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FREEDOM TO BREATHE

From working professionals to farmers: How did they do it?

How to become a farmer? Meet three couples who tell you how they connected with their roots and freed themselves from the shackles of city life

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I decided to take up farming because of the long work hours and unproductive travel time I spent commuting. So I executed my plans by shortlisting the number of activities that we would take up (as there were an infinite number of options). Rejuvenating the mango orchard was one. Hence, we equipped ourselves with the local and conventional practices of mango farming. Then, we slowly introduced ourselves to modern farming techniques. For goat farming, we started with conventional methods and

Sumit and Akshata Bhosle

34 and 31 years old respectively

THE EX-JOURNALIST AND THE LAW PROFESSOR SHIFTED FROM MUMBAI TO SAWANTWADI IN 2014 TO CULTIVATE ALPHONSO MANGOES AND REAR GOATS

then improvised with stalled goat farming. Most of it is day-to-day learning with a lot of on-the-job training.

The biggest challenge was to get into the right frame of mind to be able to work in a rural area. But surprisingly, given today's infrastructure and con-



nectivity, transitioning from urban to rural areas was not as difficult as we thought. However, scaling up our agri-business is still at the top of our mind. Climate changes, unavailability of adequately skilled manpower and non-acceptance of modern

farming techniques at the local level are some of the other challenges.

The need of the hour is not only farmers, but also responsible farmers who understand the needs of the market and accordingly change their crops. We need farmers who can in-

corporate inevitable climate changes in their cropping techniques and combine conventional farming with technology. And with all this, we also need farmers with a sheer desire to feed the population with clean, healthy and adequately nutritious food.

Rahul and Sampada Kulkarni

49 and 48 years old respectively

THE ADVERTISING PROFESSIONAL AND THE MARATHI ACTRESS STARTED AGRI-TOURISM IN RATNAGIRI (2007)

We took up farming after a brief, but inspiring meeting with veteran farmer and activist Shekhar Bhadsavle who eventually became our mentor on this journey. We discovered the fallacy of our urban assumption that food will always be available if we have money to pay for it. The farming fraternity is diminishing every day and we need to get back to farming if we want to keep producing food for future generations. Hence, we worked towards our dream of creating a farm where travellers can meet their food before it lands on their plates. This would also bring us the opportunity to live a peaceful and happy life in a small village in Konkan and allow us to share the experience with others.

Our best teacher has been hands-on experience. After 12 years, today I can claim that there is no better teacher than mistakes. We continued experiments on the farm to understand the



air and soil quality while working on our professional careers. We learned a lot from native farmers who worked on our farm for wages. We then tried to grow more than 40 conventional and unconventional grains, vegetables and fruits

over a period of five-six years. The self-done sowing, ploughing, weeding, cutting and threshing the crops were better than professional education.

Educated youth today needs to get back to the dying industry of farming to overcome risks like climate change and most importantly, safeguard the basic necessity of food for the country.



Nithin Kurian and Wilma D'Souza

Both 32 years old

THIS CORPORATE COUPLE BUILT A SMALL SET-UP ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF BENGALURU, NEARLY THREE YEARS AGO TO GROW FOOD AND HELP PEOPLE EXPERIENCE CAMPING AND FARMING ON THEIR PROPERTY



The monotony of city life along with the unhealthy lifestyle drove me to adopt sustainable farming. Initially, we started to grow veggies like tomatoes, sweet potatoes and tapoca; however, we soon realised that these veggies may not be conducive for our region as we are on the bor-

der of a forest and have elephants, boars, hares and porcupines visit us every night that could destroy the veggies. Now we have lemons, mangoes, drumsticks, some seasonal vegetables and herbs. Though we are not farming at a commercial level, we have built a small demand for our produce amongst our social circle.

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of awareness about conservation of forests and natural resources. Once, we collected seeds of native plants and trees, and planted them directly. We were excited to see these plants grow, but were devastated to see forest fires set by villagers every year to burn them. However, we don't want to give up and are therefore planning a series of educational sessions for school kids and villagers to create awareness on conservation.

Farming is no longer an offbeat ca-



reer. Today, concepts like polyhouse and aquaponics are key breakthroughs, and with increasing research, this sector is sure to become more viable in the near future. Farming is not a fancy option, but needs a lot of planning, hard work and passion. Remember the saying "If you ate today, thank a farmer."

The truth is that the farming fraternity is diminishing every day and we need to get back to farming if we want to keep producing food for future generations.

