

Text messages empower poor farmers

The BBC's Damian Grammaticas sees how poor Indian farmers are using business text messages to get better prices for their goods.

At the Khandova temple in Jhejuri it's festival time. The harvest is just in and it's time to celebrate.

Thousands of farmers, dressed in white, come from across Maharashtra state to climb the steep hill up to the temple. With them are their wives wrapped in brightly coloured saris and children too.

Inside the temple handfuls of turmeric powder are showered over everything. People sing, dance, and pray for good fortune.

Two hundred and fifty million Indians rely on the land for their survival.

But many live in real poverty. And in Maharashtra the suicide rate among farmers is high.

So the pressing question for India is how to improve farmers' livelihoods.

Costs down

Standing in a grove of lush green banana trees I find Kapil Jachak.

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See how the farmers get the information from the market

He's busy checking his mobile phone for text messages containing practical information for farmers.

It's a new service called Reuters Market Light, and he was one of the first to sign up in this area.

The first message every morning is a daily weather forecast for his area.

"By getting the weather reports we can see exactly how much water our banana plants need," he says, "I keep my cost down, and get the best crop I can."

After lunch comes another message with that day's prices for bananas in markets around his area.

"This has increased my profit," says Kapil, "I don't have to make some headache, and go to any market, any shopkeepers, wholesalers. I can do my marketing easily and get more and more money."

Changing power

In the wholesale market in the city of Pune bananas and melons are piled up as traders haggle. Knowing the right price to ask for makes a huge difference to the farmers selling here.

It's always been the buyers who've had the upper hand. Now that's changing.

Scribbling the day's prices in his notepad is Nadeem Gaikwad, Chief Market reporter for the area for the Reuters financial news service.

Usually Reuters serves rich bankers in the West. So its text message service for poor Indian farmers is something of a departure.

"Under the Indian system the prices are decided by the purchaser," says Nadeem. "The farmer doesn't have much power to say what he should get for his produce. So our information helps the farmer, he gets the exact rates from different markets."

The text service costs one dollar, less than one pound a month. It's a business venture, but helps farmers make money too.

It already has 15,000 customers signed up. If it's a success it will show that making profits and

reducing poverty can go hand in hand.

Saved

In his banana field Kapil Jachak points to a withered brown banana plant. Last week his trees started dying. A text message alerted him that this is the season when banana stem weevils attack crops.

The text recommended a pesticide. Kapil was able to save his plants.

By providing the poor with access to information, big business it seems can help transform the livelihoods of millions of farmers not just in India, but other poor countries too.

Story from BBC NEWS:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/7385542.stm

Published: 2008/05/06 13:17:59 GMT

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