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Chennai's 'Door 2 Door Organics': still going fresh

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Three years ago, Jitendra Prasad turned from his multiple tech-related startups towards agriculture. “I wanted to try my hand at it, but realised that the amount of chemicals that goes into it is phenomenal. I also realised that there were plenty of farmers trying to change this, but were all in need of support,” he recalls, explaining the motivation behind his startup, Door 2 Door Organics.

Today, the outfit has grown from a team of four to 14, and from a couple of organic farmer-suppliers to about 300, across Red Hills and Avadi to Mysuru, Kodaikanal and

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Udhagamandalam. Their delivery model of weekly subscription boxes containing 22 varieties of vegetables has clearly taken off, and Prasad's focus has now shifted elsewhere.

He is busy going through the new set of rules for organic food, being implemented by FSSAI in July, and streamlining his operations accordingly. While he appreciates the new guidelines, he also sees a few hiccups imminent in their implementation.

“For instance,” he points out, “One of the rules states that small-scale farmers should be able to sell to customers directly. The intention behind this is good, but there's no way most of them have the resources and the ability to reach end customers on their own. This will create difficulties.”

At the other end of the chain, Prasad has seen the city's organic produce market grow over the last few years, from a point when most of his customers had little or no idea about it. “I wouldn't call it a spurt, but there definitely has been a very steady growth,” he says, cautiously, describing how Chennaiites have grown more aware of their nutritional needs.

“When I first started out,” he recalls, “People would complain that our vegetables weren't completely fresh. Now, they realise that the problem is with the vegetables that don't show any change over a few days, and stay ripe over long periods of time, having been pumped with chemicals to improve shelf life.”

Most of this awareness, he says, is through word of mouth. If you are no longer under the impression that organic produce is for the upper middle class, especially for folk who have the time and money for it, your prejudice has probably been broken by one of your neighbours, or acquaintances at work. Prasad has seen this work to his advantage.

“In an apartment once one of the neighbours buy their vegetables from us, eventually the others realise that it is an affordable option for them, too.”

With the growing customer base, organic food producers have come up in every nook and corner.

“It's not just about vegetables and fruits anymore. We have people selling organic *atta*, dosa batter from organic rice, and more. Ragi and millet *dosamixes* are also available

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in organic variants, as are *appalams* and *paniyarams*,” says Prasad. The demand is here to stay and Chennai’s innovative minds are rising up to meet it.