The taste of good health

'Be organic, buy organic.' That's the mantra behind Bio Basics, run by Ramesh Chandran and Sreedevi Lakshmikutty

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Bio Basics is more than just a commercial venture focusing on organic food. The founders - Ramesh Chandran and his wife Sreedevi Lakshmikutty - moved to Coimbatore in 2018 after having lived abroad for several years. Here they bought some land and started farming. Soon they realised that Coimbatore was quite willing to adapt an organic and natural lifestyle.

Also Devi, who had regular interactions with farmers, was alarmed at the increasing rate of farmer suicide. She narrates a heart-wrenching incident about a farmer who set his home on fire and walked into those flames. "We cannot bear the pain even of touching the hub with our little fingers," she says. "Imagine the despair he would have been feeling to do something like this."

Ramesh and Devi set up Bio Basics a few months ago in order to bridge the gap between farmer and consumer in the simplest way possible. They knew no middleman, so they were responsible to both producer and consumer.

Their USP is that the fresh produce is delivered to the customer's door with a time lag of just half a day to one day from the time it is harvested. This is not a venture that will short-change the farmer nor will it offer the customer poor quality. Therefore they do not negotiate with the farmer. But if the farm's price is beyond acceptable limits, they just say that it will be difficult to sell his produce on a consistent basis.

Their trained staff is equally passionate about this venture. They meet the farmers once a week to pick up the harvest and are open about their sources and are willing to address any concerns. They know what is sourced from which farm, so that any discrepancies or complaints can be easily tracked.

Customers are connected via e-mail, WhatsApp or text. A list of available produce is sent out every Friday and people have to confirm their orders by Saturday evening. This gives them a couple of days to sort out the requirements. Therefore there is no excess stock and inventory is kept low.

Monday is the day for farm visits. Fruits and vegetables are brought to the warehouse - a cool terra-cotta-tiled dry space - that evening and sent out by Tuesday mid-morning. There are no unnecessary overhead costs like refrigeration. The fresh and packaged produce are kept separately in a hygienic manner. Since the team is looking to minimise the use of plastics, deliveries are made in cloth bags of different sizes, which are brought back to be reused.

They also use newspaper bags made by children with special needs from Amrit Centre. They also request customers to part with any surplus newspapers, which they then send to Amrit to be recycled as paper bags.

The field manager Baskaran Kumar, who is also an organic farmer, helps with the delivery.

About 15 farmers around Coimbatore benefit from this venture. Most of the fruits come from farms in Madurai and Coimbatore. They offer fruits, herbs, vegetables, oils, pulses, spices, millets and cereals. Fresh produce is completely seasonal and, therefore, based on availability.

Munish Shah from Race Course, one of Bio Basics' earliest customers, could not be happier with his decision to go organic. His talk animatedly about how the fruits, especially the papaya, taste. He reminds him of his childhood when food tasted as it should. Despite the increase in his grocery bill, he is committed to eating organic produce and is a staunch supporter of Ramesh and Devi's venture.

Professors Meena Duraisamy and her husband, who live in Madurai, have turned completely vegan, thanks to Bio Basics. The vegetables are so tasty that they don't miss non-vegetarian food. The fruits are "excellent" and the oils "pure and fresh."

Meena also mentions that the vegetables are denser and have a longer shelf life without refrigeration. She offers this emerging tribe - though her husband thought her cooking was delicious, he would say it did not match up to his brother's. But now with the availability of fresh and sustainably grown produce, she has overcome that challenge.

Unisel, who moved back to India after having lived abroad for a couple of decades, finds the quality of nallaimi from Bio Basics to be excellent. He says that he is happy to invest in a sustainable lifestyle, as that is beneficial to both the farmer and his family's health.

"By supporting organic farming, we are also helping catch the hand and keep the soil fertile," he says, citing the example of Punjab and Haryana where extensive use of pesticides has contaminated the ground water. He compares his home-made potato chips made with organic potatoes to those made with regular potatoes. The difference is so obvious in terms of taste, cooking time and density, he says.

For me personally, shopping with Bio Basics is a boon, as I know well in advance what vegetables and fruits I will get. That makes it easy to plan what I need to buy elsewhere.

Also there is a personal connection with the farmer. For example, this week, we were told that green chillis would not be available because the farmer had hurt his leg and could not deliver.

Another characteristic of Ramesh and Devi's work is their passion to impart information. Their weekly list is not just about what is available. It also includes a food write-up, a recipe one week or information on millets another.

Devi says that people should support their local organic farmers. Of course, the monthly budget has to be considered to accommodate the difference but even if one cannot afford to go completely organic, one can always try to strike a balance between what is organic and what isn't.