

Explaining community supported agriculture

Who does not want a piece of unadulterated farm-fresh produce served right on the table? Today, due to increased awareness regarding health and wellbeing, people have become more conscious about the food that is offered to them.

Worldwide intensive research has proved that food has a direct impact on health. Having said so, pesticide-laden food has severe detrimental effects on a person's wellbeing; sometimes even causing permanent damages such as cancer.

So, simply based on the law of economics, to meet-up with the intensive demand for organic food products (pesticide free), supply-side markets have developed, providing the consumers their necessities.

THE BACK-STORY

Prakriti Farming began operations by obtaining organic food themselves, as a consumer first, and then worked their way backwards to the supply-side in order to maintain quality, consistency and traceability.

"People are trying to meet this sudden rise in need for organic products by sourcing them on their own. And we have done that too! We used to source the best of products from all over the country and then distribute it to friends, family, and few others for a minimal amount of payment. Then we realised how difficult it was to maintain quality,

popular saying by the marketing gurus that customers are the king!

The farmers involved in a community farm produce according to various conditions of favourability, and the consumers take in their produce on an understanding that everything is natural, harm-free and organic. In between the entire process of producing and sharing, a community is developed where there are investors, consumers, land owners, farmers and many other stakeholders.

Some community farms offer more than just fruits and vegetables; farmers put forward eggs, honey, jams, pickles, and even poultry as a vibrant part of the programme.

"Yes! That's true," admitted Afroze. "Why should they go elsewhere for their jams and pickles when there's already a market established within the community? That is the beauty behind the concept — it's effective, economic and sustainable in all forms."

A more in-depth discussion with the experts revealed that people are currently just sourcing goods, which cannot, in any way, be compared to the more defined and complex community farming process. Banks and several NGOs are providing microcredit and intensive training to the farmers, in return of which they are expected to supply organic produce.

Land owners are getting government grants to work with agriculture, but in

We utilise each of their resources, in return of which, they get our expertise, link to the end consumers and technical support, wherever necessary. All of us share the benefits in between, a great part of which includes fresh unadulterated food," explained Afroze.

WHY START A COMMUNITY FARM?

Being part of community farming has advantages for both the farmer and consumer. For the small farmer, it is advantageous as they can sell food even during the off-seasons. They also get an assurance of timely payment without the hassle of worrying over sales. And, as the name suggests, these farming communities allow the farmers to connect deeply with everyone involved, really letting them know the people who want their food — what they want and how they want it. Farmers can finally learn to adjust their offerings to their customers' desires and create a more successful, responsive business.

WHY JOIN A COMMUNITY FARM?

Community farming shareholders get the freshest, most local food possible. Many care about whether chemicals are used on their produce, so they may be looking for chemical-free food. Others enjoy a lower price on vegetables, getting a large box of veggies every week added with the incentive to eat and live healthier. Most community farm stakeholders value the relationship with the

My thoughts have always been similar to that of Prakriti Farming, since I pursued the harvest of organic food for a long time. But every time, I'd be faced with some difficulties, especially with the yield, as they were not satisfactory. Then Prakriti Farming came into the picture, with a centre established close to my home; and with only a minimal amount of Tk 100, I got to be a member of the community. Later, they trained and shared their expertise with me. The most important part of this membership was their supply of vermicompost and feather fertiliser that worked like a miracle on my organic produce.

"As if like magic, I had a higher yield, that was completely organic, and I am both surprised and thankful that natural fertilisers could instigate such good harvest. I bought the fertilisers from Prakriti at a minimal rate of Tk 850 for 25kg substance, which is much lower compared to chemical fertilisers that people purchase from the markets.

