

Sweetening their lives with bitter neem seeds

GNFC Project Empowers Rural Poor, Women

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Ahmedabad: Tini Thakor and Lakshmi Mali — both farm labourers — have reaped sweet rewards from neem trees. While Tini paid for her niece's education, Lakshmi repaid a loan. They are among the 1.25 lakh women seed collectors associated with the Gujarat Narmada Valley Fertilisers and Chemicals (GNFC) Ltd's Neem Project, an initiative conceived to empower women and the rural poor.

The state-run company's sustainable development model has won prestigious accolades back to back. In the past two months, it has been conferred the Golden Peacock Award for Corporate Social Responsibility and the SKOCH Blue Economy Platinum Sustainability Award.

In May 2015, the central government made it mandatory for all indigenous urea makers to produce 100% of their total subsidized urea in neem-coated form. The objective was to prevent diversion of urea to chemical factories.

Taking the lead, the GNFC started manufacturing its own neem oil by roping in women and landless labourers as neem-seed collectors. Neem oil extracted from the seeds is used for coating urea. Neem cake, an organic fertilizer generated as a by-product, is also used by farmers in organic farming.

"It is a win-win situation for the GNFC and the community," said Rajiv Kumar Gupta, the MD of the GNFC. "Even after making liberal payments of up



PROJECT SCOREBOARD

- 1.25L women from 1,200 self-help groups associated with the project
- Covers 4,000 villages in 22 districts of Gujarat
- Supplementary income of ₹10-12 crore generated in first year
- Neem-seed collection was 10,000 MT in 2015 and 11,500 MT in 2016
- Other products include neem oil (for hair and skin), neem soap, and neem pesticide



- Handwash, shampoo, and mosquito repellent made with neem are in pipeline

holders, and spending on transportation, storage and oil extraction, the company earned a few crores in profit from the project. The company has decided to spend this money only on CSR activities."

Gupta has been awarded the SKOCH Blue Economy Person of the Year for conceptualizing, designing, and managing the project. In its first year (2015-16), the project generated Rs 10-12 crore in income for about 1 lakh rural women and landless labourers. Today, 1,200 self-help groups in 4,000 villages of 22 districts of the state are covered under the project.

According to a study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme, the project has emerged as a viable Rural Income Generating

Activity, and yields robust supplementary income during the non-farming season which also reduces migration. "Inspired by the multi-dimensional benefits of the project, the Government of India has directed other fertilizer companies to replicate this, taking support from the GNFC," Gupta said.

For 2017-18, the company has set the target of collecting 40,000 metric tonnes of seeds from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh. The GNFC has tied up with big retail chains for selling value-added products, which are already being sold by 5,000 fertilizer retailers in Gujarat.