

From farm to fork

Hundreds of farmers begin their day at the crack of dawn to ensure the best produce reaches the kitchens of Delhiites through the horticulture brand of a dairy major. *Shinjini Ghosh* takes a field trip to Bakhtawarpur in outer Delhi

Under the scorching sun, six migrant labourers from Bihar prepare the field for harvest in outer Delhi's Bakhtawarpur. The men work at a hurried pace to meet the target set by Safal, the horticulture brand of Mother Dairy that caters to the Capital's demand for fresh vegetables.

"We usually start our day around 5 a.m. and work till late evening. I started working on this particular farm around 10-15 days ago. Before this, I worked on a different farm. This is our usual pattern of work - we rotate between farms," said Vikas Mandal, a daily wage labourer from Bihar's Samastipur district.

400 outlets

Like the six men, there are hundreds of farmers toiling in the fields in the outskirts of Delhi. Over 8,000 farmers across 16 States cater to the demands of the over 400 Safal outlets in the Capital.

For some of the farmers in Bakhtawarpur, the association with Mother Dairy dates back nearly three decades.

"I have been a part of the project [between Mother Dairy and the farmers] since its inception. With Mother Dairy entering the market, we have gained immensely because we are more aware and educated about safe agricultural practices. We now know which pesticides to use and which ones to avoid," said 63-year-old farmer Dharampal Sisodia.

Dharampal is one of the founding members of the Bakhtawarpur Fruits and Vegetable Growers' Association. Nearly 150 farmers are affiliated to the association and these farmers supply their produce "exclusively" to Safal.

Due to its association with Mother Dairy, farming in Bakhtawarpur village has gradually changed over the last 30 years. Gone are the days when farmers simply grew wheat and rice to sell in wholesale markets. 'New age' farmers are cropping up, who have started experimenting with various types of crop.

"My forefathers were only involved in growing wheat and rice. However, we were introduced to newer modes of farming once we got associated with Mother Dairy. I now grow close to 20 different crops in a year. What started as wheat and rice farming, has now moved onto broccoli, baby corn, sweet corn, spinach and more," said Kunal Gehlot, a second-generation farmer.

Elite consumers

"We hardly experimented earlier as there were certain vegetables that never got sold in the wholesale market due to low demand. This was because demands of premium hotels and daily households vary. With Mother Dairy entering into the scene, it has become easier for us to cater to elite consumers too. There are times when we take the initiative and ask the company if there is any special requirement that we can cater to," said Kunal.

A Safal official at the Bakhtawarpur site, which specialises in leafy vegetables, said, "We have monthly and daily meetings, in which we tell farmers about our demand for a particular vegetable. Accordingly, they come in the next morning and deliver the required amount."

"We procure fruits and vegetables from over 140 centres across



Food for thought: (Clockwise from the top) Farmers collect fresh vegetables at farms in outer Delhi's Bakhtawarpur. These vegetables are sent to the local collection centre, from where they are despatched to the sorting centre after being weighed. The produce is then brought to the Central Distribution Facility at Mangolpuri, sorted and sent to outlets across the Capital. *SHIV KUMAR PUSHKAR, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

16 States. All the produce is brought to the Central Distribution Facility [CDF] in Mangolpuri. The produce is sorted at the facility and then despatched to outlets across the Capital," said a senior Safal official.

The CDF is a giant complex spread across 22 acres. Produce from farms across the country, including vegetables from Bakhtawarpur, are processed here. The produce passes through at least three quality control checks before being despatched to the outlets, said an official. Safal's CDF handles around 300 metric tonnes of fresh fruits and vegetables daily.

Quality checking

The produce needs to reach the local centre by 10 a.m. for the first level of sorting. By 12, the last truck leaves from the local centre for the Mangolpuri centre, the only Delhi-based centre for Safal.

"Our quality checking process is rigorous. Though basic sorting takes place before the produce is brought to us, we ensure it is sorted further at the CDF. Vegetables and fruits that are rejected are either sent back to traders or to the wholesale markets if farmers want and we give respective farmers their remuneration," the official said. As the last truck leaves the Mangolpuri centre for Safal outlets at 5 a.m., Bakhtawarpur village farmers get ready for the next cycle to ensure the best produce reaches the kitchens of Delhiites on time

INTERVIEW | SAUGATA MITRA

'We have been making many agronomic interventions'

Farmers associated with Safal get the benefit of transparency in pricing, timely payment and logistical support

Saugata Mitra, the director of Mother Dairy Fruit & Vegetable Pvt. Ltd, speaks to The Hindu about the importance of cultivating a good relationship with the farmers, good agricultural practices and initiatives aimed at training farmers on how to cultivate and produce as per quality specifications

What are the steps taken by Safal to ensure safe agricultural practices and ensure that consumers receive eco-friendly produce?

■ In order to ensure that safe and quality produce is available to consumers, we have always engaged with the entire value chain linking different players and stakeholders from farm to fork, with stringent quality and monitoring parameters. We have been making various agronomic interventions, such as crop planning, guidance on good agricultural practices, post-harvest practices and handling, and packaging of harvested produce.

These initiatives are aimed at training and guiding farmers to cultivate and produce as per quality specifications and norms to ensure best quality produce for the consumers. We have set up ripening chambers for fruits like mangoes, bananas, papayas,

etc., at our processing unit in order to ensure safe ripening, which in the unorganised market is done by using hazardous chemicals.

What is the business model of Safal? What are the incentives provided to farmers, as opposed to them selling directly to the market?

■ The very genesis of the brand Safal is centered around providing farmers direct access to the market with right remuneration for their produce, and providing consumers safe and quality products. Farmers who are associated with Safal get the benefit of transparency in pricing, assured market, timely payments through bank transfers and logistical support, such as transport, crates, etc.

In traditional markets, farmers get exploited right from price discovery stage to weighing and at



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SAUGATA MITRA
Director, Mother Dairy Fruit & Vegetable Pvt. Ltd

the time of payments, where transparency is an issue.

How is the objective of directly linking consumers to vegetables and fruits being achieved by Safal?

■ Over the years, we have built a robust supply chain and procurement system to enable us contact the farmers directly and eliminate middlemen. With a highly qualified team educating and helping farmers adopt good pre and post-harvest technologies,

our farmer connect programmes have strengthened our relationship and bonding with farmers over the last three decades.

What role will Safal play in order to achieve Prime Minister Narendra Modi's objective of doubling farmers' income by 2022?

■ We are working towards increasing crop yield of farmers by guiding them on good agricultural practices as well as post-harvest management of produce, thereby reducing their losses and increasing yield of marketable produce. With our experience, we have seen that marketable products such as mangoes have improved immensely over the time, which ensures that farmer gets more money through improved output per acre.

Are such goals achievable?

■ Wherever Safal operates, we strive towards achieving these goals by way of developing farmer base and engaging with them, wherein we see a positive outlook.

How will the current ecosystem be affected once food giant Walmart enters the Indian market?

we are currently engaged with a network of over 8,000 farmers across 16 States.

■ Safal has a strong back-end and robust supply chain system. It has a strong network of front-end retail outlets. Our back-end extension system is continuously working with farmers on the ground to increase their per acre