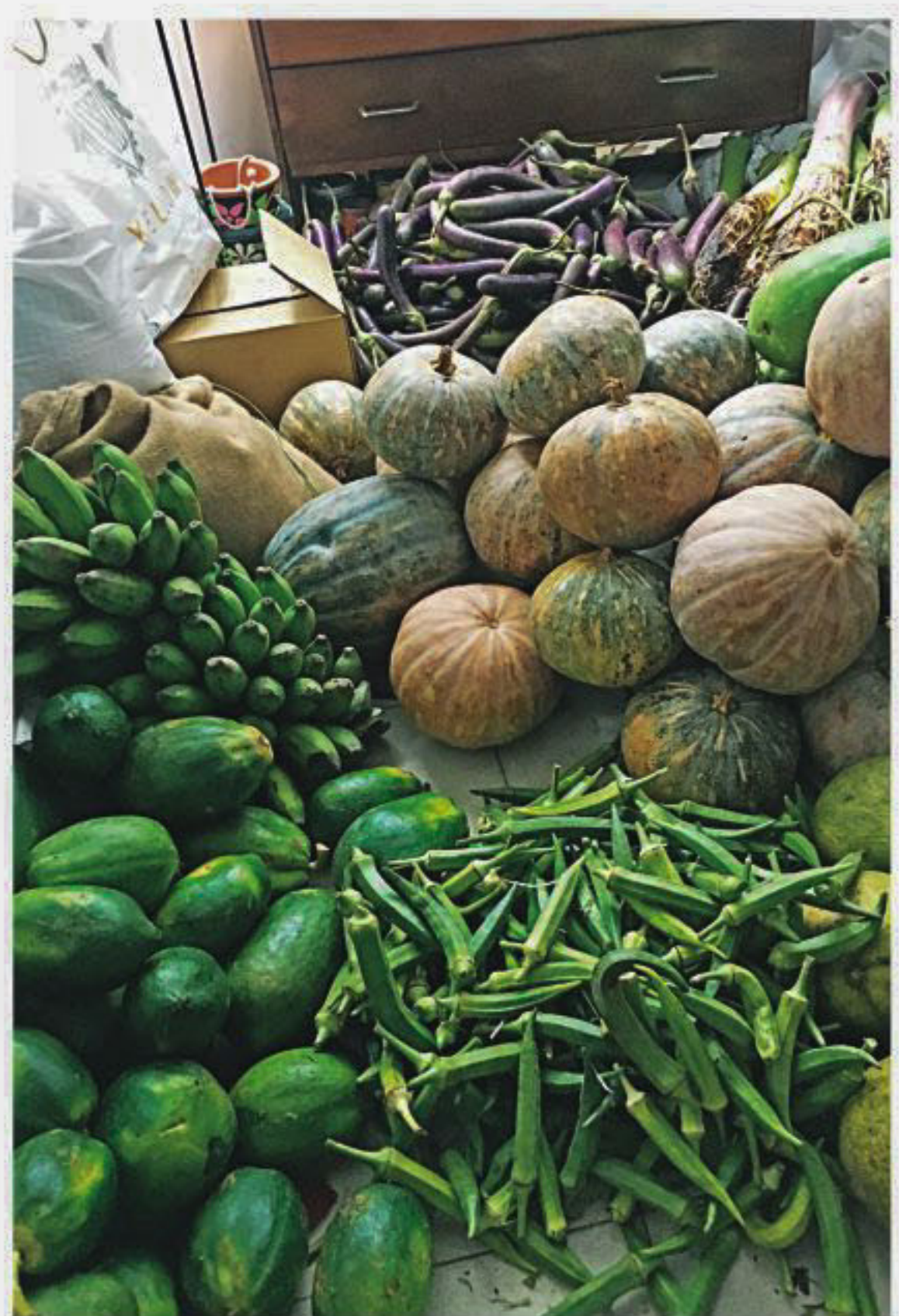
Additionally, Prakriti Farming helps me sell-off at least one-fourth of my yield to their end-consumers, and the rest I sell in my neighbourhood market. This has definitely helped my business become more stable as I do not have to worry about food becoming rotten or going to waste. In the future, when the business booms even more, for Prakriti; I am hopeful that most of my food will be booked by them and I don't have to worry at all about the sales and the

ghee, and red rice when required. Its only last year that I found Prakriti trains the farmers and supports the livelihood of their families and the communities' through their venture. This also meant that Ashna Afroze sources the vegetables directly from the farmers. I started ordering more frequently from her since this meant that not only were we avoiding unnecessary chemicals, but we were also supporting organic farming and the communities involved.

"I definitely wait every week for Prakriti's package, and I love sharing them with friends and family. The package programme offered is very sensibly priced, valuing our weekly necessities for grocery. The sudden perks of chutneys, honey, jams and pickles are a bonus. I am very glad that this process is helping out the farmers and encouraging them to harvest organic products. Now, I can proudly tell everybody where my food is coming from, and how I am actually helping a community develop in my own little way," acknowledged Shezami Khalil, Marketing Director at Shohoz.com, a busy mother effortlessly juggling work and family.

THE FUTURE

Very systematic procedure, no loan arrangements, no time restraints, no force from the customer's end! A very idealistic situation that may be looked down upon sceptically at first; but the community support comes in as the



and because of the emergence of middlemen, things got further complicated," admitted Ashna Afroze, founder and CEO at Prakriti Farming.

That was honestly the humble beginning for one company into the world of organic farming — a holistic system that professes not to use pesticides, fertilisers, genetically modified organisms, antibiotics or any sort of growth hormones, so as to protect the environment, minimise soil degradation, and promote a sound state of health for all living beings.

