

From Rs 6-crore debt to farming success: Fazilka farmer's sheep, agroforestry formula

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Harbhinder Singh Sandhu's farming journey is a story of repeated setbacks, mounting debt, a refusal to give up and bringing his young children into farming.

The 53-year-old farmer from Khippanwali village of [Fazilka](#) has been involved in farming since childhood, as his family owned 50 acres. He formally joined farming in 1994 after completing his BSc in Agriculture from Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), [Ludhiana](#).

His family's kinnow orchards were destroyed by waterlogging. Sandhu then experimented with sugarcane, cotton and dairy on the family farm, but faced setbacks and fell into heavy debt.

"The family's kinnow orchards were the first casualty of waterlogging, so I started growing sugarcane. Production was not an issue, but delayed payments from sugar mills left us short of working capital and eventually burdened our family with Rs 5-6 crore debt," Sandhu said.

He then shifted to Bt cotton, as Fazilka was one of the state's main cotton-growing belts. "The initial years were very good and I recovered much of my losses, but a severe whitefly attack in 2015, followed by other diseases, forced me to abandon commercial cotton," he said.

Sandhu next started a dairy venture with nearly 100 Neeli-Ravi buffaloes. Though it was doing well, the Covid outbreak disrupted milk sales while feed and labour costs continued to rise. The animals were eventually sold in parts, recovering some of the investment.

“Instead of asking whether I should continue farming, I began asking what kind of farming could survive,” he said.

Sandhu then focused on agroforestry on five to six acres in 2018 and gradually expanded it to around 30 acres over the next six years, adding about five acres annually.

“Besides, I began exploring commercial sheep farming around 2021, as we had been keeping sheep and goats as pet animals in small numbers for a long time. I found that managing sheep was much easier than goats.”

He visited the Central Institute for Research on Goats (CIRG), Makhdoom, Mathura, in 2021 and purchased eight semi-adult sheep for around Rs 70,000. By expanding the flock and reinvesting earnings, ARU Farms now has about 600 breeding animals and 400 seasonal grazing sheep, totalling nearly 1,000.

Today, the 53-year-old has built one of the region’s largest sheep farms, ARU Sheep Farm, named after his three children, whom he considers his greatest achievement. He developed a model combining agroforestry with sheep breeding and rearing.

Not a ‘9-to-5’ job for children, but passion that brings highly ‘respectable income’

Abhijeet Kaur Sandhu (25), an LLB graduate and practising lawyer; Roopam Sandhu (23), an MSc dietician and freelancer; and 18-year-old Udaypratap Singh Sandhu, a 10+1 medical student, are pursuing their professions while remaining deeply involved in the sheep farm.

“We grew up watching our father among his animals, so farming never felt like a job — it became our passion. From a young age, all three of us accompanied and helped him. Even today, we wake up at 5 am and spend the first two hours on the farm before turning to our studies and professions,” Roopam, who also works as a freelance dietician, said.

“Education does not take you away from farming; it helps you understand the business better,” she said.

Her brother Udaypratap highlighted that the siblings have learnt everything hands-on, from vaccination to animals to breeding and management.

“Despite having every opportunity to choose conventional careers, we are helping take the farm across India and dream of developing high-protein sheep-milk products such as cheese,” Roopam added.

Their story is significant at a time when many educated youngsters in Punjab are seeking careers away from agriculture and in foreign nations.

“For us, farming isn’t a 9-to-5 job. It is a passion our father planted in us. Now we cannot think beyond it. It generates a highly respectable income for us while sitting at our place — we don’t have to go looking for a market; the market comes to us,” Roopam further said.

From sheep farming to agroforestry plantation

The farm works with Punjab Kajla, Yamunapari, Patanwari and native breeds, focusing on quality breeding and meat production. Around 150 older females are considered “super moms”, with some remaining productive for 10-12 years. The farm maintains lineage records and sells 250-300 breeding animals in 10+1, 20+1 and 50+2 packages. A 10+1 herd costs Rs 3.5 lakh to Rs 7 lakh, depending on age and other characteristics.

Annual sales of grazing animals for meat reach 400-500, with some males weighing 1-1.5 quintals and selling for over Rs 1 lakh. Within five to six years, Sandhu said, he has raised his herd to 1,000 animals worth Rs 2-2.5 crore, besides earning Rs 50-60 lakh annually from animal sales. A sheep delivers twice in 17 months and sometimes gives birth to twins.

“We never sell our super moms. They are born here and die here,” the 53-year-old highlighted.

The farm names breeding animals and maintains lineage records, including those of Ranoo, a 32-year-old sheep from the family’s old stock of pet sheep.

Sandhu’s agroforestry plantation is also managed in rotation, with trees harvested from around five acres every year, generating Rs 45-50 lakh annually.

“Trees provide continuous greenery, conserve water and soil, while fodder and seasonal crops through intercropping make productive use of the land.”

ARU Farms trains 50-60 farmers every week in sheep breeding, feeding and management, while employing around 20 people, mostly women.

“Although I come from a family of big farmers, I have shown a way forward for the farming community, especially small and marginal farmers with one or two acres. They can start sheep farming with 10 breeding sheep and one male and potentially earn 10-20 times more than from wheat and paddy. Starting small, expanding through breeding and reinvesting returns,” he said as he summed up that even thousands of sheep farms opened cannot meet the high demand.