Villages are India’s foundation—Her very life force—and it is society’s responsibility to take care of them. In fact, it is our villages that sustain us by providing us, who live in cities, with the nourishment we need in order to survive. It is time to acknowledge that our villages are our very foundation and move forward with one heart and one mind to protect and serve them.”

— Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi.

Travelling across the length and breadth of India during her annual tours, Amma stops in remote areas along the journey. She has personally seen and listened to the problems of thousands of poor villagers across the nation. As a result, Amma’s 60th birthday was celebrated with the launch of Amrita SeRVe (Self Reliant Village). The project was born with the vision to empower villagers through the use of locally available resources instead of depending on outside factors for livelihood.

Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM) has currently identified villages in 21 states with the goal to address seven focus areas: health, water and sanitation, education, agriculture, income generation, eco-friendly infrastructure, and self-empowerment. Amrita SeRVe is yet another example of Amma’s boundless love and compassion for suffering humankind. All of Amma’s humanitarian activities throughout India, including Amrita Vishwavidyapeetham, Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences, and Amrita Vidyalayam, are working together to find solutions for the upliftment of rural India.

The farmers’ dilemma

Agriculture provides the livelihood for farmers. Most families are completely dependent on the success of their one or two crops per year. Nowadays it is common practice to purchase costly hybrid seeds, the yield of which cannot be used as seed crop the following year. Furthermore, the use of vast amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides is the mainstream approach to obtaining good yields. However, over the years the soil has been drained of its natural fertility provided by minerals and micro-organisms and as a result the requirements for artificial supplements has increased, further adding to the financial burdens of farmers.

From individuals to organised groups

For individual marginal farmers it is very difficult to change their current practices, as any change comes along with great risk. After various discussions with such farmers, whose primary concern is making sufficient income to feed their family, it became apparent that in order to enhance their income, group farming is the best method. As a group, it is much easier to receive all-round support from governmental and non-governmental instances. This coming together of supportive initiatives from government, non-governmental sector, and the farmers themselves is known as the convergence method. The convergence method is the need of the hour and highly recommended by Prime Minister of India. This model enhances the farmers’ capacities through: collective savings, availing of government subsidies, training and execution of well-planned, optimized cultivation methods, conversion to organic agriculture for restoring land fertility, increasing revenue, and improving overall health. All these steps can lead to sustainable livelihood, economic independence, and social empowerment.

Formation of farmers’ groups

A farmers’ group consists of 5 to 30 agricultural landholders that are interested in pooling their resources and carrying out their seasonal cultivation collectively. The main objectives of Amrita Farmers’ Groups are:

a. increase the livelihood of poor and marginal farmers
b. improving the overall health and security of farmers in food, social welfare, and safety
c. involving government and local authorities in supporting sustainable agriculture
d. adopting innovative methods to make effective use of available resources and restore the land

Amrita SeRVe has supported the formation of groups so far in 13 states for cultivation of the local crops: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal.
Case studies
Organic rice cultivation in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu

In May 2016, 20 of the most deprived farming families of the village joined together to start the first Amrita Farmers’ Group under the name of Amrita Vyavasayam Kulu. The members themselves defined their responsibilities and formulated guidelines for internal management. With guidance from Amrita SeRVe, they started with activities like selection of seed, soil testing, seed testing, crop planning, water budgeting and water conservation measures. Every step was discussed among the group to find solutions.

The cultivation in Sadivayal is a prime example for effective application of the convergence method. Government subsidies were availed, training provided by Amrita SeRVe, and farmers contributed with land, labour, and savings to increase both, crop yield and income for the farmers.

“We took a chance and tried something different. The result was selling a new crop for double the price of anything we had grown before. Not only that, but the seeds we planted gave us a double yield.”

– Rajan, member of Amrita Vyavasayam Kulu

On the 20th of June, the farmers planted nearly 600 kgs of organic rice on their joint 35 acres of land. Cultivating organic rice meant learning and practicing with organic fertilizers and pesticides such as Jeevamritam, a natural fertilizer, and avoiding having to purchase chemical inputs. This organic venture paid off when in January 2017 they harvested their first profitable crop in five years. Here they saw a 200% increase in net income - from a loss of 23,600 Rs in previous years to a profit of nearly 50,000 Rs per acre using natural farming methods.

After this great success, the following year in 2017 they decided to expand to 40 acres and have had surrounding villages express interest in learning from them and converting to natural methods of farming as well. So far 150 acres of fallow land in nearby villages have been converted to rice fields for the adoption of a similar approach.

Traditional farming in Wayanad district, Kerala

Vallaramkunnu is a tribal village located in Wayanad district, Kerala, where three tribal colonies were adopted by the Amrita SeRVe project, namely Paniya colony, Kattupara Nayakar colony, and Kuruchur colony comprising a total of 75 families. In Vallaramkunnu 13 farmers formed the Amrita Organic Farmers Club and registered the same under the Cooperative Society Act. They are collectively growing five acres of Organic Athira Rice on land which they have taken on lease. The activities are guided by local Amrita SeRVe coordinator. This project has been supported by the Integrated Tribal Development Programme, Wayanad.

Chilly Cultivation by Andhra Pradesh’s First Agriculture Society

Andhra Pradesh’s first agriculture society was registered in July 2018 by the members of the Amrita Gudipadu Cheruvu Organic Farmers’ Group. They immediately organised themselves and began the preparations for organic chilly cultivation. They started with training on the preparation and usage of natural fertilizers, such as Jeevamritam, as well as how to treat the organic seeds before planting.