But Prakriti Farming wanted to go to the roots of organic farming, where there is zero manipulation; and people worked together as a community, to place unadulterated farm goods directly to the table. This model, widely practiced in the west is popularly known as CSA.

"Community-supported agriculture (CSA) or as some know it, community farming, is a food production and distribution system that directly connects farmers to the consumers," confirmed Afroze.

In short, we got the understanding that people buy shares of a farm's harvest in advance (they become a part of the community farming programme) and then receive a portion of the crops as they are harvested. There is simply no pressure on the farmers to produce a specific crop or vegetable. They are the final decision makers, as opposed to the

every case, they can, at best, be labelled as solo initiatives, whereas in the case of community farming — an entire community is built-up, working towards a definitive goal of producing organic harvest; and everyone is connected.

COMMUNITY FARMING AT GOHAILBARI, TANGAIL — A PILOT PROJECT

"When we thought of planning to construct our pilot model village, we thought of Tangail, as the soil is fertile over there and most importantly, one of our institution partners owns several acres of land. Few of us, founding members of the institution, also bought lands over there, and thus began our humble journey. In the process, we appointed several local farmers, some owned lands of their own and some professed to work on ours.

"The appointments began in a very easy format. A centre had been established and all those willing to be a part of the community farming programme needed to become members by paying a minimal fee, we named it the Krishok Jibika programme.

"After being a member, they get rigorous training on organic harvest, they are also required to purchase natural fertilisers and seeds from us. Without these fertilisers, we cannot assure that their produce is completely organic. So this part is an integral element of the string of processes involved.

farmer and the traceability to the food they are eating. Some of them may even be interested in the workings of the farm, or simply enjoy volunteering in the labour along with the farmers.

BACK TO PRAKRITI FARMING

Prakriti Farming's approach to community farming began in a natural way, as this was the best possible option to utilise agricultural resources efficiently. However, there were many hurdles along the way, but the steadfast resilience of the founder members only helped Prakriti grow over time.

"Community farming involves a decent amount of dedication. We have to regularly train and guide the farmers, provide them with raw materials and maintain a constant monitoring system. The process is not easy and we must maintain consistency all throughout, in order to witness effective results in the end.

"Our ultimate vision is the empowerment of farmers. For that to happen, the realisation hit me that I must also be one of them. Otherwise, I might not be able to acknowledge or comprehend the real obstacles faced by them. Hence, I bought the land myself and made similar commitments as every one of our member farmers," disclosed Afroze.

The farmer's point of view
Sharif Mia, of Gohailbari, Tangail only had positive things to say, "I own around four acres of land in Gohailbari.

profits. I'd just keep on producing unadulterated food for the community."

Rabeya Begum from Porabari, Tangail had similar hopes from the community, that she had become very recently a member of. With a little bit of land that she owns, she opts to grow lentils, beans, tomatoes, cabbages and much more.

Even though her husband works in a different place, she wants to contribute to the household income by doing something on her own. "This is my first time with the Prakriti Farming community," she said, sounding very optimistic.

THE END CUSTOMER'S POINT OF VIEW

"It started as an experiment, however we have seen that the customers also wait eagerly for our food," said Afroze.

We met one end consumer, and she seemed very hopeful.

"I started moving onto organic produce when I got pregnant in 2016, purely to avoid unnecessary chemicals. Options were quite limited back then, and it was more of a first come first serve basis. As Prakriti grew, they started having a steady flow of organic vegetables and that's when I became more regular.

"They offer a weekly package between Tk 400-500 which consists of season's freshest vegetables and local fruits. They also provide organic honey,

saviour. Because when everyone is supporting each other, a faultless environment is naturally developed — there's just no way around it.

Prakriti Farming has a long way to go with its vision, but with its current initiatives and a model community farm already established in Tangail, they have certainly proved that wherever a community is involved, there is harmony and fresh produce on the tables.

We simply have to conclude by quoting Ashna Afroze, the mastermind behind setting up a purely 'deshi' community farm established by local people.

"We want many others to follow our footsteps, the result of which maybe that someday the chemical laden, adulterated food is completely removed from our tables. We also want everyone to truly start caring about what we eat and who harvests them for us; we hope to see a future where the farmers are no longer suppressed and they are empowered, choosing to stay with 'farming' by preference," articulated Afroze.

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury

Photo: Prakriti Farming

To join the community, pay a visit to www.prakritifarming.com
Retail outlet: House 18, Road 15, Block D, Banani Dhaka
Follow them on Social Media:
www.facebook.com/groups/850680618392851/?ref=rf_target&fref=rf