditional farming methods of Indian farming where it regenerates the soil, plant, and human health. It mainly focuses on sustainability and climate-resilient farming methods. Farmers who follow this method face numerous obstacles when trying to sell their produce. The whole supply chain of natural farming produce is not yet developed properly. In the upstream and downstream both have no proper system developed for marketing of natural farming produce. A Committee was constituted by DA&FW on 21.03.2022 to draw the standards and certification system for Naturally Grown Products and in this regard, the constituted committee has framed the standards and certification system and submitted the report to DA&FW, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmer's Welfare, Govt. of India. However, the standardization process has not reached to maximum producers and has not been adopted throughout the country uniformly. The natural farming produce is sold in individual pockets in their rural village local markets but no proper collection standardized grading and processing facilities are available. Farmers just sell their produce such as fruits and vegetables in the nearby local markets without proper advertising that the produce is produced naturally without the use of chemicals. Non-availability in metropolitan cities and lack of awareness in tier 2 and 3 cities can lead to demand and supply disturbances.

Lack of credibility among consumers is a major reason that consumers don't prefer natural

produce because it is not certified authentically as organic. In metropolitan cities, all consumers can't afford to buy natural produce because of its availability only in supermarkets and vegetable retail chains and its overpriced nature. New strategies and approaches that could help practitioners of natural farming improve their marketing capacities need to be developed to address these issues. Using social media and e-commerce channels to market and sell products grown naturally to customers are some of these strategies, along with focused education efforts to increase consumer awareness and the creation of a reliable certification program to build credibility. Expand the accessibility of natural farming products by working together with grocery stores, local markets, and retail chains. In Andhra Pradesh in 2022, the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) a most famous religious temple in Andhra Pradesh placed an order for 22,000 tonnes of 12 types of chemical-free agri-produce from 25,000 natural farming farmers. The TTD also supplies livestock from its cow shelters to farmers to help them prepare natural farming formulations such as Jeevamrit and Beejamrit. To get the above constraints, explore producing value-added items from natural agricultural produce, such as organic snacks, drinks, or processed foods, as well as developing collaborative marketing campaigns.

Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming:

In natural farming, Andhra Pradesh is leading in this due to the presence of an initiative named Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming (APCNF) which is a community-based farming system applied in all the districts of Andhra Pradesh by a non-profit organization named Rythu Sadhikara Samstha under the

guidance of Andhra Pradesh state government. It is a very successful initiative with lakhs of farmers as its followers and community leaders. APCNF is a successful model as it follows all the universal principles of natural farming such as covering the soil with crops for 365 days round the year so that they can prevent soil erosion, maintain the diversification of crops and trees, and create minimal disturbance to soil structure. APCNF farmers integrate animals into every step of farming as all the inputs that are used in the process of natural farming are derived from the procedures that involve the utilization of cow dung and urine as the basic raw materials. These bio-stimulants which are prepared through standardized methods from the raw material are the catalysts for whole natural farming as they function accordingly as Jeevamrit helps in developing and maintaining soil micro-organisms ratio and helps in plant growth and soil microclimate maintenance.

These bio-stimulants also increase the soil organic matter and a few methods such as Pre-monsoon Dry sowing (PMDS) is also one method to maintain soil organic matter by sowing more than 9 varieties of crops on a single piece of land and ploughing them as they attain maturity stage enhances the soil organic content. In natural farming methodology, the farmers use only indigenous seeds and not any hybrids. Even in crops like cotton farmers are moving back from BT to indigenous varieties to get into the natural farming stream. The pest and disease attacks in these varieties are comparatively low due to their wild natural characteristics and if the crop is treated with many botanical extracts such as Neemastra, Bramastra, etc at every stage before there is any pest infestation. The overall natural farming practice involves no use of any fertilizers or pesticides or herbicides or weedicides, which are used in conventional farming techniques. Without using all these conventional methods shifting to natural farming is a risky task as there are very low initial yields for the initial 3 years and it takes a minimum of 3 years to build good soil organic matter and yield good yields. Hence natural farming farmers have a huge amount of patience

which is required to get good yields in due course of time.

