

An organic farm that nurtures life and spirit

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Babulal Gandhi with his nieces : Gandhi family

The rest: Adwait Deshpande

As you turn off the dilapidated tar road, and wind along the dirt track, lack of any human presence makes you wonder if you have lost your way. Further into the way, you might catch the flutter of a large colourful bird in the corner of your eye. Convincing yourself, that it couldn't possibly be a peacock in this barren landscape, you move on. But as you walk further, the image of a barren landscape evaporates with every step you take. You have arrived at Maganlal Gandhi Smrutivan. **Babulal Gandhi with his nieces Madhavi and Midori.** Located in the Satara district, near the town of Phaltan, in a village called Vinchurni, Maganlal Gandhi Smrutivan, is a haven that offers a story of rejuvenation of land, water and wilderness. MGS is a 100-acre grassland that is owned by the Gandhi family since generations. Babulal Gandhi, an 89 year young enthusiast and his younger brother, Maganlal Gandhi, are behind this goliathan project of transforming a rocky, dry grassland into a fertile estate that is teeming with various interdependent lives. Maganlal Gandhi left us early, and Babu kaka took forward this mission with the help of his nephew and nieces. Madhavi, one of his nieces became an eager apprentice and is now shouldering the responsibility of managing the daily activities of the farm. Her sisters, Madhuri, Midori and brother Yogesh, too undertake responsibilities for the development of the farm. In an age when farmers are trying their best to dissuade even their sons from getting into this vocation, the three sisters are an inspiration for the boys and girls that visit this farm. Being a prominent 'Bhoodan activist' who worked alongside with Shri Vinoba Bhave, Babu kaka had visited many villages and learned traditional techniques of farming. When he came back to his village, he saw barren grassland with a few scattered neem trees. He decided to prove to the local farmers, that such land could also be developed into a bountiful farm. Through his work over four decades, he followed one principle – do not disturb the local biodiversity. As a result, the farm still bustles with wild rabbits hares, foxes, birds and insects that belong to the grasslands. The peacocks have claimed this land as their own, and a community of more than 150 peacocks have built a neighbourhood among the trees. Babu kaka persevered through meetings with the local farmers to convince them the importance of maintaining the local ecosystem. Slowly and steadily, he established a few rules for the surrounding land. First of them was *kurad bandi* (ban on the axe). They decided together that no sprouting tree would be cut. They needed as many roots as possible, to hold the scant four inches of fertile soil. Even wild bushes were left alone. Then the land was contoured in a way that the rainwater is absorbed by land with minimum runoff. The excess water was collected in a water-harvesting pond that stretched over 22 acres. These steps were effective in retaining fertile soil and moisture in the ground. Next, hunting of animals was discouraged. Even the grazing of the cattle was planned in such a way that all the grass is not eaten away. This led to a domino effect resulting in the rise in population of insects, birds, snakes, rabbits and foxes. Being in the rain shadow region of the Sahyadri range, Vinchurni receives scanty rainfall. But the contoured land, and water-harvesting pond help in retaining most of the water that is offered to it. The pond doubles as a harbor for some migratory birds in the first quarter of the year. *Painted stork and other birds in the lake* With a cowshed at its heart, the entire farm is fertilized by using *jeevamrut*, a mixture of cowdung, cow urine, jaggery, gram flour and curd. Such a mixture is converted into a solution, which is then introduced in the farm through drip irrigation. The excess cow dung is used to feed into the vermicompost beds and a biogas plant that supplies cooking fuel to the kitchen. Mulching is done with unfailing regularity by using dry leaves, grass and even uprooted weeds. For a dry grassland like this, mulching proves to be a crucial step that helps in retaining moisture in the soil for the driest quarter of the year. Making organic fertilizers behind the cow shed Experimenting has always been a way of life for the Gandhi parivar. Once, despite skepticism of the local farmers, Babu kaka decided to grow watermelon, an unconventional crop in these parts. Further more, his decision to harvest it for seeds confused many. As the melons ripened, Babu kaka invited children of all the surrounding schools to come and feast on juicy watermelons. One can almost picture the event as Babu kaka describes it: "Children dismantled in truckloads! Sheds were built to accommodate hundreds of children at once. The labourers cut melon after melon, as the children relished them and spit the seeds in buckets provided at every meter. It felt like a grand harvest festival. Watermelon juice trickled along the elbows of the children, but not even the teachers cared to admonish them, as they all reveled and laughed with mouthfuls of sweet pulp." After a few weeks of this carnival, sacksful of watermelon seeds were shipped out to make enviable profits. Even today, a few of those children come, now with their own kids, to