

Rallying for the farmer

Rallis is partnering with farmers to help them protect crops, raise yields and educate them on the latest farming trends

Sitting on a cot in the small front yard of his home in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, in southern India, 38-year-old T Venkateswarlu looks out at his 4-acre land holding with satisfaction. The fields are lush with the paddy crop and he credits Rallis India with his success: “Other companies give me credit on their products and lower prices, but even if I have to borrow money to buy a Rallis product, I will use no other.” Mr Venkateswarlu uses a basket of Rallis products, including Contaf, Tatamida, Takumi, to combat the pests encountered in his field.

In Tongaon village in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, in western India, Vithal Bhonsle, who grows cotton and pomegranate, echoes a similar sentiment, “I know lots of farmers who use other pesticides because of lack of awareness or the credit extended by other pesticide companies but I’ve been using Rallis products since 1989 and I’m satisfied on all counts.”

The plaudits from these two farmers become a collective applause for Rallis when you hear it echoed by other farmers across Andhra Pradesh and the adjoining state of Maharashtra.

The two states are a sharp contrast in terms of the agriculture landscape and farming methods. Guntur, located around 64km to the north of the Bay of Bengal

on the east coast of India lies in the fertile Krishna delta, irrigated by the waters of the mighty Krishna River. And even though the Krishna River flows through Aurangabad, farmers like Vithal Bhonsle have to rely on the rains to quench their fields. Lack of irrigation facilities has 90 percent of the farmers in the Vidharbha region in Maharashtra dependant on the monsoons to grow their crop.

However, what is common to both regions is the farmers’ consensus on Rallis products for crop protection. As the farmer races to get more productivity, protection and peace of mind with limited resources — Rallis paves the way.

The Indian farmer and a Greek legacy

A 157-year old enterprise, Rallis owes its origins to a family of Greek merchants. In 1851, Stephen Ralli, the then head of the firm, decided to expand to India, and set up a trading firm in Bombay in 1861 called Ralli Brothers. Their sojourn was successful until the great economic crash of 1929, which led to the Indian operations closing down in late 1931. Rallis India was re-born in independent India in 1948, and diversified into the fertiliser and pesticides business. In 1962, Fisons and Tatas became chief shareholders of Rallis India and in 1973, Fison merged with Rallis to become Tata Fison, a Rallis company.



Some of the products from the Rallis stable

Rallis has been a pioneer in the field of providing agri-inputs to Indian farmers over the last six decades. The Rallis presence cuts across crop geographies in India. Farmer relationships have always been at the core of Rallis's operations, and the company is focused on introducing better solutions for crop production.

Changing landscape

In the late sixties with the advent of the Green Revolution, Indian agriculture witnessed a quantum change in crop production methods. The introduction of high yielding varieties brought in the promise of higher yield potential. It meant that farmers needed to use better crop protection chemicals and fertilisers with improved water management. This was the period when better chemicals, fertilisers and new irrigation schemes were introduced in India to achieve self-sufficiency. It also required changing farmers' attitudes and practices.

M Srinivas Reddy who started cultivating in the early '80s says, "When I first started out as a farmer, there seemed to be fewer pests or maybe we were less aware about them. I would just add fertiliser to the soil and my crops grew." Mr Veeraiah, also from Guntur, recalls dusting his cotton crop with DDT powder, while B Venkateswarao from Dalliparu village vaguely recollects using *neem* cakes to control pests. All that changed with Rallis introducing a slew of products to help farmers.

There was Furadan, a solution to overcome the problem of Stem Borer, a pest that caused serious damage to paddy in the vegetative stage. The pesticide made a significant impact on crop economics and farmers were able to fend off the risk of crop losses. In cotton growing areas, the introduction of hybrid seed varieties brought in the element of susceptibility to sucking pests. Rogor, an insecticide introduced in the mid-seventies by Rallis, remains a popular brand in many belts even today.

Forty six-year-old K Nageswarao, a Guntur farmer, who has been growing cotton on 10 acres of land for the last



A farmer spraying bio insecticide in his fields

three decades, has doubled his area of cultivation. "Without the pesticides from Rallis, 50 per cent of my farm would be lost. I was getting 10 quintals per acre until 2000; now with BT cotton and Rallis products, my yield has increased to 15-20 quintals per acre," he acknowledges gratefully. "I have used most of their products — Rogor, Sumicidin, Asataf, Daksh."

Customer first

Understanding the emerging needs of its customers well, and in time, is perhaps Rallis's greatest strength. A good example is their reaction to pests attacking the paddy crop.

In the late '80s, Rallis sensed the need for a product that could provide a solution to diseases in paddy crop, and make a significant impact in improving the yield. As a result, it launched hexaconazole, under the brand name Contaf, in the mid '90s. Contaf usage enabled paddy growers to achieve a higher yield (2-3 quintals) than usual. It gradually became a much-used product in paddy areas, and its use was later extended to other crops such as fruits, vegetables and oilseeds.

