

From sickle to the stall: A farm labourer turned ponk entrepreneur

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In the region of southern Gujarat, seasonal farm labourers face low wages, unstable employment and limited market access. Through Krushi Mela, Khedut Shibir and ATMA/Line Department programmes, farmers/labourers were trained in scientific harvesting, post-harvest handling, value addition and market-oriented ponk production. The programme improved skills, promoted entrepreneurship, and enabled access to education and career opportunities. This demonstrates that combining traditional knowledge with science, value addition and market access can strengthen rural livelihoods, employment and growth.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Post-harvest processing, Rural Livelihoods, Value addition

ACROSS rural Gujarat, farm labourers form the backbone of agriculture, yet their contributions often go unnoticed. Seasonal work, low wages and minimal market access keep livelihoods fragile, while their traditional skills remain unrecognised. This story highlights how exposure, training and simple value addition transformed farm labourers into small-scale entrepreneurs, improving income, employment and community well-being.

Life on the fields: Challenges of seasonal farm labourers

In the Ankleshwar, Bharuch and Zagadia region of southern Gujarat, many agricultural households depend on seasonal farm labour and often live near highways and industrial zones where living costs are high but wages remain low and unstable. Employment is mainly daily wage based with limited income security and no linkage to market value. During winter, labour demand increases for *Vani jowar* harvest for ponk, yet wages remain fixed. Labourers possess valuable skills in identifying the milky stage, assessing soil moisture and crop maturity and maintaining post-harvest quality, but these remain

unrecognised. Baseline wages ranged from ₹300–₹400/day with seasonal earnings of ₹8,000–₹10,000. Thus, the reliance on informal borrowing and limited access to grading, packaging, pricing, marketing and extension services, highlights the need for targeted extension and market-oriented interventions.

Although these labourers possessed strong practical knowledge of crop harvesting and handling, the absence of market exposure and value addition opportunities limited their economic returns. Their existing skills remained confined to wage-based activities rather than enterprise development. Recognising this gap, extension efforts were designed to build entrepreneurial capacity through scientific ponk harvesting, post-harvest processing, value addition, and direct market linkage so that labour households could transition from seasonal employment to sustainable income-generating rural enterprises.

From fields to markets: Capacity building and training initiatives

To address gaps in skills, market exposure and institutional linkage, extension interventions

were undertaken for farm labourers of the Ankleshwar–Bharuch–Zagadia region through regular extension systems during 2022 to 2025. The focus was on awareness creation and capacity building using existing institutional platforms. More than 500 farm labourers and over 7,000 farmers participated in a regional *Krushi Mela* organised with the involvement of the College of Agriculture, Navsari Agricultural University, where they were exposed to improved agricultural practices, value addition techniques and market-oriented approaches. Interactive sessions and demonstrations provided information on scientific harvesting of *Vani jowar* for ponk, quality standards, hygienic handling and the importance of value addition.

Subsequently, interested participants attended *Khedut Shibir* and training programmes under ATMA and Line Department activities. These programmes emphasised post-harvest management, processing, grading, packaging and market awareness. The participatory approach integrated traditional field knowledge with scientific recommendations. The interventions

Phase A : Procurement and quality control



also encouraged labourers to adopt value addition and direct marketing practices, supporting their gradual transition from seasonal wage labour to small-scale ponk entrepreneurship and market-linked livelihood opportunities.

The ponk value chain

The ponk value chain demonstrates how traditional expertise, scientific precision and market-oriented practices combine to produce a high-quality, high-value seasonal delicacy. The process is divided into three phases:

- Procurement and quality control
- Processing and transformation
- Refinement and distribution

Procurement and quality control: Quality begins at the field. The first phase ensures only premium-grade raw material enters the value chain. Ponk is a seasonal delicacy produced during the winter season (generally November to February in southern Gujarat), when *jowar* reaches the optimum stage for harvest. Farmers select the 'Vani' cultivar, prized for its soft, gelatinous grains and high sugar content, which remain tender even after mild heat. Harvesting is carefully timed at 40–45 days post-flowering, confirmed using the

traditional squeeze test, where milky sap indicates optimal sweetness and moisture. The timing of harvest is a critical determinant of ponk quality because grains at the milky stage contain higher moisture and soluble sugars, producing the characteristic soft texture, tenderness, bright green appearance and desirable flavour of premium ponk. Delayed harvesting results in starch accumulation and grain hardening, reduced softness, recovery, and market value. Immediate transport to the *Bhatti* (roasting unit) preserves freshness and prevents sugar from converting into starch, maintaining the field-fresh profile essential for high-quality ponk.