Later in August, the chilly saplings were purchased for 16 acres of land. Teza Lepakshi was the chosen variety and the next day the saplings were planted. More meetings followed to complete the applications for a tractor and bore
well motors. All steps are guided and supported by Amrita SeRVe’s local coordinator and experienced agriculture program manager.

**Organic wheat cultivation in Rajasthan**

In Harirampura, Rajasthan, 9 of the 55 tribal families in the village have begun forming a farmers group already back in 2015. For their last collective cultivation, they set aside four and half acres of their land for organic wheat cultivation. Their first organic harvest was a big success, culminating in the harvest of 4,000 kilograms of the crop. Although it is common that yields are initially lower on land that got used to chemical fertilizers, the added sales value of their organic crop has easily compensated for that. Their profits were further boosted by reduced expenditure on costly seed crops and chemicals as fertilisers and pesticides. Usually such small-scale farmers sell to middle men who then deliver the goods to a larger market. For the first time this year, the farmers sold their produce directly to end consumers, which further increased their revenues. For this purpose, an organic wheat sale was organised at the Mata Amritanandamayi Math branch in Delhi. There, the farmers club was able to get an average of ₹30 per kg, instead of ₹15 per kg that they would have received otherwise.

Based on this success, the farmers are currently expanding the share of organic cultivation for the next season, eagerly pursuing the vision of converting their entire village to fully organic agriculture. Amrita Farmers Club - Harirampura was formed and registered under the central government scheme of the Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA).

**Nani Borvai Farmers Group, Gujarat**

In Nani Borvai village, located in Aravalli district, Gujarat, agriculture is the primary source of income for over 100 farming households with a combined land holding of 300 acres. Eighty-five per cent of these farmers are marginal. Their main crops are groundnuts, rice, cotton, and maize. A farmers’ group has been formed in July 2018. By now they have already organized themselves and opened a joint bank account for their registered group. Something very special about Nani Borvai is their tradition of animal husbandry. More than 300 buffalo and 75 cows are in the village. The well-priced buffalo milk is held in high demand in the commercial dairy sector. Recognising this opportunity villagers were encouraged to approach Amul dairy cooperative. As a result of this meeting in July 2018, a deal was made to set up a milk collection centre in the village itself. The new milk collection unit started in collaboration with Amul Dairy on the 21st of October. A committee of ten women was formed to run the process of collecting the milk twice every day. On arrival at the collection unit, the milk is weighed and tested. The average price per liter of buffalo milk is 40 rupees. The data is entered on the spot to an online register provided by Amul. The milk producers get their payment twice a month in a joint account.

**Lemongrass cultivation in collaboration with CSIR-CIMAP**

In many villages, a lack of water and issues with wild animals make regular agriculture difficult and often unprofitable. To help counter this, in 2017 Amrita SeRVe...
partnered with CIMAP - the Central Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (the plant research laboratory of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, CSIR), to help guide farmers in planting medicinal and aromatic plants. Working with aromatic plants such as lemongrass offers several important end-uses and can present decent economic returns for farmers. Another benefit is that these plants are rarely disturbed by wild animals and do not require large volumes of inputs. Initially, the farmers were very nervous to start such a new project. They didn’t know anything about lemongrass and they were hesitating to form a group and start lemongrass cultivation. Now over 70 families have taken advantage of the expertise and experience offered through the CIMAP-Amrita SeRVe collaboration. Ghanshyam Upadhyay is one of Amrita SeRVe’s experienced agriculture program officers, who, with guidance from CIMAP, successfully implemented lemongrass cultivation and distillation in four villages. Commencing with the Malgaon village in Chhattisgarh in early 2017, CIMAP guided and supported the farmers in lemongrass cultivation and distillation. Known for its medicinal properties, for example in cough treatment, lemongrass is also used in perfumes, soaps and cosmetics and favoured by conscious consumers as organic mosquito repellent and natural disinfectant. Ghanshyam has arranged that renowned scientists from CSIR-CIMAP talked with the farmers in their fields, did filming and field-testing, checked the quality of the lemongrass plants and compared the yield of each farmer. As a result, the Malgaon farmers have had two very successful harvests and production of the oil using a water and steam distillation process.

**Kitchen gardening**

In order to address the deficits arising from malnutrition, Amrita SeRVe community health worker initiate, promote and monitor kitchen gardens in the villages. By growing their own food, villagers can meet their nutritional needs of essential vitamins and minerals. These may be located in homes, schools or public community areas. In 2018 alone, our staff have monitored over 500 household kitchen gardens in 25 villages.

“**The practice of maintaining a vegetable garden is declining. Even if we only have a tiny plot of land, we should try to grow a few vegetables, using organic fertilizers. Spending some time with our plants, we should talk to them and kiss them. This relationship will give us a new vitality.”**

– Amma

**Essential oil distillation from wild lemongrass in Kerala**

In Valaramkunnu village, Kerala, nature has provided lemongrass in abundance. With help from Amrita SeRVe, villagers have harnessed this natural wealth and created another income source. The initiative started with Amrita University’s Centre for Wireless Networks and Applications (WNA) setting up a distillation unit utilising solar energy for the heating process. Then 4 members of the village Self-Help Group (SHG) received training on the production process. They are now self-sufficient in distilling lemongrass oil and supplying it directly to the market.

**Amrita SeRVe**

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