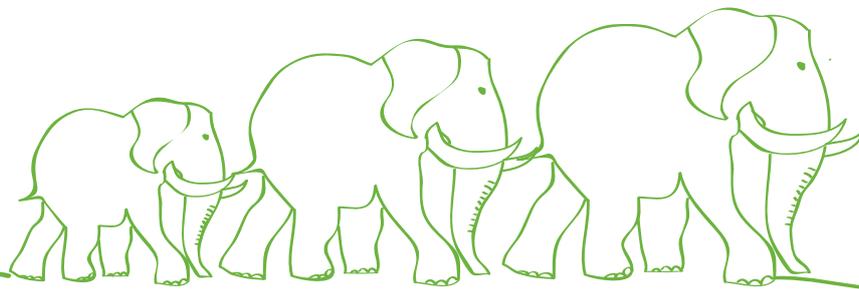


Organic in Action

Karnataka, India:
organic cotton farmers provide a safe haven
for wildlife



One of the key benefits of organic agriculture is its contribution to biodiversity. In southern India, organic cotton farmers are supporting fragile forest ecosystems and an elephant corridor.

Savayana Krishikara Sangha (SKS) is an organic farmer group based at Handpost in Mysore District in Karnataka, India.

Appachi Cotton, a farm to fashion vertical chain that promotes Ethicus, India's domestic organic label, source all their cotton from SKS. Mr Mani Chinnaswamy of Appachi /Ethicus and Mr Chandrasekhar of SKS tell us how the organic story started in this vulnerable part of Karnataka and the critical role they play:

History and background

Handpost is a tiny town, approximately 50 km from Mysore. The Mysore Rural Development Agency (MYRDA) was started in 1968 with Handpost as its headquarters and the Myrada Kaveri Pradeesksha Samsthe (MYKAPS) was formed in 2002, with a broad agenda of rural development including agriculture. The Kavery is a sacred river, with its source in the state of Karnataka. It is an important source of irrigation for farmers of Karnataka and neighbouring Tamil Nadu. MYRDA started an important National Watershed activity in 2002 - 2007 in about 23 villages covering 2000 hectares.

It was through the watershed development activity that the farmers of this region were introduced to organic farming. Most of the farming is rainfed, with some irrigation. Major crops are cotton, sugarcane, tobacco, ragi and turmeric. They also grow ginger, jowar, maize, pulses, oil seeds such as



groundnut and castor, paddy, vegetables and fruits. The soil is a mixture of red, black and sandy loam.

Cotton has been an important commercial crop for this region for the past 30 years or so. The agricultural conditions of this region favour the Extra Long Staple (ELS).

SKS is an NGO formed in 2006 by the farmers of this *taluk* (a group of villages organized for revenue purposes) who wanted to shift to organic farming. They are housed in the MYRDA premises in Handpost. Any farmer wishing to be organic can become a member of this *Sangha* (association) on payment of a yearly subscription of Rs 100. Membership is also open to well-wishers, traders and interested individuals. The *Sangha* initially started with 30 members and now has about 135.



Many farmers realise that the way they farm makes an impact on their environment. Some of them feel the need to farm their land the way their fathers and mothers did. *“Growing crops without pesticides is a way to connect with our land and ensure we keep it safe for ourselves, our children, and for the wildlife in the nearby forest area.”* said Mr Chandrasekhar

The SKS group is small by Indian standards, with about 100 farmers (2010/2011) and a few on the way to being fully certified. The majority are smallholder farmers owning 2 to 5 acres of land. The cotton acreage for 2010 has been approximately 45 hectares. The popular cotton variety is DCH 32, an Extra Long Staple variety that is well suited for the high counts needed for the fine garments such as saris, duppattas, and stoles that Appachi makes for their brand Ethicus.

Though sourcing good quality DCH 32 seed is a challenge, SKS is supported by Appachi and gets technical support from University of Agricultural Sciences



Dharward. Some farmers have expressed a willingness to grow seed for their own seed security.

The planting of cotton is done at the end of April, much earlier than farmers in Central India, as they get rain at that time. Harvest is in September/October. SKS shares the cost of certification with Appachi, and the farmers therefore feel they own the certification. There is enthusiasm for following the Internal Control System (ICS – required for certification) and their certifiers (IMO).

Intercropping

This group of farmers have a rich mix of crops - and grow red gram, green gram, lablab, cowpea, black gram and castor, and groundnuts along with cotton. Most of them keep the food grains for their own use. Oil seeds such as castor and groundnut are used for making oil which they use. Any surplus is sold. This intercropping is one of the reasons as to why they favour cotton as it gives them food security.



Lower costs – Keeping the traditions

Mr Chandrasekhar and Mr Chinnaswamy say that the cost of cultivation for organic is low compared to conventional. Farmers still use the traditional methods of plough and oxen and do not purchase any inputs. Most farmers own livestock. They thus maintain traditional techniques as well as ensuring that organic cultivation is self-reliant, as it is meant to be.



Market support

SKS supports its members both for their cotton marketing as well as for their food crops. However only a small amount of the crops gets sold as organic with a premium and the rest goes into the conventional market, especially millets such as ragi, some edible oils, fresh vegetables, coconut, rice and tamarind. They have good markets from the big cities such as Bangalore.