Processing and transformation: Raw stalks are converted into edible ponk using controlled traditional methods. In sand and charcoal fired

Bhatti roasting, panicles are evenly parched, producing a smoky aroma through Maillard reactions. Roasted earheads are then enclosed in heavy bags to retain residual heat and moisture, keeping grains tender. Finally, manual extraction separates soft green grains from husks without crushing them by skill and care to achieve uniform, high-quality ponk.

Refinement and distribution: The final phase focuses on quality, aesthetics and market value. Winnowing removes husks and dust, producing clean, ready-to-eat grains. Grading is based on bright lime-green colour and uniform size; over-mature or dull grains are downgraded. The product is then sold directly to consumers at roadside stalls, capturing maximum retail margins and significantly increasing income compared to

Table 1. Critical parameters for quality ponk

Feature	Technical specification	Relevance
Harvest window	40–45 days (Milking stage)	Ensures optimal moisture and sugar content for tender ponk grains
Primary cultivar	Jowar (<i>Sorghum bicolor</i>)	Selected for soft, gelatinous endosperm and high natural sweetness
Heating method	Indirect sand-parching (Charcoal/Sand-fired <i>Bhatti</i>)	Provides uniform roasting, develops smoky aroma, prevents grain burning
Texture target	Gelatinous/Soft-solid	Maintains chewiness and tender quality during post-harvest handling
Economic impact	High-margin seasonal niche	Enhances farmer income through direct consumer sales and value addition

selling raw sorghum grain.

This value chain highlights the integration of traditional knowledge with scientific guidance and market linkage, enabling farm labourers to enhance income, generate employment and establish small-scale enterprises while preserving the authenticity of ponk.

Impact of the intervention

The extension interventions and adoption of value addition transformed the livelihoods of farm labourers in the Ankleshwar-Bharuch-Zagadia region. By applying scientific practices learned through *Krusha Mela*, *Khedut Shibir*, and ATMA/Line Department programmes, beneficiaries moved from daily wage labour to small-scale entrepreneurship in ponk production.

Enterprise transition: Following training and exposure activities, interested labour families adopted ponk processing as a seasonal enterprise by procuring *jowar*, applying scientific harvesting and post-harvest practices and selling directly through roadside and urban markets. This practical shift from wage labour to value-added production enabled beneficiaries to

convert existing agricultural skills into entrepreneurial opportunities and improve household income.

Economic gains: Seasonal income increased from ₹10,000 as wage labourers to ₹3,75,000 over 50 days with daily sales of 7–8 kg ponk at ₹1,000/kg and net profit of ₹1,75,000. Investment in hygienic roasting, cleaning and packaging improved quality and efficiency. Sales reached Bharuch, Ankleshwar and Surat.

Social impact: Enterprises generated 10–15 seasonal jobs per village. Families trained other labourers in scientific harvesting and post-harvest handling, promoting skill recognition and encouraging entrepreneurship.

Methodology for income/profit estimation

Cost and profit estimates were generated using primary information collected from 15 vendors and 30 consumers during the intervention period. Information on raw material procurement, processing costs, recovery rates, sales quantity, market price and seasonal returns was compiled and used to estimate enterprise economics and assess the livelihood impact of ponk entrepreneurship.

