

On the wing

Kapil Bajaj February 16, 2008

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Lakshami Devi with her partners

Travelling 280 km from Delhi to witness poultry farming in villages of Uttarakhand might seem, on the face of it, like an idea strictly for the birds. Having been there and now writing this piece, I am inclined to think it was worth it. That's because Uttarakhand Rural Poultry Development Project (URPDP) comes across as a reasonably successful essay in the great civilisational goal that science should be employed for the good of the people.

It's strange that in a country that prides itself on having brought about the Green Revolution, there seem in the present times so few examples of science helping people bettering their lot.

Started in January 2003, URPDP, a collaborative effort between Uttarakhand government and Gurgaon-based Keggfarms, promotes poultry farming among rural communities that have very limited means of livelihood and survival.

The mainstay of the project: Kuroiler, a sturdy egg-laying-cummeat bird whose stock is developed by Keggfarms. (It's a 'genetically enhanced' breed—not a genetically modified bird, I am told.)

The coloured bird, which can survive in scavenging conditions and yet has the superior ability to lay eggs and grow in body weight compared to non-descript chickens and broilers (industrial poultry birds used for meat), makes up the science part of the project.

"In scavenging conditions, which are commonly found in villages that practise poultry farming, a Kuroiler produces 180 to 200 eggs in 365 days and the male bird can attain a weight of 1,800 gm in 90 days. It's also a much tastier bird," Vinod Kapur, the 74-year-old Managing Director of Keggfarms, had told us the other day.

As we drive down from URPDP parent farm in Pantnagar (which produces 1.5 lakh chicks a month in modern incubators and hatcheries), to Sadhu Nagar village, Lakshami Devi, a smart client of the project, tells us that Kuroilers (named so to evoke the Keggfarms name) also require less healthcare than common broilers and have lesser mortality rates.

Vinod Kapur

Lakshami Devi and her two partners, who belong to Vikas Svayamsiddha Samooh (self-help group), can't give us precisely the costs of their business, but are sure that a 3-month or so cycle of buying about 500 day-old chicks (Rs 9-10 a chick), raising them to the marketable bodyweight, and then selling them for meat earns them something like Rs 14,000 to Rs 22,000, depending on how good the market is.



Their costs include feed, vaccines, electricity (for maintaining temperature in the sheds), and transportation (for fetching the inputs and selling the poultry). Abdul Qadir, a URDP agent, who facilitates marketing of chicks and provides other assistance to clients, tells us that broilers continue to dominate the market and so Kuroilers make up a higher-priced, more niche market.

Later, in Shakti Nagar village, Deb Dulal Mondal, a medicine seller whose wife Taruna takes care of the poultry, tells us that his costs in raising day-old Kuroilers to 21 days or so is around Rs 23-24 but it's hard to sell it to pheriwallas (the bicycle-borne retailers of 21-day chicks) at a price covering those costs. "The other option for us is to raise the birds for 90 days till they attain about 2 kg of weight and can be sold," he says.



Kuroiler chicks

Ambarish Srivastava, URDP Coordinator, says the project does help its clients in marketing the birds—whether they want to act as 'mother units' (that raise day-old chicks sourced from the parent farm) or as small poultry farmers (who generally buy 21-day-old birds and raise them to maturity), but there are still some gaps between the farmers and the market.

Unlike the Keggfarms' business model, which mainly relies on selling the superior birds as chicks to the village poultry farmers who can raise them in traditional low-cost way, URDP also combines field extension, training, and marketing in its fold—not an easy job in the difficult-to-reach villages of Uttarakhand. "The idea is not to make any big intervention in the traditional backyard poultry farming, but use the available resources to help farmers raise their incomes. Kuroiler commands better price than nondescript birds or broilers," Kapur had previously told us.

At Lama Kheda village, we visit the house of Sarvan Devi, another URDP client and SHG member. In her absence, Inder Singh, her husband, tells us that each woman in his village raises 10-12 chicks, sourced from the parent farm in Pantnagar.

That is typical of small Kuroiler farmers (as opposed to 'mother units' that buy birds in hundreds or thousands) who raise their chickens in traditional, 'free range' ways— i.e., without sheds and feeds purchased from the market, letting the birds roam around and feed themselves on vegetation and household waste.

"About 64,000 families, many of whom are below poverty line (BPL), have so far benefitted from URDP," Srivastava says, noting that about 4,000 SHGs are involved in the project. And given our experience of meeting SHG members who are participating in the project, URDP also seems to be giving women a tool with which to organise and empower themselves.