

Story of the Humble Onion



(Ramchandra and his wife, Kaladevi, in their patch of Onion: Heena, Uttarkashi)

Ramchandra Singh Panwar, 51, is a small farmer in Heena Village, 11 km from Uttarakashi on the Harsil Road. He has about 11 nali farming land, only half of which has access to reliable irrigation. Most of his plots are small and scattered. This is true of almost all the farmers in this region. What separates him from others is his willingness to take risks to pursue a new idea to its logical conclusion – even though he has little formal education (only class eight) and he has not traveled beyond Uttarakhand.

He grew up in old Heena village, a little higher up the mountain slope. After the 1991 earthquake, he shifted out and down a little bit in the valley, to this present settlement. He has two sons and a daughter. Earlier he has worked as a rural electrician too, off and on. In 2013 he came in contact with The Himalaya Trust, MMAP (Maximizing Mountain Agriculture Project) team; There are other agencies also working in his village but these were focusing more on providing subsidies and less on extension services.

Working closely with THT team, he has learned new ways of agriculture, like line sowing, making beds, early detection of insect infestation and proactive management. Earlier they scattered onion seed on a small plot. Whatever grew was used for the household and surplus was often given away for free. Today, if we talk of onion alone, his output has gone up by more than three times.

He explains that now, line sowing on raised beds offers them a couple of advantages which were never considered seriously in the past: the plants never get inundated with water and rot, because the drains carry away the excess water, because of unsupervised irrigation or rains. Secondly, the drains allow the

farmer to walk safely, without trampling the plants, while tending them. This also allows enough space between the plants to get sunshine and flourish.

Coming to insects, Ramchandra mentions that earlier he would simply listen to the next farmer and spray the recommended insecticide in his fields. Now, the THT team visits his farm promptly, takes a WhatsApp photo, consults the expert in Dehradun and provides him specific insecticide with proper instructions. They come and demonstrate the process too.

He has also learned how to store onions on wooden racks for off season sale. Greater outputs and better prices are the results. This has transformed farmers' attitude to onion. It was never considered a cash crop in the past. Now, farmers in his village collaborate, negotiate the prices with the vegetable market in Uttarakashi and then, sell their onions *en masse*.

But there are constraints too. Prices fluctuate. In 2015, he was able to get Rs 50 per Kg for his onion. This year, it has come down to Rs 20 per Kg! This is because Uttarkashi market imports onions from the plains. In 2015, because of the road blocks, onions from plains had never arrived. This import can be stopped only when many villages collaborate and produce at least 500 quintal of onion in the year. Many farmers are thinking along these lines in the villages between Harsil and Uttarkashi, because it is not just onion, there are many other vegetables (seasonal and off season) which are facing the same 'roadblock'.

Ramchandra highly values two qualities of the THT-MMAP field team: They are promptly available and they exhibit a personal touch in their dealings with the community. It is not just a "project" for them.

Saving to Sowing



(Jayendri, on the right, with her daughter in law, Kavita, in their plot: Naitala, Uttarkashi)

Jayendri Semwal, at 60, has seen many rural women's groups, where saving and loaning often sums up the whole story. When she joined Durga Producers' group in 2013, initiated by The Himalaya trust in her village Naitala, she was expecting the same. But she was in for a big surprise. She was taken to visit a modern dairy operation near Chamba, a hundred km away, besides many inter-group meetings. She learned about *Kurmula*, thrips, leaf-miners to inter-cropping and a lot more.

To take a few steps back, her husband, a priest is not very active now, since he had a Hernia operation. Her only son, a priest at Gangotri earns for just about six month every year – the period during which the Gangotri shrine is open to devotees. Essentially, it is the small scattered plots, which sustain the family, both for food as well as cash needs – like school fees of the two grandchildren. Jayendri and her daughter in law (Kavita Semwal) work these fields patiently round the year. Home finances were a little tight till 2013, when she began adopting new ways of agriculture. She had about 5 nali (1 nali=200 sq meter) which she used to raise traditional coarse grains- *jhangora*, *Mandua* etc. Only about half of this land is irrigated.

She began by changing the method of sowing: Initially she thought that making a bed and sowing in a straight line must be a tough job. But once started, she and her daughter in law, found it easy and beneficial in many ways. They dedicated larger plots to cash-crops like Onion, Coriander, Chilli, Spinach, Potato etc.

Encouraged by THT field team, she tried new ideas: She has started Onion seed production this year and she is sure of getting very good price for the seed, all of which is expected to be consumed locally. Until now, the seed was always bought from outside specialized agencies. It was considered a highly technical field.

THT field team, has been meeting their group (Durga Producer group) every week and in between too. They offered not only advice and information – but often got into their fields and gave a proper demonstration. In the meantime, the group was doing quite well on the savings front too. It has 15 members and about Rs 29,000 has been deposited in the local bank. Loans are given at a very low interest rate of 2%; for non-member families of the village, it is 3%, which is still very affordable and accessible compared to Banks. She herself has taken a loan thrice – for her own and her husband’s medical treatment. She has shown interest in kitchen garden and will be taking it up soon.

In the process, over last three years, she has developed an appreciation for scientific farming: keeping proper distance between plants; judicious use of fertilizers – compost supplemented with urea; Use of pesticides at the RIGHT time; separation of crops etc. Finally, she has started taking three to four cash crops per year, back to back, like this:

Planting cycle	Crop 1	Crop 2 (parallel)	Output (half a nali plot)	Income (INR)
June	Chilli (Harvest in Oct)		Green -10 Kg (Rs 300) Red Chilli- 4 Kg (Rs 400)	700
October	Spinach & Radish (Harvest Dec)	Onion Nursery (Harvest Dec)	Spinach/Radish- Rs 1350 Onion Nursery- Rs 3000	4350
December	Onion transplant (June Harvest)	potato (harvest-March)	Potato 100 Kg (Rs 500) Green Onion 20 Kg (Rs 600) Onion Bulb 50 Kg (Rs 1000)	2100
March	Beans (Harvest-June)		Beans 10 kg (Rs 300)	300
Total income from half a Nali plot in a typical year (investment about Rs 3000/-)				7450

Such cropping and its management has brought in a certain change in attitude. She sees agriculture no more as a drudgery aimed at subsistence alone. Farming can be remunerative, she is beginning to appreciate. Earlier, this same plot would earn her less than Rs 2000/-. Now, she earns Rs 7 to 8 thousand.

Another benefit she has noticed is: because the plot is in constant use, the soil remains soft; Light ploughing once a year is enough to keep the plot productive. Now, her ambition is to convince other families, who are still sticking to the old ways of farming (below).



New trend: Furrows and beds



Old method: scatter the seed