Natural farming is a process that requires time and good regenerative practices which can help in the revival of soil health, plant health, human health, and environmental sustainability. Even though natural farming farmers put time, effort, and patience into growing produce they are not receiving sufficient market price and profits for their hard work. The marketing ecosystem in natural farming products is a completely new area where still there are very few interventions. The standard certification process for natural farming produce as that of organic farming is still under development. Natural farming produce has no exact credibility in the consumer market due to a lack of awareness and many other issues. A detailed analysis of the marketing issues is presented below:

Producer level Challenges in natural farming:

Natural farming is a risky process as the yields starts being remunerative only after many years of continuous efforts and hard work. No specific support is provided by the government to the natural farming produce regarding its marketing such as MSP. Farmers who follow natural farming need to use cow dung and urine as the major raw material for all the bio-stimulants preparation. But those farmers who don't have their cattle have to purchase these inputs from Goushalas and neighboring farmers in huge quantities, which is a costly affair. Storage of bio-stimulants is a major problem in natural farming as these are in higher quantities and there are no farm storage facilities to store the bio-stimulants. Farmers can't get readymade bio-stimulants because of the above reasons, as their bulky quantity hampers their storage on a large scale. It becomes again a costly affair to store huge quantities of bio-stimulants. The quality stays very high in natural farming produce but the external appearance of fruits and vegetables may not be satisfying to the eye when contrary to conventional farming. The color of the natural farming produce is not as appealing as the chemical-intensive products.

The natural farming produce is sold as individual pockets in their rural village local markets but no proper collection standardized grading and processing facilities are available. Farmers just sell their produce such as fruits and vegetables in the nearby local markets without proper advertising that the produce is produced naturally without the use of chemicals. As there is no sufficient popularity consumers consider it as any other normal chemical farming produce and ignore it as they feel it's high priced or the color and size are not satisfactory when compared to the chemical farming produce placed aside. In general, producers are weak at marketing strategies and middlemen are involved in this area and market the produce highlighting all the health benefits to the corporate world, educational societies, temples, and many residential societies and get huge contracts from them and give less rupees to farmers in the profit as a result the producers share in consumers rupees is always diminishing.

Processor level challenges in natural farming:

Even if any processing industry wants to start the processing of natural farming the necessary huge amounts are not available to them as many farmers who practice natural farming grow it in a limited area and do not expand it because of the huge quantities of bio-stimulants necessary for production on a large scale. As the produce is not available on a large scale to the industries, the industries cannot process it because of irregular availability. The whole supply chain of natural farming produce is not yet developed properly. In the upstream and downstream both the streams have no proper system developed for natural farming produce. To label any produce that is value-added as natural produce there needs to be some certified procedure which has not standardized completely till now in natural farming. Like organic farming, there is a huge need for standardization of the certification process for natural farming produce which helps in increasing the market credibility. Consumers are only believers in labels certification numbers and codes, it is the core necessity to create a standardized certification system.

Consumer-level challenges in natural farming:

The Indian consumer market is health conscious and prefers more organic and natural-based foods that are low in chemical residual content. However, these consumers exist in most of the metropolitan cities of the country but not much in tier 2 and tier 3 cities. Hence availability in metropolitan cities and lack of awareness in tier 2 and 3 cities can lead to demand and supply disturbances. Lack of credibility among consumers is a major reason that consumers don't prefer natural produce because it is not certified authentically as organic. Hence in many cases, though the food is available to consumers they are unable to distinguish and understand the importance. In metropolitan cities, all consumers can't afford to buy natural produce because of its availability only in supermarkets and vegetable retail chains and its overpriced nature. Comparatively, the cost of naturally produced food is higher in retail outlets than chemical farming produce which makes consumers think twice before purchasing as it has no authorized sticker of certification and costs more. Few leafy vegetables and other vegetables of some kind are easy to identify if grown naturally as they are mostly indigenous varieties and leaf size and texture also vary. Natural farming produce can be distinguished based on taste as most of the consumers who consume it regularly can be able to differentiate the taste difference of both chemical and naturally produced food.

