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Every year beginning October, Sitara Devi's day would start by collecting custard apples from the forests around her home in Gogunda village of Udaipur district in Rajasthan. Gogunda *tehsil* is home to the Gameti (Bhil) and Garasiya tribes, who are heavily dependent on forests for their livelihood. After harvesting the fruit, by 8am Sitara would fill her basket and walk 10-15 km over the hilly terrain of the Aravallis to sell them in nearby villages.

Engaging tribal women in food processing

This arm twisting, however, ended in 2017 when Rajesh Kumar Oza set up Jovaki Agro Food India to process custard apples and other forest produce in the Gogunda *tehsil*. His plant now processes custard apples, *jamun* (a wild Indian berry), *amla* (Indian gooseberry) and *hara chana* (green gram) in addition to empowering the region's tribal women.

Sitara now works in the Jovaki plant where she separates seeds and pulp from custard apples,

jamuns etc. “I get Rs 250 per day besides an incentive for extra production,” says the 34-year-old. She is not the only one to have benefitted from the setting up of Jovaki, which employs 150 women from the two nearby tribal villages.

Another 435 women from 12 villages are involved in the collection of fruits, which they sell at Jovaki’s collection centre.

Better bargaining power

The assured purchase of fruits has also increased the bargaining power of others who don’t sell to Jovaki. Custard apple is a wild fruit that grows in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka besides the tribal belt of Rajasthan which includes Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara, Rajsamand, Chittorgarh and Jhalawar. While its season lasts just two months – October and November – there is demand for its pulp throughout the year as it is used in making ice-creams, shakes and sweets like *basundi* and *kalakand*.

“We continue to buy custard apples even after Diwali. Besides, the processing work beyond the harvest season enhances livelihood opportunities. *Jamuns* come only during July while *green chana* is harvested between January and March and *amla* in December-January,” he points out.

Gooseberries are dried and sold while green grams are frozen like peas. The work to deseed custard apple and *jamun* is done manually as there are no machines available. “We are trying to use maximum manpower to give employment,” Oza says.

The pulp is then frozen using blast freezing during which cold air is pushed at high velocity across a food product in order to freeze it as quickly as possible. At minus 35 degrees, the pulp freezes in 6 hours. “From the deep freeze, we move the products to our cold storage in Udaipur from where it is sold to ice cream companies, caterers and others in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi,” he adds.



Custard apple pulp is in high demand throughout the year for making ice-creams, smoothies and sweets. Pic: Jovaki Agro

Last year, Jovaki produced 20 tonnes of custard apple and 8 tonnes of *jamun* pulp. The seeds of these fruits also generate income.

“We are trying to enter the B2C (business to customer) space by selling the *jamun* seed powder directly in the market,” Oza says.

Jovaki's journey and the road ahead

Setting up the plant, however, was not a cakewalk. Oza spent a year studying the forest produce, growth, harvesting and processing of custard apple. “I researched for a year and went to Dr R A Kaushik (Professor and Head, Department of Horticulture at Udaipur’s Maharana Pratap University of Agriculture and Technology) to learn more about the fruit and its processing,” he says.

Along with putting up the plant, that entailed an initial investment of Rs 15 lakh, Oza trained the tribals about the best methods and time of harvesting as fruits are rendered useless if plucked too early. “Custard apples have to be plucked when the fruit is ripe. It cannot be processed if it is even partially unripe. We formed groups of 15 women each in 6 villages and trained them in harvesting under Dr Kaushik. We procure from them every day till the season lasts,” he says.



Jovaki procures custard apples at Rs 15 per kg and jamun at Rs 40 per kg from tribal women who sell the produce at Jovaki collection centres. Pic: Jovaki Agro

Jovaki is also receiving help from the ICICI Foundation, which has trained 400 tribal women in harvesting, storage, grading, packaging and plantation of custard apple. They also provided free siketer and plastic storage containers to these women for improving the shelf life of the produce. The training helped 125 tribal women improve their

fruit processing skills, resulting in better income and livelihood opportunities. This support from ICICI Foundation is helping Jovaki scale up at a faster rate.

Now, Oza is trying to expand his start-up and include more fruits and vegetables to Jovaki's portfolio. "We provided green gram seeds to people and the first harvest was ready early this year. De-podding them again provides employment to women because there aren't any machines for the work unlike shelling peas, which has been fully mechanized," he says.

There is a high demand for green gram round the year as they are used in kebabs, gravies as well as sweets. However, their short season and lack of players in the space has so far not allowed mainstreaming of their processing yet.

"We have 4 products now and cluster bean is next on the radar.. We can dry them or freeze them. Then the other vegetable we are planning to process is *kakoda* or *kantola* (spine gourd), again a forest product which has high demand as well as nutritious value," Oza says.

Overall, Jovaki's aim is to employ 5,000 women for farming, harvesting and working in the plant. "We receive orders for exports as well but we don't have the bandwidth yet. As we increase production and grow our network, our forest produce will travel overseas as well," Oza adds.

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