A frequent Contaf user, B Krishna Mohan of Dalliparu village in Andhra Pradesh recalls the time when he switched to a cheaper brand, "I found my crops looked less healthy, less green." He promptly switched back to Contaf and today uses Contaf Plus, the latest variant.

Ask a farmer who has lost half his field and more to a pest of the season and you will know why they speak in hyperbole when they talk about Rallis. In 1976, B Panduranga Rao also of Dalliparu village began cultivating eight acres of paddy. This was the time when the brown plant hopper (BPH) made its appearance. The nymphs and adults suck out the plant sap from phloem cells, causing the tillers to dry out and turn brown. This condition is called 'hopper burn', and it affected five acres of Rao's rice field. The setback cost him his savings, and it took him two years to play catch up. Today he uses Applaud, another success story from Rallis.

In 2004, the Rallis team sensed the emerging resistance in BPH for neonicotinoids in some specific pockets of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, another southern India state. They speeded up the development work on an alternative solution to the BPH menace and launched Applaud in 2006. Paddy farmers who were struggling hard and spraying their field 10-15 times to gain control over BPH, today use just 1-2 sprays of Applaud to control this devastating pest. Applaud has proved to be extremely effective in the paddy farmer's fight against a



A village shop stocked with Rallis products

tenacious enemy. It has become a high earner for the company and the stockists.

Mr Srinivas, a sole stockist for Rallis in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh is satisfied with his decision to deal with Rallis's products. "Farmers have been trusting Rallis's products for the last 30-40 years. There has been no compromise on the product, brand or price. I used to sell Rogor. Now, there is also a demand for Applaud and Contaf Plus. Six out of ten farmers that come to my shop ask specifically for Rallis."

V Shankar, CEO and ED, Rallis India, is happy with the response to new products such as Applaud, Taqat and Takumi. "They have been well received by the farmers. Process improvements and people initiatives have helped the company to strengthen its core competencies of market access and customer relationships."

Reaching out

As the sun sets in a village in Guntur, a group of farmers (about 100-150) sit quietly on rows of plastic chairs. Halogen lamps illuminate the entire space and posters of various Rallis products decorate the area. On the dais, the Rallis sales team are ready to begin their presentation.

This is a typical farmers meet that is held across the country by the Rallis field force. The company believes in providing the farmer with not just products, but also services. The sales teams fan out the length and breadth of India's villages to dispense product information, educate farmers about correct product usage and crop protection options, and inform them about the latest farming trends.

"We routinely conduct these meetings on local temple premises as we find it is the best place to draw a crowd," says Venkat R Mabbu, area regional manager, Guntur. During farming season, such meets take place almost every day, with an average attendance of 100 farmers. Many other such initiatives help Rallis connect with the farmer.

Focus group discussions (FGD) are held, during slack farming months, to obtain feedback from the farmer and to inform him of current farming trends, different pesticide formulations and technologies. FGDs are conducted on specific crops in different areas depending on the prevalent problem. They are also held for dealers, retailers and other channel partners.

Rallis also identifies progressive and proactive farmers of a particular area and puts them on a standard visit list (SVL). Usually 4-5 such farmers are selected (depending on the size of the village) from each village. Each sales officer has 200 names on his SVL, with whom he coordinates. These farmers help spread Rallis's message to all members of the village, and are involved in important Rallis events like the farmers' meet, product launches and seminars.

The SVL initiative has now been broad based as the Rallis Kisan Kutumba (RKK), which aims at reaching out to the maximum number of farmers in all regions. Rallis has identified three key needs: assurance, experience and knowledge. These are being addressed through regular farmer contact programmes. The company reaches out to about one lakh farmers under the RKK initiative today and is working to expand this to a million farmers in the next 2-3 year. Plans in the future include tie-ups with other Tata companies to provide the farmers with products and associated benefits.

Way forward

Looking at Rallis's future plans, it seems there is even more in the offing for the Indian farmer. AK Shetty, COO, agri business, outlines the priority areas that the company is focusing on: "Shortage of land and rapid urbanisation with increasing population calls for significant improvements in the crop productivity over a period of time. We will have to provide solutions that enable farmers to enhance per unit efficiency of crop chemicals, nutrients and water. We are intensely working on the introduction of safer and more effective products. Advice on seeds also becomes an important area for us in this aspect."

"Apart from agrochemicals and pesticide, we are looking at adjacent areas like speciality chemicals and seeds for growth," adds Mr Shankar. "Rallis would also introduce more hybrid seed varieties for wheat, paddy and mustard in the coming years. We would also like to build our international business, which at present constitutes 22 per cent of our portfolio."

With Rallis as his partner, the Indian farmer can continue to look forward to better times ahead. ●

Christina Fernandes