

Fashionably conscious: Japanese consumers help support cotton farmers in India

The Peace by Peace Cotton Project in Orissa implemented by Chetna Organic in partnership with Felissimo Corporation, Japan is strengthening the fair trade and organic movement by helping farmers go back to nature to grow better, trade better, and profit better.

When a teenager in Japan buys a nice outfit and pays a premium for it, we would not have much to comment. For this is usual.

But if the choice of the outfit is because it is made of 100% organic cotton, grown by a farmer some 4000 miles away in an Indian village, then we have some reason here to take notice. For this is organic and fair trade advocacy working at its best!

It is easy to understand people's preference of organic food for obvious health reasons. But when it comes to 'organic clothes', the choice here is more than just fashion; it indicates an emerging trend in 'responsible shopping'.

And while we laud shoppers who buy organic, we should also give due credit to those marketers, who have succeeded in making organic a "cool" and viable option in the market.

Like the Felissimo Corporation in Japan.

A leading catalogue retailer, the Felissimo Corporation, is bringing responsible fashion to the Japanese market through its designer prêt line that is made from 100% fair trade organic cotton. Simultaneously, Felissimo is supporting a social intervention, Peace by Peace Cotton, which is promoting organic farming and fair trade in India.

Peace by Peace Cotton

The Peace by Peace Cotton project was started in 2010 in collaboration between Felissimo Corporation, Chetna Organic & Fair Trade Cotton Intervention Program to help small-holder, marginalised cotton farmers in India improve their livelihood options by making their farming systems more sustainable & profitable through organic farming, and opening access for them to an international market for organic cotton.

The programme is being implemented by Felissimo in the Kalahandi and Bolangir districts in the eastern state of Orissa. Chetna Organic Farmers Association and Felissimo Corporation have been facilitated in their collaboration by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

Under the Peace by Peace Cotton intervention, Felissimo provides transitional support to farmers to convert completely into organic farming. It also provides much needed educational support to

farmers' children by awarding scholarships to meritorious and needy students, and encouraging their enrollment in schools.

Presently Chetna Organic is assisting near 3000, predominantly tribal, small holder cotton farmers in Orissa to completely transit to organic farming. Of the 3000 farmers, approximately 2300 have completely converted to organic farming, while 700 farmers are in the In-Conversion Stages I and II, which are the two preceding stages to becoming a fully certified organic producer.

Felissimo presently supports 587 of these organic farmers, and targets covering a total number of 1317 organic farmers in the next two years.

Felissimo supports Chetna in taking up interventions on technical research, and establishing eco-centres to demonstrate integrated farming systems and compost pits, as part of socio-technical extension activities in the community to strengthen knowledge, training and hand-holding support for farmers on organic farming, and facilitate appropriate market linkages for them.

The Chetna Experience

The farmers, supported by Felissimo, have been associated with Chetna under the aegis of its Organic & Fair Trade Supply Chain Intervention, which was started in response to the agrarian crisis of the late 1990s in India that took lives of many farmers, particularly cotton cultivators.

Cotton as a cash crop is extremely prone to fluctuations, both in climate as well in the market. While it fetches good cash returns, cotton has over time become highly dependent on expensive inputs to stay profitable.

Chetna Organic therefore seeks to wean away farmers from conventional, high-input dependant farming practices that cause much harm to land and ecology due to use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and replace it with farming that goes back to nature without any use of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers or GMOs.

Over the past years, Chetna has achieved success in bringing more and more farmers to the organic fold. Farmers are motivated by the long standing benefits of organic farming which shows results in better quality of the crops, a healthier soil environment, lower or negligible input costs, and better market prices.

However, notwithstanding all its benefits, organic farming is yet not widely taken up, as it entails an initial dip in crop productivity in the initial years, and is more labour intensive.

Chetna therefore has a mandate to continuously engage with the farming community to provide them socio-technical support at all levels - from the sowing to the harvesting stage – so that farmers who have converted to organic farming, stay with organic farming.

Felissimo's Peace by Peace Cotton intervention provides this critical transitional support to Chetna to support in-conversion farmers to smoothly convert into organic farming.

Under the Felissimo support programme, participatory learning methodologies are used to impart technical knowledge to farmers at every step of the cotton chain, and the farming process is closely monitored through an 'Internal Control System' to ensure compliance with relevant organic and fair trade certification standards.

VIDEO: About Chetna and Felissimo

Link: Rama Krishna Yarlagadda - COFA: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbFBuxnIvBE>

Alongside farmers have been brought together and federated into self help groups and cooperatives to promote informed decision making, so that they don't remain mere recipients in the supply chain but are empowered to own the entire process. The farmer cooperatives have today formed the Chetna Organic Agriculture Producer Company Ltd (COAPCL), which promotes and markets the certified organic and fair-trade products under its label across consumers in national and international markets.

