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TECHNOLOGY@GRASSROOTS PROVIDING SIMPLE BENEFITS

Farmers use biz software to track data and growth

Srividya Iyer
BANGALORE

IN A FIRST, grape farmers in Nasik, Maharashtra, are planning their harvest and managing inventory and production using an enterprise resource planning (ERP) software reflecting a growing shift in the way sophisticated software applications can be used by the masses.

Traditional ERP software sold by top multinational vendors such as Oracle and SAP help companies like Hero Honda and ONGC automate and integrate their complex processes of sales, marketing, production, inventory and finance.

But over 100 farmers across Maharashtra, Karnataka and Gujarat are showing that such sophisticated applications can be put to simple use. While they are not buying any pricey software from the multinational vendors, these farmers are using an ERP product called FarmERP, developed by Sanjay Borkar and Santosh Shinde, both Pune University computer science graduates.

Borkar and Shinde founded a company called Shivraj Technologies in 1996 that helped education institutes and local manufacturing units with tailor-made software applications. Later in 2000, both of them realised a growing need among the farmers to have a better visibility about their livelihood.

"We saw many of them were looking at farming as something they inherited from their families. But it's about analysing the data and treating agriculture as a business," says Borkar. "Since we came from agricultural families, we knew that we wanted to do something in the area. We just did not know what," he says.

Later, the idea to develop an ERP-like software for farmers came from a project that they got involved with while doing a project for the Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation. The project called

Parivartan Network, involved setting up 2,000 internet kiosks with agricultural content for farmers in 60 centres across Maharashtra.

"We met a lot of farmers during this project and it was a real eye-opener to what the farmers wanted," Borkar adds. They realised that there was not much of a difference between the needs for a large organisation to have an ERP-like software and farmers like Dhananjay Jadhav growing sugarcane, grapes and other vegetables in Nashik.

"We knew that it had potential but it was also a great challenge because there was no benchmark,"

“The software keeps track of everything including when I have to oil my tractor next. Of course, I have to feed when I oiled it earlier, but that's become a habit now. I can even send the quality auditors a summary through email, thanks to this ERP solution

DHANANJAY JADHAV,
NASHIK GRAPE FARMER

said Sanjay who started off developing multimedia content for farmers on behalf of the department of agriculture in the state government. Jadhav, 35, was also the first customer for Shivraj.

The software helps farmers like Jadhav take control of some of the simple farming processes. By allowing them to maintain a record of sow date, it also leads to better planning. For instance, every time Jadhav feeds name of the crop and the sow date, FarmERP creates an entire schedule that he can track. This includes information about the date when it should be irrigated, which fertiliser to put and how much and when exactly the

harvest should be done. A team of agricultural experts at the company works on the schedule needed to be followed for each crop.

For grape farmers like Jadhav, the software has brought many benefits. When auditors from markets of Netherlands, the UK and the US visit him to certify the quality of grapes to be exported, they can now see real-time data about what pesticides, and how much of it, has been used. "I can even send them a summary through an email, thanks to this software," says Jadhav.

Jadhav needs to maintain an error free entry process as he needs a certification for exporting the produce. "The software keeps track of everything including when I have to oil my tractor next. I have to feed when I oiled it earlier, but that's become a habit now," he says.

Elsewhere in Shirdi, Chandrashekar Deshmukh is the latest customer for FarmERP. Having installed the software for only six months, Deshmukh is still learning how to use it. "It's new, it's different. It gives a lot of information about new crops and even the ones we have been cultivating. And, information is always good. We try to stick to the schedules strictly," he said.

The application is a time-saver which also brings in sophistication. Jadhav who grows sugarcane, grapes and other vegetables in Nashik was finding it difficult to manage stock maintenance, bills and invoicing manually.

Experts believe there is a lot more than can be done in agriculture by technology. "The new generation of farmers use mobile extensively. There is a lot of scope there since everyone uses a cellphone. Softwares like FarmERP may not change a farmer's routine drastically but definitely helps him make better decisions," said Dr Surya Gunjal, director, faculty of agricultural sciences, Yashwantrao Chavan Open University in Nashik.

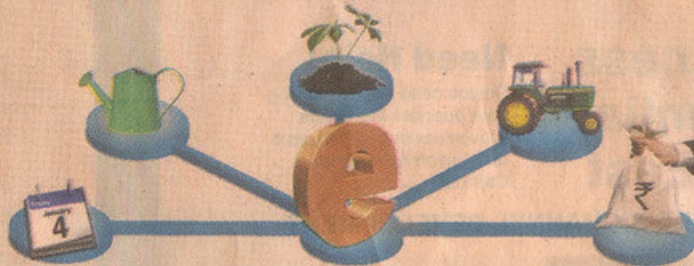
FARMING IT

THE WORK-FLOW

If the farmer feeds in the name of the crop and the sowing date, the ERP software creates a schedule that the farmer can follow.

The schedule has the date when it should be irrigated next apart from information on which fertiliser to add, how much to add. It also gives information on when and how the harvest should be done.

The farmer can record the invoices, bills and other documents in the software which can help him manage his produce in the next season.



THE BENEFITS

- FarmERP helps farmers document and analyse the per-acre expenses, labour cost and other variables
- The software developers want to make the farming exercise more stable by making it predictable as much as possible
- The early adopters of the software are the grape farmers in Nasik, Maharashtra where the farmers are known to be progressive and had already used computers.
- There are some farmers in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka who have already adopted the solution.
- The software, which is an one-time installation, comes in three packages - Standard (₹ 15,000), Professional (₹ 35,000-40,000), and Professional (₹ 75,000)
- The firm, which developed this software, offers remote support and is adding seven to 10 clients every month