Not lounging in but mucking out

A new generation of rural retreats offers rustic accommodation, home-grown produce and the chance to get your hands dirty

Shabnam Minwalla

When Vrichita and Sandeep Karnik travelled to Mumbai from Muscat for their annual holiday in July, they visited family, met up with friends and shopped. But they also spent three days planting rice in a remote corner of coastal Maharashtra.

The Karniks are city people. Sandeep works in a shipping company. Vrichita is a housewife and their teenage daughter Nishita is a student. But they were enchanted by their farm stay in Ratnagiri. "Homely atmosphere and great food. It was really fun," Vrichita says, about their rainy, slushy but fabulous vacation.

India, we've often been told, lives in its villages. But we've rarely bothered to experience this for ourselves. The Karniks are, however, part of a new breed of tourists eager to get away from the hill station-and-history trail and visit unexpected corners of rural India. They are willing to put up with insects, no mobile signal and mystifying T-junctions in order to watch cows being milked, collect their own eggs from the hen coop and munch on the sweet potatoes that they've pulled from the ground. As long as there are clean rooms and good loos at the end of the day.

Which is why remote getaways like the Farm of Happiness — an old-style Konkani house near Phunus village, which can only be accessed by a twisty drive on lonely rural roads — are springing up across the country. Tea estates near Darjeeling and coffee plantations in Coorg have been offering accommodation for some years, but now small-time farmers in Maharashtra,

orchards in Uttarakhand and far-sighted entrepreneurs in Rajasthan are also jumping onto the "get your hands muddy" bandwagon.

For example, at Amrute's Nisarga Sahavas, another farm stay near Ratnagiri, visitors can graft plants, thresh rice and harvest fruits. While at Maachli in lush Sindhudurg, they can cook on an open flame and use traditional kitchen implements. At Our Native Village near Bangalore, they can milk cows and acquire a Bullock Cart Driving licence. At Acres Wild in Coonoor, guests can enroll in the cheese-making course.

Everything from bullock cart driving lessons and harvesting vegetables to rice threshing is on offer for city slickers wanting a taste of country life



At the Banyan Tree Farmstay in Tamil Nadu, they can fish for their own dinner. While at the upmarket Lakshman Sagar in Rajasthan, they can master the tricky art of herding goats and harvesting vegetables for their own dinner.

Clearly, agro-tourism is where the action is. "Farm stays like ours are for people who want a safe, clean place that's close to nature," says Rahul Kulkarni, a Mumbai-based ad man who felt he was getting "fried" and yearned for a simple, sustainable lifestyle. In 2005, he realized he had inherited a plot of land and gradually, patch by patch, experiment by experiment, established the organic Farm of Happiness. "I built the kind of house that my grandfather would have, with laterite bricks, niches, porches and a clay floor covered with cowdung. We now let out three rooms and it's been wonderful. The villagers feel so proud that people are actually coming all this way to our small, isolated village."

But why are guests bothering to make these bone-rattling journeys? "People are fed up of typical resorts

with everything artificial. Here they are getting good, neat and clean rooms and hygienic homemade food from the farm. And they are also learning something different," says Ashish Amrute of Amrute's Nisarga Sahavas.

Concurs Pravin Samant, who runs Maachli Farmstay on his ancestral plantation in Sindhudurg: "Visitors who come here in the monsoon love to sow plants alongside the farmers. In summer they pluck their own mangoes and berries and eat them under a tree. Guests come to enjoy and understand village life."

The Samants, who have been farmers for generations before straying into the world of hospitality, offer four beautifully designed cottages hidden amidst the cashew and kokam trees. "We treat guests the way we treat our own relatives. When a son-in-law visits for the first time, it can be difficult, but it also brings us joy. It is the same with guests who come to our farmstay."

The Salvis, who run Majhya MamachaGaon near Ratnagiri, also maintain that their visitors come as tourists and leave as "relatives". Like

FARM IDYLL: Agri tourism offers travellers unusual alternatives. (Above) Vacationers at Farm of Happiness in Konkani try their hand at ploughing and dine on vegetables that they've harvested

fussy sons-in-law, then, guests are pampered with the freshest vegetables, the plumpest prawns and the most labour-intensive delicacies. And this is the norm in most farm stays.

"Everything we serve is locally sourced or made in-house. So instead of ice cream we may make kulfi," says Inderpal Singh Kochhar, an innovative hotelier who set up Lakshman Sagar in Rajasthan. "For snacks we whip up some chikki or tilpatti. Instead of cold drinks we offer khush varieties and fresh juices."

It is these traditional flavours and touches that are attracting numerous tourists. "When you stay at such places, you experience the place, the people and the culture in a very different way," says Shilpa Sheth, an ardent traveller who is happy to weed, play in bales of hay and dabble with rangoli on cowdung floors. "For me this is real travel."