Collaboration with Felissimo

Transitional support to farmers for their complete conversion to organic farming, and education support to their children are the two main components of the Felissimo Peace by Peace Cotton intervention.

Presently under the programme, 1317 farmer households in 10 villages in Golamunda and Bhawanipatna clusters in Kalahandi have been chosen for 100% transition to organic cultivation.

However Felissimo refuses any credit. "It is the buyer in Japan who supports organic, who is actually funding the programme," says Tatsuya Kasai, Manager, Felissimo. "We only try to inform them how their purchase of organic contributes to a larger cause in India, and it is this advocacy that brings in more consumer support to Peace by Peace Cotton."

Building Confidence Support

Any farmer who adopts organic farming, needs continued assurance that he has made the right decision. It is not easy to transform practices that are now habit to farmers like, using pesticides.

Peace by Peace Cotton, through various socio-technical extension services for farmers, therefore provides them with 'confidence support' to keep them motivated in their decision.

The socio-technical activities include setting up demonstration models and plots to promote integrated farming systems and show how an entire farm plot can be judiciously exploited with natural inputs and complete re-use of farm waste.



Organic cotton cultivation is demonstrated here in a trial plot/
Photo credit: OWSA

OneWorld visited the Mathrubhumi Eco-Centre of the Mathrubhumi Swayam Sahayak Samabaya, a farmers' producer cooperative at Mading Block, which is a demo-and-training plot, supported by Felissimo.

The plot demonstrates how an integrated farming environment can be promoted in a single plot of land with integrated fishery, cattle rearing and crop cultivation. To promote other agricultural crops grown with cotton, like red gram, the eco-centre also has a dal processing unit, which ensures a post-harvest value addition to food crops as well.



Research plot in Sialjodi where long staple cotton varieties are being grown/ Photo credit: OWSA



Natural pest traps/ Photo credit: OWSA

Felissimo also supports Chetna for research and development of different varieties of seeds, development of research and trial plots for crops, and composting and soil fertility enhancement training.

At the Sialjodi village, in Golamunda Block, Chetna has a trial plot to demonstrate how organic cotton cultivation is to be carried out. Cotton crops are neatly arranged in rows here, inter-cropped with red gram plantation after every few rows.

Coloured pots with natural pest attracting chemicals serve as traps for pests, and there is no need for synthetic pesticides to be used.

On another research plot in the same village, new varieties like *Varlakshmi* and *DCH 32* are being trialed to develop long staple cotton varieties.



A long staple cotton variety and a regular variety of cotton/ Photo credit: OWSA

Farmer Showcase



Chetna farmer Gangaram Patel shows off integrated farming in his plot/ Photo credit: OWSA

Gangaram Patel in Sialjodi village is a Chetna farmer who has implemented integrated farming in his two acre plot.

He points to the mixed crop of vegetables and fruits and shares how he does not need to buy any fertilizer or pesticide, as everything needed for his farm is produced in the farm.

He treats guests with papaya and smiles knowingly when told his papayas taste better than any in the market.

Post-harvest processing of Cotton

After harvest, the cotton is ginned to separate the fibers from the seeds. This process is now mechanised in a gin plant, where huge clouds of cotton undergo ginning and processing to come out as bales for export. To avoid contamination, organic cotton is ginned separately from conventional cotton.

The cotton is labeled in a manner so that even when it comes out from the gin, it can be traced up to the level of the farmer who has produced it!

Support to Education

Most poor farmers are unable to support their children's education, as a result of which a large number of students drop out of school, and are found in the fields, working with their parents rather than in the classroom.



To reverse this trend and help poor farmers send their children for studies, Peace by Peace Cotton is giving education support through scholarships to needy, meritorious students.

The focus is on girl students who are provided a scholarship of Rs. 7500 for a year to support their education.

The farmers groups formed under Chetna have also been mobilised to promote education of children, their retention in schools and to prevent child labour in the field. An enrollment campaign under the programme has targeted to ensure 100% enrollment of children in schools in all the villages covered under Peace by Peace Cotton.



Rita, an eleventh standard student from Sialjodi is one of the scholarship awardees of Felissimo.

She tries to hide her excitement as she talks to OneWorld, and shares her plans to buy a cycle with the scholarship money so the journey to college becomes easier. She also plans to invest this money to learn a computer course, which will help her later in getting a job.

A Shared Vision

Video: Felissimo vision

Link: Tatsuya Kasai : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0gAvSkA3RE>

Chetna and Felissimo share a vision for an empowered farming community in India that takes its own decisions, owns and manage its livelihoods sustainably, while at the same time is creating a model for a profitable, responsible and earth-friendly business.

This is summed up by Eisaku Kojima, Manager, Felissimo Corporation when he elaborates the Peace by Peace Cotton vision to build a world, where a fair and eco-friendly organic movement brings holistic profits and benefits to all – right from the farm producers to the consumers – and also pays back to create a healthier and happier mother earth.

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