



## A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK - AJAY: THE MASTER FARMER



Farmer Ajay Nand with wife Keshmi Devi.

At the end of one's secondary school education, school leavers have a fair idea of what they want to make out of their lives, be it pursuing a career in the medical field or becoming a farmer because an educator.

The possibilities and options are limitless.

For Ajay Nand of Sauniwaqa though, he'd developed tunnel vision, focusing his efforts solely on becoming a farmer because for him, the land was his niche.

When his schoolmates pursued their tertiary studies after leaving Bhawani Dayal Arya College, Ajay returned home.

His home of Sauniwaqa in Nakasi is where he has erected his whole life as a farmer for 18 years now on his 5-acre piece of land.

"I knew I was not good academically but I knew deep inside that I could excel elsewhere like toiling the land and that it would help me take care of my family," he said.

Providing for his wife Keshmi Devi and daughter Shetrya Nand, the 41-year-old Ajay has had to hustle to create a living from the land that once belonged to his father; "Farming is my trade, it is my hobby, I have done everything I learnt from my farming parents

and I've also learnt new techniques along the way," he said.

"This piece of land is inherited, I got it from my father, who toiled it with my mother, I grew up on it and I know of its preciousness."

"My mathematics and physics are my livestock and crops, calculating each step of production, I may have failed in the classroom but I did not fail on the farm," he said.

On his farm, Ajay plants assorted vegetables such as tomatoes, eggplants, cucumber, long bean, bitter gourd and coriander.

"I chose to plant assorted vegetables because of the demand out there and I am also keen to help and feed the public nutritious food for their meals," said Ajay.

"People have choices to which type of vegetable they prefer to consume and that is why we are planting a wide variety of vegetables," he said.

"The weather is sometimes a hindrance but that is always a short term experience and there are solutions around the weather problem," he smiled.

"If crops get damaged because of the weather we do not whine but replant to keep providing even if thefts occur."

Being a chip off the old block, Ajay followed in his father's footsteps, who in his heydays was a successful commercial rice farmer who supplied 60tons of rice to Rewa Rice, recording the highest yield for that period, only through the use of bullocks as his help.

Learning from his father, Ajay delved into rice farming and also has a few heads of livestock for his herd and his experience has led him to venture into these commodities, by also taking up rice and livestock farming.

"This has not limited me to try other commodities like rice and livestock which are great substitutes to vegetables, I learnt

all of this from my father and I idolized him for his hardworking personality, he prospered during those days producing that much rice, but that was my father," he reminisced.

"Rice takes up a separate 1 acre and the Ministry of Agriculture assisted me with rice planting material and is often used for consumption with a few kilos being sent to the Nausori market."

"For livestock, there are 13 cows, 2 bullocks, ducks and chicken who are also part of our farm, and we've rostered ourselves accordingly for their welfare.

Apart from the careful maintenance of his crop and livestock farm, he has also ventured into layer bird rearing which started in 2018.

"We love to develop yearly and when we have saved enough to venture into something else, we do it and we make sure to keep it running," he said.

Market day is always a family affair and one which is looked forward to with much fervour as their variety of assorted vegetables, commodities and livestock are up for sale.

"Our vegetable market would always be on the roadside as you enter the Nakasi Road from the service station side, we'd get customers there who are vegetable lovers and vendors too from the Nausori market."

"It is a weekly routine and we could be roping in a minimum revenue of \$200 and if the sale goes well it could go to as high as \$700," he said.

The money earned from the farm, apart from the payment of home and the family necessities, is also used to purchase fertilizers, pay for the hired tractor, chemicals, seedlings, transport fuel costs and payment of the two farm labourers.

"This is also where farm records come in, we need to record all the transactions and the developments

on the farm."

By saving for a rainy day and the families urgent needs, Ajay has not only managed to renovate the family home but has also built a storage shed for their assorted vegetables worth \$3,000.00. Throughout his farming practice, Ajay has seen a lot of changes over the years on his farm, transitioning from the traditional use of bullocks to plough and prepare the land to tractors and hand-held tractors alike.

His impeccable bookkeeping and his farming success have not been for naught as he was rewarded with the 2014 Best Farmer of the Year award during the 2014 Central Division Agriculture Show.

"I would like to thank the Ministry of Agriculture for not only recognizing our efforts on the farm through the awards but they've also assisted me through the provision of rice and squash seeds and that hand-held tractor," he said.

"If you are passionate about something, do it with all your heart and when you do so, you'll get ideas on how to improve on areas that can increase your output, and the next step forward will come to you as you develop onward," he said.

Ajay lives by one motto - "Be kind and good to others and you will see the goodness of it."

"It does not matter if you have even a quarter land, just make use of it and you will see what that little piece of land can offer, if you are not academically gifted, don't be disheartened; if you cannot find work, do not worry because toiling the land does not require qualification nor certificate," said Ajay.

"I was not good in school either but through the land, I can provide for my family and achieve what any other with tertiary qualifications can achieve, all you need is to have a passion and heart for what you do and nothing will be impossible."

## GLOBAL AUDIENCE HEARS FIJI'S AGRICULTURE INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Export in 2020 has increased compared to the first quarter of 2019 despite the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed Ministry of Agriculture Permanent Secretary, Mr. Ritesh Dass at a webinar session on Tuesday (15.9.20).

"In 2019, \$234m in total export value of crop and livestock was recorded where a total of 223 crop, livestock produce and products were exported to 47 countries," he said.

The webinar session featured the Permanent Secretary, Investment Fiji CEO, Mr. Craig Strong, and Joe's Farm Managing Director, Mr. Michael Joe.

Mr. Dass explained about the opportunities for investment in Fiji's agricultural sector to over 300 participants worldwide, and led the discussion on Transforming Agriculture agenda in Fiji.

"In 2020, we have noted a 2

percent growth in value for export, recorded a 14 percent growth in volume of only fresh or chilled export, and documented a 11per cent average growth rate per month in volume of export from January to March," he said.

In describing a snapshot of Fiji's agriculture, Mr. Dass revealed over the last seven years from 2013 to 2019, crop and livestock export continued to increase.

"There was a fairly modest growth of 0.1 percent growth in volume of export, 4.7 percent growth in value of export, and 2.2 percent growth in value of only fresh or chilled export."

He said there is real potential to achieve accelerated growth through strong investment support given Fiji had only utilized 20per cent of arable land for agriculture purposes.

"There is still 80 percent of

arable land not utilized so the potential and the possibilities to invest in this sector is endless and you can be rest assured that you will have the Ministry's full support to assist you in your investment ventures," he said.

The Permanent Secretary said there were opportunities available in government investment programs, farmer to market linkages, organic farming model, agriculture value addition, agro tourism, and climate smart agriculture.

Mr. Dass revealed the potential areas for investment in Fiji's agriculture sector were in livestock such as sheep, beef, or dairy, and crops such as rice, turmeric, ginger, cassava, taro, fruits, high value vegetables and coconut products.

"The Ministry will provide end-to-end support to any investor to ensure their investment success."



Permanent Secretary for Agriculture Mr. Ritesh Dass (right), Joe's Farm Managing Director, Mr. Michael Joe (middle) and Investment Fiji CEO, Mr Craig Strong during the webinar session