

## Linking Ecologically Protective Farming with Consumers Who Value Healthy Food

By [Bharat Dogra](#)

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*Thanks to the efforts of a voluntary organization Srijan spread over several years, Tikamgarh district (Madhya Pradesh) has emerged as an important center for the spread of natural farming practices. The 'Tikamgarh model' that has emerged from these efforts is based on encouraging small farmers to adopt natural farming practices, with special emphasis on encouraging women farmers, as well as diversifying crops with multi-layer vegetable gardens and small fruit orchards.*

Now that these farmers have a higher diversity of crops grown using natural farming methods (and avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides), the next obvious step is to try to increase the income of farmers by taking their produce directly to those consumers who value healthy food. However this would involve some additional efforts on the part of these farmers to take up food processing activities as well. This makes it possible to gain access to consumers directly. Value addition with processing activities, which are taken up keeping in view health and nutrition value of food, also brings new livelihood support and income to rural communities.

Hence the next step in the natural farming model implemented here is to add food processing, value addition and improved marketing. Once farming communities move in this direction, the consolidation efforts also make it possible to receive inputs like better quality seeds and saplings as well as know-how and other help in a more organized way.

Hence the Tikamgarh model of natural farming is now marching into a new phase of a farmer producer group of women farmers. It has been decided to initiate such an effort with women farmers because they have been a very important part of the mobilization here for natural farming and higher diversification of crops and have been consistently giving good results with their sincere efforts. In addition there is a desire to accord the due recognition to the important contribution of women to farming which has not received the due recognition in most parts of the country.

Saroj Kushwaha of Pathari village is a woman farmer who has adopted natural farming practices with a lot of commitment and has also encouraged and helped several other farmers to do so. She has started a natural farming center on her small farm of about 4 acres or so with the help of Srijan. Making the most of the several opportunities created by this voluntary organization, she has initiated a multi-layer vegetable garden and has enrolled for training as a 'goat doctor' so that the goats of her village can now be treated within the village with her help. Not too far from this village is another inspiring woman farmer Phoola Devi from an even poorer background. Although she has even lesser land, she has attracted much appreciation for her sincere and hard work in creating a beautiful fruit orchard on this land.

Such hard working and sincere women farmers are the real strength of this farmer producer organization which has now also been registered as a company, the Ken Betwa Women Farmer Producer Company. This company has 2300 shareholders, who are mostly women farmers from Tikamgarh district.

This name is based on two famous rivers of Bundelkhand region—Ken and Betwa rivers—and the message sought to be conveyed by this name is that just as it is very important to protect these rivers for the prosperity of the region, similarly it is very important to protect the sustainable livelihoods of small farmers.

This effort has made it possible for women to come forward increasingly in leadership roles, a trend that is likely to increase further in the near future.

Instead of being too ambitious, this effort has come up with the sale of a limited number of products initially for direct sale to consumers. Orders from health-conscious consumers are coming in based on its web-site information and other avenues of approaching consumers. Although this effort is already getting good orders from big cities like Mumbai, its aim is to keep a balance between such orders and sales closer to home.

The products already being marketed include cold press groundnut and mustard oil, ghee based on the milk of local breeds of cows, graded and packaged groundnuts, kodon and kutki millets, arhar and moong pulses.

By using cottage and village-scale processing, this effort ensures additional advantages which may be lost in large-scale processing. Healthier, more nutritious edible oil can be obtained while oilcake remains available for local dairy animals instead of being lost to the wider market or the export market.

Farmers get their payment very quickly. Often the produce is collected right from their doorstep so that they do not have to spend money and time in the sale effort. At some of the processing centers women farmers can come and use the equipment available here even for the processing of that produce which has not been sold to the company. Whatever

profits the company makes remain with their own company of which they are shareholders.

Rakesh Singh and Kamlesh Kurmi of Srijan who have been closely involved with the initial planning of this venture say, "The idea is not to make a big splash with too many products but instead to emphasize quality control and establish credibility. Once this is achieved other gains will come in due course. We have several innovative ideas which will be implemented when things have stabilized somewhat."

A side activity of this effort has been to also make available some bulk farm produce to some bigger procurers (such as wheat to biscuit makers). However the main concentration remains on establishing a direct link between ecologically protective farmers and health-conscious consumers.

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**Bharat Dogra** is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include *India's Quest for Sustainable Farming and Healthy Food*, *Man over Machine* and *A Day in 2071*. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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