

## Kushal Dange and Narsingh Lal: A Family of Progressive Farmers



*Narsingh Lal, Kushal's father, proudly points to his orange trees as he explains the process of intercropping*

Kushal Dange, a young man from a farming family in the village of Biaorakala (Khilchipur block, Rajgarh district, Madhya Pradesh), embodies the wave of change sweeping India's villages. Unlike his father and brothers and generations before them, Kushal does not spend much time on his farm, choosing instead to run a small shop in his village, where he sells everything from mobile phones to school stationery supplies. Across rural India, increasingly more young people like Kushal are looking for non-farming work, either moving to cities or creating new opportunities within their own villages. Kushal epitomizes this entrepreneurial bent of mind, involving himself in a number of activities that not only provide additional sources of income but also enable new learnings and experiences that can benefit his community.

One of his new roles is that of a community facilitator for the Digital Green

partnership with ACCESS Development Services, an NGO focused on the development of rural livelihoods. Since 2010, Digital Green and ACCESS have been working together to promote better agricultural practices using short, community-made, locally relevant videos in three districts of Madhya Pradesh.

Kushal has been facilitating screenings of these community-sourced videos in six different villages in Khilchipur block of Rajgarh district since 2012. In addition, he works with farmers' groups in the area to understand their challenges and needs, helps to implement new practices, and acts as an interface between the ACCESS staff and the community. This job also necessitates him to attend various training programs, knowledge-sharing workshops and seminars on agri-practices and the use of ICT for development.

For someone who never imagined a



*Kushal Dange speaks about his work as a facilitator*

life outside of farming or outside of his own village as a child, Kushal is proud of all that he has now accomplished. In particular, he is pleased that he can contribute to his community's development in a significant way, and that his own learnings can be passed on to others. His own social standing has also changed, as he explains: "In the beginning, I used to feel shy about going and talking to farmers about ways to improve their work. But now, whenever people see me, they know that I'm the person who shows videos. In fact, many people who didn't know me before now easily recognize me as the person who

shows videos, and often come to me for advice and assistance."

One of the many people who have benefited from Kushal's work as a facilitator is his own father, Narsingh Lal, whom he introduces as one of the most progressive farmers in the entire village. Narsingh has been attending the video screenings ever since they first began, and was one of the first adopters of several progressive farming techniques. Walking through his fields, he points proudly to a patch of orange trees, planted in rows and interspersed with onions, garlic and even cauliflowers. He explains, "I decided to practice intercropping after watching a video that showed its benefits. When taller crops are interspersed with smaller ones, you can maximize utilization of available space. Also, the video showed that mixing the crops like this can help improve the health of the soil and the crops."

Narsingh also watched a video on line-sowing and planting vegetables on slightly raised beds, which involves creating channels through which excess water can flow, thus, preventing rot and disease. Inspired, he decided to try the process for himself, and is very pleased with the results, showing off his flourishing orange trees and the healthy vegetables that lie in between.



*Line-sowing makes it much easier to maintain the field with frequent weeding, Kushal's mother (photographed) maintains*



Narsingh Lal and his son are also the very first people in the village to adopt another practice - poultry farming. While they only initiated the project recently, their chickens look plump and are almost fully grown and ready for the market. The chicken coop receives a great deal of attention from the community, and Narsingh Lal explains that others in the village have also considered building one after witnessing the success of theirs. Indeed, due to his enthusiasm for trying new practices and urge to learn and experiment, Narsingh Lal is looked up to by the other farmers, and was even chosen as the featured farmer in a few Digital Green videos. Both Narsingh and Kushal smile as they share the thrill of acting, and the sense of pride they felt watching the video later, along with the rest of their family.

Describing the relevance and usefulness of the videos, Kushal says, "even when Digital Green was absent from our village for a few months, the farmers were interested in continuing the screenings. Since there was a demand, we continued to show them the videos, and am sure that

we would do so even in future. The main challenge that we face is not the interest of the farmers, rather the availability of good equipment." This, Kushal feels, is a good indication of the success and sustainability of the approach, even though he remains cautious about the availability and access to resources.

Kushal's growth and achievements over the course of his work with ACCESS and Digital Green illustrates that this work can grant the opportunity to move beyond traditional jobs even while continuing to live in the village and serving the community. The technological aspect of the work is clearly interesting and exciting for him, for one. In addition, he is also given access to other opportunities that take him outside the village, such as attending educational sessions at the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (farmer education centers), and participating in seminars and conferences in nearby cities. As he says shyly, "I am happy to be doing something that helps my family and community. Personally too, I feel like I have grown since I began working as a facilitator."



*Kushal and Narsingh's poultry farm is something of a novel spectacle in the village, with curious daily visitors*