

2 IITians turn down lucrative job offers, tread new path in farming

Alok K N Mishra, TNN | Jun 25, 2011, 05.49pm IST



Shashank Kumar and Manish Kumar at a farmers' training camp in Vaishali district of Bihar. (TOI Photo)

PATNA: Treading a path less travelled, two [IITians](#) have taken to [agriculture](#) after turning down lucrative job offers by [MNCs](#) and made a mark for themselves within a few months. Beginning their offbeat initiative in October 2010 in Vaishali district, their activities now span six districts in Bihar.

Meet Shashank Kumar, an IIT-Delhi graduate (2004-2008 batch), and Manish Kumar, an IIT-Kharagpur postgraduate (2005-10 batch), who have embarked on their mission to improve the lot of farmers in the backwaters of Bihar with the aim to empower them, much to the chagrin of their parents.

The two techies were old friends, having prepared together for engineering entrance tests, a couple of years back. In October 2010, they persuaded a group of 14 farmers in Vaishali district, 30km from here, to do scientific agriculture.

"We suggested to farmers to cultivate 'rajma' instead of the conventional crop of wheat. But they ignored our suggestions outright," said Manish. "We were at our wits' end," Manish recalled adding, "but we somehow persuaded 18 farmers to experiment on six acres of land. Luckily, it was a huge success."

"The farmers earned Rs 1000 per kattha with an investment of Rs 400. For wheat, they used to invest Rs 350 and reap 50kg produce per kattha, earning Rs 400 to 500," said Manish, son of a retired clerk.

In February 2011, they founded an NGO, 'Farms n Farmers (FnF)', which does everything from soil testing to providing a market to farmers. Its activities have now expanded to adjoining districts including Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Banka and Purnia.

"Our focus is on maximizing returns from land through natural farming," said Shashank.

In Purnia district, where corn and potato are predominantly grown, farmers usually leave their land unused from June to September. "We advised farmers to sow baby corn. As baby corn is reaped within 50 to 60 days, farmers had a bumper harvest just before raising another crop," said Manish, who hails from Chakdariya village in Vaishali district.

Several Purnia farmers harvested 25kg baby corn per kattha of land and sold it for an average amount of Rs 750, earning more than Rs 300, he said.

In Buxar, the farmers, facing water shortage, were advised to grow medicinal herbs, which need negligible irrigation.

"We sell directly to food processing companies. It helps farmers earn more," said Shashank. The FnF charges a nominal 10% of total sale value from farmers. The techies plan to lower this figure in future as more farmers join their initiative.

"We want to create a large network of small and marginal but happy and prosperous farmers," Shashank and Manish told TOI.

Though they are currently not using organic methods of farming, they said "organic is best." "Now that we have gained farmers' faith, we have started to work on organic farming. We are advising farmers to avoid using chemical fertilizer," they said.

FnF, which has more than 150 farmers associated with it, has an eight-member advisory team which includes Prof P K Sinha from IIM-Ahmedabad, Prof R Singh and [P B S](#) Bhadoria from IIT-Kharagpur, and Dr Bimla Rai from RAU, Pusa. Manish and Shashank hold regular training programmes in different parts of Bihar.