

BANGLADESH



CULTIVATING MEDICINAL PLANTS TRANSFORMS SANTAL FAMILIES

As far as the eyes can see, rows of Bashok plants flank the sides of the roads near 15 villages in Birganj, Dinajpur. It's a sight sure to impress any visitor to the region. **However, this is no traveler's tale, but the story of how a crop transformed the lives of hundreds of Santal families.**

SANTAL PEOPLE

The Santal people are one of the oldest and largest indigenous ethnic communities in northwestern Bangladesh. They live on the margins, are often dominated by the local majority communities and experience limited opportunities for income generation. Many are dependent on the work they can find as agricultural laborers.

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Since 2011, through its Sustainable Agriculture for Santal Community project (SASC), Syngenta Foundation Bangladesh (SFB) has been supporting the Santal to explore a variety of farming methods, such as cattle rearing, homestead gardening and seed production. One pleasant, sunny morning in 2014, SFB approached Santal farmer groups with a new idea: the cultivation of Bashok on the land bordering the local roads. Bashok is a perennial bushy medicinal shrub, mainly used by pharmaceutical companies producing treatments for colds, pneumonia and other diseases.

LINKING THE FARMER GROUPS TO THE MARKET

The Rangan farmer group were among the first to get involved. Syngenta Foundation Bangladesh provided support, training, and links with both local government and a pharmaceutical company. Soon, the Rangan farmers had planted and cultivated 4000 Bashok shrubs along two kilometers of roadside. A local service provider (LSP) collected, dried and sold the leaves to the company. At the end of the year the crop had yielded 1.9 metric tons of dry leaves, worth about USD 950. "It is a miracle", says farmer Shah Soren. "We simply couldn't imagine that income is possible from fallow land next to roads."

LIFE-CHANGING SUCCESS

News of the success spread quickly. Currently, 80,000 plants are being grown along 38 km of roadsides. Five hundred Santal households now enjoy an additional annual income of USD 1700. Their communities are more united and together they plan to take leased land to cultivate profit-earning crops. Together they can begin to dream of how their lives can change.

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