From Dubai's highways to Punjab's orchards: 'Farming not just a livelihood, it's a fulfilling life'

Courtesy: Anju Agnihotri Chhaba

After spending 14 years as a heavy truck driver in Dubai, Narinder Singh, 51, returned to his roots in Punjab in 2010 — not due to financial hardship, but because his aging parents and family wanted him back home. In 2011, he began farming on his family's six-acre ancestral land in his native village Jharh Sahib of Punjab's Ludhiana district. He later expanded operations to eight acres by leasing two more. What began as a traditional farming and dairy venture has now evolved into a diversified agricultural model integrating fruit orchards, agroforestry, intercropping, drip irrigation, polyhouse cultivation, and zero stubble burning. He didn't stop here but also set up his own bio-fertiliser manufacturing unit, which has the potential to generate cooking gas. Narinder, who has studied up to Class 12, takes pride in not relying on a tractor for cultivation on almost his entire six-acre base. His self-sufficient fertiliser unit means he remains unaffected by the common shortage of urea and DAP that trouble most farmers in the state. "Along with tradtional farming, I started dairy farming in 2011. At one point, we had 35 to 40 cattle head, including buffaloes," Narinder recalls. "Now I keep only six–seven of them, as my focus has shifted more towards farming and horticulture." His current setup includes 1.5 acres of guava orchards with Hisar Safeda and Taiwan Pink varieties, and 0.5 acres of Anna variety apples, which he is growing on a trial basis. On these two acres, he practises intercropping by growing turmeric and ginger between the rows of fruit trees. "My guava and apple orchards are planted on raised beds — 21 or 22

of them — with a spacing of 12×12 ft between rows. For guava, we maintain 6×6 ft spacing between plants, while for apples it's 12×12 ft," he explains. "We prune the trees twice a year to maintain a height of four–five feet, which improves fruiting and makes intercropping easier." "We harvest guava twice a year — once from mid-July to August and again in November–December, when prices are higher," he says. "After the first year, which requires the highest investment of around Rs 70,000 to 80,000 per acre due to the cost of plants and labour, the recurring costs are low. Guava trees yield around 10 kg per plant in the first year and up to 20–25 kg in subsequent years. With around 600 plants per acre, the returns multiply quickly." "I have planted around 900 guava plants in 1.5 acres, and each plant yields about 20 to 25 kg of fruit. I could get more, but that would compromise the quality. Even at the minimum wholesale rate of ₹25–30 per kg — and going up to ₹50–60 per kg — a single tree earns about ₹500 on average with minimum average price while maximum could go up to Rs 800 to 900. From 900 trees, one can easily earn around ₹4.5 lakh per season. Since the orchard bears fruit twice a year, I earn approximately ₹6 lakh per acre annually from guava, after covering all expenses. Intercropping turmeric adds another ₹50,000 to my income from the same land. I also intercrop ginger, but currently use it as seed to expand its area," says Singh, adding that guava trees would require replacement after around 25 years. He has dedicated three acres to poplar plantations, intercropped with maize and wheat during the first two years. "In one acre, around 370 poplar trees are planted. By the fourth year, each tree weighs between 2.25 and 2.5 quintals. At the current market rate of ₹1,200 per quintal, each tree sells for ₹2,300–3,000. So, 370 trees can fetch between ₹8.5 and 11 lakh, which translates to an annual income of ₹2 to 2.75 lakh per acre over four years. Intercropping maize (June–October) and wheat (November to April) in the first two years adds another ₹35,000 to ₹40,000 per acre after covering input costs." He has also allocated 0.5 acre for fodder cultivation for his cattle. A single one-kanal polyhouse (1/8th of an acre) gives him an annual net return of ₹50,000–60,000 from summer and winter vegetables — three crops a year. "This is more than what one earns from wheat and paddy on a full acre," he added. His 5.6 acres of orchards, agroforestry, and the polyhouse are equipped with drip irrigation and sprinklers, significantly saving water. "I have never used a tractor on this land — everything is done manually," he says, adding that he had even grown banana orchard in Punjab successfully. On the remaining two acres, he practises crop rotation: Basmati rice (June–October), potatoes (October–February), and spring maize (February–June). One of Narinder's proudest

innovations is his 30×10 ft bio-fertiliser unit — an aerobic system that produces liquid manure and even has the potential to generate cooking gas. “I collect cow dung, cattle urine, green manure like moringa and pruned guava leaves, weeds of field, leftover buttermilk (lassi), and jaggery. This is stored in a 5,000-litre bag. The first fermentation cycle takes two months, after which we get 100 litres of bio-fertiliser every second day.” This liquid can be applied via drip irrigation or foliar spray, depending on crop age. “It’s like IV fluid for crops,” he says, comparing its effect to intravenous therapy in humans. The cost of the unit? Just ₹30,000 initially, with a lifespan of 7 to 10 years. Narinder learned to build and operate it through YouTube and company guidance. “Now I hardly use any urea or DAP,” he adds. For his sustainable farming practices, Narinder has received multiple recognitions, including the District-Level Award on Republic Day — twice — for managing crop residue without burning, instead incorporating it into the soil or using it to make bio-fertiliser at his unit. He was also honoured with the Rattan-E-Baghbani Award by the Punjab government in 2021. “When I left Dubai, I never imagined I’d find such purpose in the soil of my village,” he says with quiet pride. “But today, I’m convinced that farming — if done right — is not just a livelihood, it’s a fulfilling life.”

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