

Shyam Lal: Student for Life

“ *Samajh nahi aata kyon, gaon vapas kheechte rahatee hai.*
(I don't know why, the land keeps pulling me back.) ”



Shyam Lal (center), with Kamlesh and his granddaughter

Shyam Lalji (56) doesn't remember how old he was when he first left Tamanpur (Rae Bareli district, Bachrawa Block, Uttar Pradesh). They were poorer then, even though his father had more land than he does now. Shyam Lal, was the most academically inclined of his siblings, completing his matriculation and undergraduate degree with good marks. He soon got a job with the railways and moved to Allahabad.

“A government job with a pension is the dream for most people. I tried to stay for as long as I could, but my heart

wasn't it.” As he recounts wistfully his return to the village, a small crowd has gathered around us. It is around 5:30pm. It is evident that the elderly farmer, with his thick glasses strong jaw and clear, confident voice is respected in this community.

After returning to the village, Shyam Lalji tried to become a government school teacher for many years, without success. He taught the children going to the local primary school free of charge till the private school came up, and they finally began to get an education.

With just 11 *bighas* of land, his family is not well to do. Both he and his son have MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) job cards – the extra income has become vital to them. The desire to give his grandchildren an education is what drives Shyam Lal to labour even at his age.

Despite a difficult life, Shyam Lal is not averse to change - he constantly experiments with new farming techniques and multiple crops in his field. In addition to paddy, wheat and mustard – which are grown by almost the entire community – he plants peppermint, okra, onions, brinjal, potatoes and tomatoes. Last year he began to subscribe to updates on agricultural practices on his son's mobile phone. When Kamlesh, Digital Green's Village Resource Person (VRP) screened the first video a few months ago, Shyam Lal was among the most enthusiastic. Of the four practices featured in the videos screened since, he has adopted three.

"The *Mentha* nursery video came too late. I had already planted peppermint by then. But I will surely try it next time."

With all his experimentation, Shyam Lalji is still a careful man. "He always adopts a new practice on a small piece of land. 'Only results matter,' he says. He still doesn't trust me!" says, Kamlesh, half jokingly.

Farmers like Shyamlal are rare, taking immediately to new practices – changing habitual ways of working. His age and background command respect and quite a few others followed suit after he adopted the practice featured in the first Digital Green-enabled video screened in his area. During the dissemination he is vocal, grilling Kamlesh for details.

For now, though, he is waiting for videos on how to make his paddy crop flourish.