reminisce the happy moments of that time. It makes you wonder how much the farm has earned, besides money. **Finished sapota powder** *Dehydration plant* Last year, when the prices of sapota (chikkoo) hit rock bottom, Madhavi tai thought of making sapota powder by dehydrating pieces of sapota and grinding them. This was done by building a makeshift dehydrator on the farm. The resulting powder is now being sent to dairies and bakeries to make sapota milk shake, cakes and ice creams. How Madhavi tai achieved this by cajoling an unwilling staff to cut the fruit into pieces and follow the procedure scrupulously, is a story in itself. *Children mixing cow dung to make manure* Babu kaka has always intended this place to be an educational space for children of all ages. He has built a campsite for school children or other groups to visit and stay on the farm for a few days. Few schools from Pune have made this farm their own, and bring their children every year to enjoy and learn from the wilderness. An educational program is also designed to engage children with the environment. The idea behind this is perfectly captured in Madhavi tai's appeal to all visitors – "one must not just observe nature, but must be able to *read* it as well..." Life at MGS is lived a day at a time. There are days of strain, when last night's wind has short-circuited the meter, and none of the motors are working, or when there is shortage of labour. And there are days to sit back and look at the birds as land, water and plants, do their work. But everyday, Babu kaka and Madhavi tai brainstorm ideas to develop the farm further. The issues of their discussion range from the possibility of developing a bee farm to the tackling of unmotivated labourers. Madhavi tai, with the help of her sisters, has tried various ways to engage the labourers with the entire process of organic farming, rather than just keeping the relationship limited to daily wage contracts. During the sugarcane harvest season, when migrant labourers arrived from far away villages, they stayed at the farm for weeks together. As the labourers cut the sugarcanes, Madhavi tai gathered all their children and began a mixed-age school. She read out stories to the eager ears of the children who ranged from toddlers to adolescents. Soon, some of the children began reading the stories that were left intentionally incomplete by her. Though these contract labourers welcomed such activities, it held no water with the local labourers, who were more interested in sending their children to government schools. In a bid to engage the local labourers in the process, Madhavi tai tried various ways, such as community lunches, providing land for them to grow vegetables, offering part of the produce etc. But nothing seemed to help in generating their interest in organic farming. They seemed skeptical about the unusual techniques that are used on this farm. They still prefer spraying weedicides over manual weeding, adding chemical fertilizers over handling cow dung slurry. The only way, Madhavi tai has decided, is to lead by example, and demonstrate the techniques wherever necessary. To develop a workforce that works with a common purpose is a dream than Babu kaka is now becoming weary of. Yet, they have not given up, and in his youthful passion, he continues to design the farm such that a momentary labour crisis may not affect it terribly. As she struggles with these issues daily, Madhavi tai reminisces about her decision to work on the farm. She grew up on this farm, and her family had always supported freedom over everything else. So much so that, when she came back from school one day, and announced that she doesn't want to go to school anymore, it was accepted without any retaliation. It was no surprise to them, that a child who has grown up unhindered among trees, birds and animals, would feel caged in a space that suppresses movement. She was tutored at home and though, she never enjoyed

studying much, her love for reading blossomed. The turning point in her life was her 2-month stay at a kibbutz in Israel. She was taken aback by the social and practical arrangement of the community. The purposefulness of every member of the kibbutz towards community work deeply impressed her. The stamina and dedication of the members was something that she decided to take back with her. Soon after, she completed her bachelors in agriculture and became an integral part of the farm. Madhavi tai, seems to be able to successfully ignore the idea of fear from her mind. She has endured many circumstances that others would call 'risky'. From driving a tractor to the labourers' village at 3 in the morning, to challenging local goons who are misdirecting farmers, or rebelling against powerful business men who pollute the surroundings of the farm, she has done it all! When asked how she found courage to face these situations, she simply states that they were "things that needed to be done". Just like a peacock's feather, Maganlal Gandhi Smrutivan, or the people within, cannot be described in mere words. Babu kaka is eager to have this place bustling with likeminded people working towards the cause of sustainable organic agriculture and environmental education. Four years of drought has decelerated the plans for the farm. Yet, day by day, as the sunshine falls on the farm, we all grow a little, and dream further of, as Babu kaka puts it, "Witnessing the harmony between land, water and wilderness..."