

P BHUVANESWARI'S DETERMINATION AND HARD WORK TURNED BARREN LAND INTO FIELDS OF GOLD, WHERE SHE HARVESTS PADDY, VEGETABLES AND FRUITS

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P Bhuvaneshwari, winner of the Karshakashri award, at her paddy fields in Elappully in Palakkad | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

Rising with the sun, P Bhuvaneshwari begins work on her fields when the horizon is still rosy with the promise of a new day.

Winner of the Karshakashri Award for 2021, Bhuvaneshwari is a woman of few words. With more than 24 acres, including orchards and paddy fields, under her care, the 62-year-old homemaker has her hands full.

Apologising for not taking calls earlier, she says she was busy drying turmeric to be ground into powder. She says: "There is always something to be done on a farm. Since I grew up in a family with extensive farmlands, I was not unduly worried about making a living from farming when we came to live in Elappully panchayat in Palakkad district, in 1995 after my husband, Venkitachalapathy, a school teacher, retired."

Her hard work and determination turned the dry barren four-and-a-half acres that her husband inherited into a veritable Eden of paddy fields, coconut groves, mango and jackfruit orchards, vegetables and fruits.

"The parched land was filled with shrubs and stones. With my eldest son Sajith, who was then 14, we cleared the land and planted sheema konna (*Gliricidia*). With a bank loan, I purchased 20 cows and began to earn a living by selling milk," she recalls.

There was no question of selling the property to move to the city. The way forward was to make farming a paying proposition. She attended a workshop conducted by Subhash Palekar, champion of natural organic farming, and that helped her in learning to farm without the aid of chemical pesticides and fertilizers.

The first task was to improve the fertility of the soil. Using lime, cow dung and urine, she enriched the soil without any artificial fertilizers. Leaves of the sheema konna were spread over the soil to reduce evaporation and conserve the scarce water resources on their property. Within five years, the land began yielding the fruits of labour.

Not an armchair farmer, the septuagenarian, with her farm workers, ploughs, weeds and transplants seedlings in the fields. "My father was one of the first in Palakkad to own a tiller and I learnt to drive the tiller and the tractor. As a farmer, I enjoy being a hands-on worker instead of merely supervising the farm work. Sometimes, it is difficult to find labourers when we need them. So, I decided to learn to use the farm implements myself," she says.

By rotating crops on her fields, she ensures that no field is left fallow. After one paddy harvest, she plants urad dal, green gram, horse gram and sesame, which rejuvenates the soil's fertility.

“We have two paddy harvests every year and in between I cultivate pulses. I get about 2,500 kilograms of paddy from one season. We mill the paddy and sell it directly to buyers,” she explains.

“My farm workers’ cooperation and the support of my family have been paramount to my success. My workers are family to me and every time there is work on the fields, I cook lunch for them as well.”

During the lockdown, every day, she packed 100 lunches and left it on the compound wall of her house so that the needy could come and take it. “There were many in dire straits in our neighbourhood. By providing them one meal, at least some of them did not have to go hungry.”

For the doughty Bhuvanewari, farming is not merely a way to earn a living. It is also her way of keeping her part of the earth free of pollutants that damage the soil. Hence, she does not encourage selling the fruits on the trees. The fruits are sold only after they are harvested. She prefers to sell the fruit directly to buyers in and around Palakkad and in cities such as Bengaluru.

“Farming is profitable, if it is done sincerely. I don’t like giving the fruits on the trees to large-scale buyers because they tend to use pesticides and fertilisers to get a good crop. As result of the care that we take, the fruits and value-added products we sell fetch a good price.”

Coconut oil, saplings, fruits and milled paddy are snapped up by large hospitals and big buyers who are confident about the quality of the produce.

Her children, living in UK and Australia, take her for vacations. Her heart, however, is in her farm and she cannot wait to get back to her beloved orchards and fields.

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