Elephant corridor and tiger area

The SKS farmers are located on the border of Nagarhole National Park in the Nilgiris biosphere reserve on the Western Ghats. This area is part of the migratory route of the elephants of South India. Elephants roam the forests in search of food. They choose their routes from genetic memory and from the teachings of their elders. The villages where the SKS farmers live and work are very close to this major elephant corridor and migratory route - one of the oldest connecting the Eastern and Western Ghats forests of South India. There are said to be 6000 elephants in the area. The forests are also a core tiger area for India, with 300 animals reported.



Making the connection

There are many major threats to the once pristine forest area and its immediate environs. Farmers living near forest land and cultivating it have emerged as one of the biggest threats to wildlife as their habitat shrinks. Human /wildlife conflicts occur on a regular basis.

“In this scenario the manner in which crops are grown and choices that farmers make are



invaluable, and have a tremendous impact on the forest ecology and the wellness of wildlife in the area. By being organic, SKS farmers are making a small but significant impact” says Mani Chinnaswamy.

Mani calls the SKS farmers “real life heroes as they are doing everything they can to hold on to their slice of paradise. They have tilled and walked the land for years. They have resisted the temptation of Bt (genetically modified) cotton. They refuse to stand around watching their beloved earth getting degraded. They love their land. They have given away acres of land to create the Kabini Reservoir.

“Thousands of elephants have benefited from this move.” says Mani.



walking with elephants

Mani invites his buyers to come to Karnataka and embark on a Cotton Trail; to see the beauty of the place and the change that organic farming and organic cotton is bringing to this sensitive ecological zone.

“Being a part of this organic story is a way of joining the farmers in their crusade” says Mani. “On the Cotton Trail you can view the elephants as they go about their business from the machans [lookout hides usually made of rough wood and straw] each farmer has on his land”.



The Appachi Cotton initiative works at keeping the flora and fauna of the Kabini region safe and flourishing. Appachi sustains elephant reserves and partners the Anaimalai Tiger Reserve by creating tiger conservation awareness amongst the children who all live around the foot hills of the reserve and study in the school Appachi runs.



" For three generations my family has been involved in cotton farming and trading. Until the year 2000, we never realized the consequence of chemical intensive cotton cultivation, on the environment where it was grown. Perhaps, what was 'Out of Sight, was out of our Minds". The awakening came, along with the introduction of GMO cotton in India. The question that always popped in my mind was " Can I still look away from the impending danger, just to further my business?", or "Should my business grow at the cost of the environment". This pricked my conscience and troubled me a lot around 2005-06, especially after I shifted my area of cotton procurement to H.D. Kote block of Mysore District of Karnataka, which was at the fringes of Nilgiiri Biosphere Reserve. Home for hundreds of rare fauna & flora.

Thanks to my conviction, resolve and strong backing of my family, Appachi Cotton is now a firm that solely facilitates, purchases and value adds, Organic Cotton / Eco-Logic Cotton."

Mani Chinnaswamy
Partner, Appachi Cotton,

At a Glance: About SKS

Organic cotton is grown for Appachi by Savayana Krishikara Sangha (SKS), an association of farmers formed in 2006.

- SKS, together with Appachi, work with the farmers to help them form Self Help Groups and to ensure that the necessary support is in place.
- The majority of farmers are small holders with between 2 to 5 acres. There are a few farmers with larger holdings.
- SKS holds organic certification from IMO.
- The agricultural conditions of this region favour ELS or the Extra Long Staple (ELS) variety, (33 to 35 mm staple length). The favoured variety is DCH 32, an interspecific, long duration hybrid comparable to Pima and Egyptian Giza and is highly prized ELS cotton.

The value chain

- Appachi started its organic journey in 2004-05 and had converted the whole business into organic by 2007.
- Appachi acts as the link between farmers, weavers and textile mills and by providing a guarantee that the cotton produced matches market expectations ensuring that farmers reap maximum benefit for their labours.
- The Appachi brand 'Ethicus' was launched in 2009.

Influencing others

Mani Chinnaswamy and his wife Viji tell their customers that they [the customer] are central to the Cotton Trail story and that their engagement in Kabini where the cotton is grown to Pollachi where it is woven, helps preserve the peace and tranquillity of this little but vital corner of India, pull it back from environmental degradation, and reclaim and restore the pride of handloom weavers.

Along with customer engagement, Appachi, SKS, and other organic stakeholders in the region have been asking the Government of India to make all farming on the edge of forest lands organic by law. It is well known that wildlife coming in contact with pesticides used by farmers can face significant harm.

While this regulation may be passed in the future, it is encouraging to see the farmers of the SKS group putting their weight behind such a mammoth voluntary effort. "In India where farmers using pesticides are themselves at risk if they fail to follow safety regulations while administering them, farmers who care for the potential effects of pesticides on wildlife are a breed apart, and deserve our support and admiration".

For more information please visit:

Appachi <http://www.appachicotton.com/>

Ethicus <http://www.ethicus.in/> and read our Future Shapers report on Ethicus [here](#)

Contact

Mani Chinnaswamy
Partner, Appachi Cotton,
email: mani@appachicotton.com



Designed by Evonne Tan

Textile Exchange inspires and equips people to accelerate sustainable practices in the textile value chain. We focus on minimizing the harmful impacts and maximizing the positive effects of the global textile industry. Our signature program focuses on organic cotton value chains; improving lives for farmers, stimulating markets, and supporting best practice.

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