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By Vineet Kumar

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THE ORGANIC LIFE

24 Mantra Organic by Sresta has been a frontrunner in the space of all things organic, and the work — started over 17 years ago — is more relevant today than ever before.

Text | Bindu Gopal Rao

24 Mantra Organic by Sresta was born with a vision to make a sustainable living for farmers as well as to create a healthy lifestyle for consumers by providing safe, healthy and pure food products.

LOOKING BACK

Raj Seelam, Founder and MD, 24 Mantra Organic by Sresta, started the company in 2004. "After graduating from IIM Ahmedabad, I took the traditional route by joining an Indian agribusiness conglomerate selling pesticides and

fertilisers. I was shocked at the alarming use of chemicals and fertilisers on farms, impacting the lives and sustainability of the farmers," says Seelam.

With the sole motive of supporting farmers in sustainable farming besides providing healthy food that was void of pesticides and additives, he decided to do something about it. After years of research, Sresta Natural Bioproducts started in 2004, adopting a farm-to-fork approach. Incidentally, the concept of organic food in India was then relatively unknown.

"Along with like-minded and inspired colleagues, we set out on our journey, but we had to face numerous challenges. One of the biggest obstacles we faced in our initial years was convincing small groups of farmers on the benefits of organic farming. Over many years, we have been able to demonstrate 15 percent to 20 percent increase in net income, lower financial risk, lower production risk and better health of farmers and their families. We also had to convince retailers that organic will sell," says Seelam.

FARMER FIRST

In these last 16 years, the company has explored many categories where they can provide a complete organic range with over 200 SKUs and have a loyal customer base of over one million families in India and another one million families across the 50 other countries they export to. In these years, they have built a community of 50,000+ farmers across 15 states, cultivating over 2.5 lakh acres of farmland.

"Farmers are our foundation on whom rests our organic journey. Therefore, understanding them, setting up processes that protect their interests and encouraging them to be part of the organic movement is something that we have accomplished over the last few years," says Seelam.

The company's role is to ensure that organic practices are done systematically and consistently and contribute to their sustainability and improve their standard of living. Having found the right farmer,

the next step is to ensure that they are productively engaged and to educate them on an ongoing basis.

"We have 100+ projects across the country, and we monitor the organic methods of every farm by multiple visits to every farm every month by our team members. Each project is in a 15- to 20-km radius covering a few hundred to few thousand acres. We do over a million farm visits every year. Sresta continuously trains the farmers to build soil fertility and increase soil microbial population using manure, crop rotation, green manuring, improving natural balance through natural pest and disease control methods, providing good quality seeds and ensuring appropriate water and soil conservation," says Seelam.

FARM TO FORK

Over the last few years, there has been a growing demand for safe, healthy food bereft of pesticides and chemicals. The pandemic has accelerated this momentum, putting the spotlight on safe, healthy and pure food. With 200 products in its portfolio, Sresta has adopted the Farm to Fork approach right from the beginning to maintain organic integrity while also investing time and resources in training, educating, and sensitising the farmer community in organic farming.

"Right from the farming stage to the processing of the produce, Sresta monitors



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OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

In India, the biggest challenge is the lack of a level playing field. While there are subsidies for fertilisers, hybrid seeds and everything else, there is no tangible or visible support for the entire organic farming movement by the government. Again, although India represents the largest number of organic food producers in the world, it contributes only 2.59 percent of the total organic cultivable area. One of the biggest challenges in this space is convincing a conventional farmer to shift to organic farming.

"It is important to use science which supports conservation and sustainability on a large scale to improve organic farming outcomes. We need to invest in them so that more and more farmers can adopt organic farming profitably. Moreover, we must master the art of growing crops that thrive in local weather conditions. It is important to identify crop varieties that are resistant to pests, diseases and adverse conditions and are suitable for organic farming. This will further build trust among our consumers to rely on local organic food," says Seelam.

ORGANIC INTEGRITY

Sresta follows rigorous practices and procedures to ensure that all their methods — growing, harvesting, storage, grain

cleaning, natural fumigation, milling, aseptic processing, dehydration, canning and freezing foods (for the international market) are done without use of any chemicals. To ensure that the products adhere to strict organic standards, the company has evolved a robust five-level check system to ensure that the produce is genuinely organic. This involves social control through group behaviour, regular field visits by the team, cross inspections of every farm every season (which is roughly about 80,000 inspections), inspections by certification agencies, and pesticide residue tests.

RESEARCH RULES

The company invests in developing suitable and better organic farming methods by researching and taking up crop experiments and demonstrations. "At Sresta, we take product R&D seriously because as the pioneers in the organic food space, we take it upon us as our responsibility to be abreast of changing consumer demands and preferences. In the last few years, we have developed proven expertise in understanding what the organic food industry needs with regards to product concepts, processes, quality benchmarks and various product options," says Seelam.

The company has been successful in servicing several markets across the world with diverse offerings. "From catering to clients who want a set and conventional list of products to the ones who want new products to be developed, we work with all of them. We have a full-fledged R&D team that looks after all the necessary facets — from idea to certification — as an integrated approach," adds Seelam.

BUSTING MYTHS

From a consumer perspective, the primary concern is that they believe organic food is for the elite, which is not the case. "If a normal middle-class household spends

approximately ₹4,000 for their monthly ration, we assure that converting to organic would be an addition of around ₹1,000 to ₹1,200. Converting to organic will not only provide better health but would also be creating a sustainable platform for our farmer friends," says Seelam. Another common myth about organic foods is that they have a different taste than conventional foods. On the contrary, organic food tastes better and is nutritionally better, too.

FUTURE PERFECT

Sensitising and convincing the government policymakers and research institutions — both central and state — to invest in research on organic farming methods and providing support to farmers wanting to switch to organic production is the need of the hour. Sresta has also worked with governments like Sikkim in converting their entire space into organic. Looking ahead, Sresta believes in the sustainable development of both farmers as well as their customers. "Our plan is to adhere to organic integrity and provide opportunities to more than a million farmers while serving more than 10 million customers in the next few years," signs off Seelam. ■