Strategies to enhance the marketing of natural farming produce:

At the farmer level, all the issues marketing of natural farming produce have to be addressed and expansion of the area under production through incentives is the major strategy need to be developed. Farmers as a group such as producer organizations will have more bargaining power. Hence, establishment of Farmer Producer Organizations either crop-based or area-based on farmers would help in the accumulation of the natural farming produce and bargain at a good price directly with the consumers or retailers. Farmers of natural farming have more yield losses in the initial

years compared to chemical farming hence, a cumulative effort on reducing the risk through intercropping and other strategies will lead to good profit when all the groups of farmers go for similar intercrop and marketing the produce together. Farmers need to develop good marketing practices (grading, packaging, labeling) and skills such as advertising the health benefits of the produce and transporting it to markets where the price is remunerative. Selling in local markets is cost-effective for farmers but it is the major reason for least profits. When farmers develop their own natural produce upstream supply chain through integration of all the produce and arranging logistic support for transportation to high-demand places can yield double prices to farmers and also reduce transportation costs. However, due to a lack of cohesiveness among the farmers and limited produce, many farmers are not forming into groups and working collectively.

Collective direct marketing avoiding middlemen can be the best method to provide the produce at optimal prices to the consumers. As price is a major factor in the consumer decision, if prices are kept optimal then the chances of purchase of the produce may increase even though it's not certified as the opportunity cost is more for the customers. Proving the produce at an affordable cost is important for natural farming farmers as the produce is still not authentically certified and the process is still under development. As online marketing and digitalization is at its rapid adoption stage in India developing skills among farmers to sell their produce online is a new marketing strategy as it can help in reaching a large number of audiences in a limited time. Using short videos and advertisements with influential people can help a layman also to understand the health benefits of naturally produced food and also benefits of the farming for future sustainability.

The trend of using naturally grown foods with the least chemicals should be developed among the internet users which passively influences their families and creates awareness among the consumer base. To start, focusing on the industrial market- that

is, hotels, healthcare facilities, travel companies, and railroads- is an essential strategy for expanding the market for natural products. It leads to more popularity bulky orders and contract-type farming. It can eventually lead to the development of natural produce-specific food outlets same as millet-based outlets. Government support is critical in streamlining the certification systems and helping farmers form new farmer organizations as they need to be given incentives in the initial stage. The government has to ensure that the lack of market access does not hinder the transition towards non-chemical farming practices.

Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming (APCNF) successful marketing strategies:

Local communities can purchase chemical-free Natural Farming produce from 139 Government offices, including those located in commercial areas, 96 Farmer Markets, and 84 retail locations operated by Natural Farming (NF) entrepreneurs in Andhra Pradesh. Natural farming produce is supplied at Early Childhood Care centers run by the government, student hostels, and neighborhood hospitals in addition to public health facilities. There are Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) between RySS and Tirumala Tirupathi Devasthanam (TTD), which is one of the most famous temples in India, and the Women's Welfare Department. Negotiations are ongoing for commodity supply arrangements with leading Indian retail houses like AMUL, Reliance, and Phalada. APCNF has strong quality control mechanisms set up to fulfill stringent certification requirements. The program has improved internal control and community-endorsed traceability for Seed to Seed (S2S) farms significantly. A farmer's ability to guarantee premium prices for the produce of their regenerative farming, prove authenticity, and increase product acceptance are all greatly aided by certification. At the moment, the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) makes this possible. Together with a strong Internal Control System (ICS) and traceability, RySS actively conducts PGS-INDIA certification in every district. While farmers supplying to TTD were granted

exclusive PGS-INDIA certification in 2022–2023, 889 local groups with 6285 S2S farmers were formed. In addition, 4.31 lakh additional farmers will also be subject to RySS's Internal Control System (ICS).

EPILOGUE

Natural farming being the most unique method of regenerative agriculture, expansion of area under production through incentives to the farmers needs to be developed. To have more bargaining power for natural farming produce, establishment of Farmer Producer Organizations either crop-based or area-based would be helpful to

the farmers. Farmers need to develop good marketing practices and marketing skills to get remunerative price for their natural farming produce. Marketing platform like Pusa Agri Krishi Haat of IARI for marketing of natural farming agri produce directly to the consumer needs to be created at KVK, SAUs and ICAR Institutes for promotion and marketing of agri produce. The initiatives taken by Andhra Pradesh Government as natural farming produce is being supplied at Early Childhood Care centers run by the government, student hostels, and neighborhood hospitals in addition to public health facilities needs to be implemented by other states.

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