

TECHIES TAKE TO FARMING

Engineering graduates return to their villages in Punjab to practise organic farming, fight pesticide overuse

SUKHDEEP KAUR

CHANDIGARH, FEBRUARY 26

THEY slogged to make it to prestigious engineering colleges of the country. Only to return to the farms in their villages and try their hand at something their engineering degrees did not equip them to do — grow organic food.

For Ashish Ahuja, his IIT-Delhi degree was a passport to a plum job. But he chose to bring “organic science” to his ancestral 200-acre farms in a Bathinda village and thus prevent overuse of pesticides that was causing cancer there.

“Indiscriminate use of chemicals render the soil unfit to grow organic food for a long time. Also, there is a capitalist approach to farming and changing mindsets takes its time. I have a long way to go and intend to push harder,” he says while adding how quite a few of his IIT friends had also taken to farming.

For Mandeep Dhariwal, his return has also to do with the fact that he himself is suffering from



Mandeep Dhariwal (left) on an organic farm in Panniwal Mahia village of Ferozepur district. Express

liver cancer. It was an engineering degree in transportation that took him to New Zealand but he is now back in his native Panniwal Mahla village of Ferozepur district to make a difference — both to his

health and the environment. “I was always interested in nature but went for an engineering degree and later settled for a job in New Zealand. But every time I was home I would want to go

farming on my land. There was always a desire to be master of my own time and destiny. And being diagnosed with liver cancer was like the proverbial last straw. I came back and am now growing organic wheat, gram and kinnows on nearly 10 acres out of the 35 acres. In fact, from milk to my cereals, most of my food is as natural as what goes inside my plants,” says Mandeep, who is now trying to bring more farmers into the organic fold.

While farming is coming naturally to some landed techies, those who do not own a piece of land too have worked out ways to return to the fields. While he runs his own programming firm, 31-year-old Jaskirat Singh of Ludhiana had taken three acre of land on lease last year.

Interestingly, for this chemical engineering graduate from the BHU, it was large-scale pollution of Ludhiana’s Buddha Nuliah due to toxic chemical discharge by industries that pushed him to take up farming.

“The toxic water from the nul-

lah is flowing into the fields and entering our food chain. While I cannot find a solution for the entire area, I decided to find one for myself. I now grow organic vegetables, maize and this year we have also grown organic wheat,” says Jaskirat.

Also to the world of techies-turned-farmers belong those like Gaurav Sahai who did his engineering from REC, Jalandhar, and followed it up with an MBA from the United States.

He later left his cushy job at Hewlett Packard (HP) to happily settle for less money but “more satisfaction”. He is now growing organic food at his friends’ farm near Mohali and feels his engineering degree hasn’t gone waste.

“The technical knowledge comes in handy at managing farming,” he says.

And he is not missing that six-digit salary either. “I don’t crave the lifestyle good money provides anymore. I have just begun my journey and the going so far has been very rewarding,” he adds.



Farmers carry cucumbers on a boat to sell in an Allahabad market on Thursday. PTI