

PROFILE

A Lady Farmer who Inspires, Innovates and Intrigues her Neighbours



How often do we hear about lady farmers whose husbands acknowledge them to be a better farmer and whose mothers-in-law proudly share what they have learned from them. It is even more rare when inter-regional knowledge and technology transfer

through institutions of marriage gets acknowledged in neighbouring villages. The case of Lassi ben of *Sisodhra village in Sabarkantha district of Gujarat* illustrates this all.

Lassiben Somabhai Parmar, an illiterate lady is educated probably much more than those scientists and the extension workers who often advocate only chemical pesticide based solutions disregarding the health of environment, soil, animals, plants, humans, etc.

Originally hailing from Churu, Rajasthan, she learnt a lot of herbal healing practices and insights about non-chemical agriculture from her father who was an extremely hard working person. She has set the standards for sharp observation, continuous monitoring and constant experimentation for solving problems in the farm. Today, farmers in Ramgarh and Paloni near her village acknowledge that the chilli crop grown by her is not only healthier, more productive but also disease free and the credit for that goes to her use of goat's milk sprinkled with the help of neem twigs at an early stage to control leaf curl. She does not know that use of milk for viral disease control in plants has intrigued scientists for almost 100 years. And the first paper on the subject was published in 1935. She also did not know that a review article on the use of milk for viral disease control in crops was published in *Honey Bee* around two decades ago (Chari and Nagarajan, *Honey Bee*, 3(3&4):8, 1992).

The interesting aspect of her practices is that some other farmers have added other plants to her formulation depending upon their local need. She has not just helped in diffusing innovation but also the spirit of experimentation and innovation. Users of her innovation have triggered many more innovations. She grows cotton, corn, maize, groundnut, chilli, paddy, brinjal and pulses. She is an eclectic person. When need arises in some crop, she does use chemicals too. However, she prefers to manage without chemicals. She also uses the decoction of majeth [*Rubia cordifolia* L.] for pest control. She did not know that Chinese

scholars had documented the use of this plant for pest control in ancient text as early as 25 - 220 AD (Yang and Tang, 1988). It is quite possible that she drew upon an autonomous and simultaneously evolved knowledge tradition in India completely independent of similar evolution of knowledge system in China. By mixing butter milk and bitter cucumber in a copper vessel, she develops herbal pesticide for brinjal and chilli crops. She soaks kothandra (Bitter cucumber) in water for four days and then adds buttermilk in it. She uses this formulation for curing leaf curl in the crops. She enjoys spending time with plants and singing bhajans when she is free. She wants to grow papaya and roses in future to further improve the productivity of her farm. Whenever she gets time, she shares her knowledge about medicinal herbs and plants with her children to make sure that her knowledge survives for the future generation. The dedication and sincerity with which she works on her farm is exemplary. She has not visited her father's place for a long time due to her focus on farm as well as the family. In her words "*Mujhe raat ko neend nahin aati jab bhi apne in ped, paudhon se door hoti hoon.*" Obviously, it is due to her efforts that the family now owns around 20 acres of cultivable land.

She recalls that she started working in the field with her father since childhood. Her father did not use chemicals on the field and instead used organic and natural inputs. It was in those days that she used to notice a stark difference between her fathers' agricultural fields and that of her neighbours' where chemical inputs were being used. She could observe that in the fields where chemicals were used, pests used to return periodically. This early learning about the long-term beneficial effects of organic and natural methods of farming had a profound impact on her impressionable mind.

It is not just in the field of farming where Lassi ben has experimented, she also has a large repertoire of animal and human practices. For problems like vomiting and worms in stomach, both in case of animals and humans, she uses the leaves of seetafal (*Annona squamosa* L.). A handful of the leaves is fed as such or ground to paste and then administered orally for two or three days. For treating diarrhoea, she uses the seeds of khakhra (*Butea monosperma* (Lam.) Taub). The decoction of seeds ground in water is fed to the animal twice daily till the symptoms subside considerably.

The credibility that Lassi ben has gained as a good farmer has expanded her domain of influence substantially in nearby villages.

References

- R. Z. Yang and C. S. Tang, *Plants Used for Pest Control in China: A Literature Review, Economic Botany*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1988), pp. 376-406
 M KChari and K Nagarajan, *More on the Use of Milk for Virus Control, Honey Bee*, 3(3&4):8, 1992