

# Faith and focus bring business success

## Marginal farmer's son turns entrepreneur

**“The prospect of failure and debt was terrifying, but here was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to change my future. So I took a leap of faith.”**

So says Gopal Pujari, reminiscing about his decision to join the Syngenta Foundation India (SFI) agri-entrepreneur (AE) programme. Gopal signed up in the Kalahandi district of Odisha, eastern India.

His fears were understandable: Kalahandi is infamous for famine, poverty and farmer suicides. Fortunately, they were also unfounded. As an AE, Gopal has more than tripled his annual income to INR 500,000 (approx. US\$7,350). The farmers he serves now earn more than four times what they did two years ago.

A first-generation micro-entrepreneur, Gopal says unwavering customer focus is the most critical element in running a successful business. He provides agricultural advice to local farmers, helps them access credit, and sells them the seeds and other inputs they need to earn better livelihoods from often very small pieces of land.



Frequent visits to individuals and weekly meetings with farmer groups help Gopal maintain a loyal customer base. His understanding of the importance of trust and good customer relationships was honed by his previous role at a local NGO. There he managed a farmers' centre, helping them to connect with traders, obtain quality inputs and acquire knowhow. The quality of his service earned him the loyalty and respect of around 250 farmers.

Gopal had no doubt that he could make his AE business a success, but he had no money to start operations. With the help of SFI, he bought inputs on credit from the local distributor. His reputation meant sales grew quickly. Gopal was able to purchase new stock and pay off his previous credit within the first month. His input store now brings in up to INR 20,000 (about US\$295) per month.

In 2015 Gopal added another revenue stream to his business. He became a coordinator for hybrid seed production, working with a large input company. Gopal coordinates production by more than 100 farmers on 105 acres. This earns him up to INR 250,000 (approx. US\$3,700) annually in commission.

The son of a marginal farmer, Gopal exhibits tremendous grit, astute business skills and a love for his community. His aspirations to grow are reflected in his personal life, too. He has now built a *pukka* house for his family, staged his sister's wedding, and aspires to send his five-year-old son and two-year-old daughter to an English medium school.

Asked why he didn't migrate to a city for a job, Gopal replies: "I haven't just earned money here, but also the respect and love of my people. Those are my biggest asset, and I wouldn't trade them for anything."