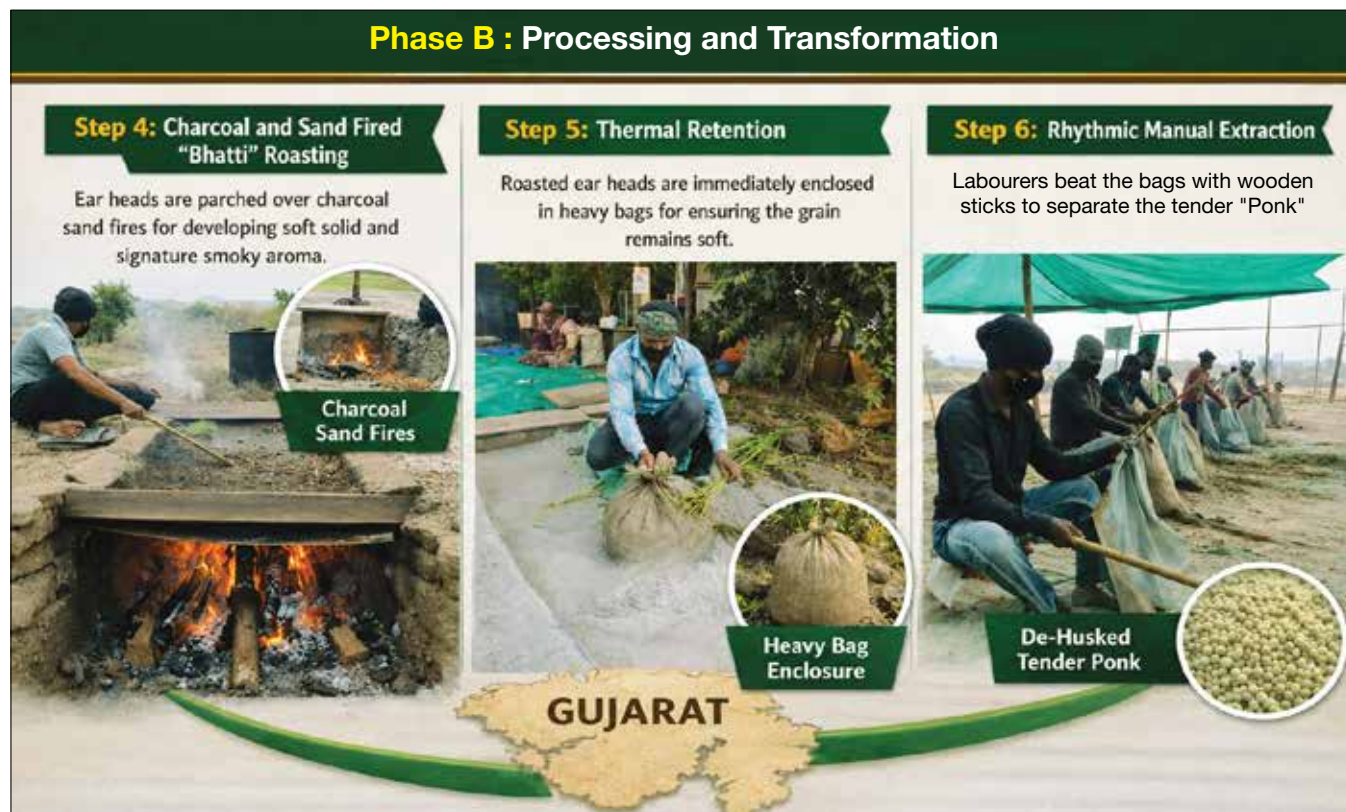
When traditional field expertise is combined with scientific guidance, value addition, and direct market access, farm labourers can transform livelihoods. This approach increases income, generates local employment, enhances product quality, fosters entrepreneurship, builds skills and supports inclusive, sustainable rural growth for future generations. The experience demonstrates that existing agricultural skills, when supported through extension and market linkage, can evolve into viable rural enterprise opportunities.

A message to emerging ponk entrepreneurs

Successful ponk entrepreneurs now often return to *Krusha Mela* and training platforms, not as learners, but as role models and local resource persons. Their message is clear: 'Entrepreneurs now share their knowledge and techniques with others through training and local fairs'.

Risks and limitations

The model may be influenced by seasonal availability of ponk, changes in market demand and prices, the need to maintain food safety and product quality, and



Phase C : Refinement and distribution



Note: In Step 9, the author gathered feedback from ponk entrepreneurs on production efficiency, processing costs, recovery rates, and sales revenue. This helps optimise roasting, cleaning, packaging, and marketing strategies, improve profitability, and guide farmers in managing inputs and outputs for maximum economic gain.

challenges in expanding the activity to larger scales. Variations in raw material quality and market fluctuations may also influence profitability and enterprise sustainability.

SUMMARY

The ponk story shows how combining traditional skills with scientific guidance and market access can support the transition of farm labourers into small-scale

entrepreneurs. Families purchased 20 kg/day 'Vani' sorghum and processed 7–8 kg ponk daily for 50 days, applying hygienic roasting, cleaning, grading techniques and sell this to highways and in cities. The intervention increased seasonal income from ₹10,000 as daily wage labourers to ₹3,75,000, with a net profit of ₹1,75,000, while generating 10–15 seasonal jobs per village. Improved quality and wider market access boosted sales to Bharuch, Ankleshwar and Zagadia. Improved harvesting, processing, grading and direct marketing enhanced household income, generated local employment and encouraged family and community participation. The experience highlights the potential of integrated extension approaches to promote skill development, value addition and sustainable livelihood opportunities in high-value agriculture.

Table 2. Seasonal economics of ponk production: A 50-day family enterprise model

Parameter	Intervention		Highlights
	Before	After	
Engagement	Farm labourers	Ponk production and processing	Transition from wage labour to entrepreneurship
Raw material	Not applicable	20 kg Vani Jowar ₹2,500	Total 50 days = 1,000 kg, ₹1,25,000
Recovery	–	7–8 kg /20 kg	Total 50 days = 375 kg
Daily sales quantity	–	7.5 kg/day	Optimised for market demand
Market price	₹300–₹400/day	₹1,000/kg	Direct-consumer sales on highways
Daily revenue	₹300–₹400	₹7,500	Average per day
Total revenue (50 days)	₹10,000	₹3,75,000	Full season revenue
Processing cost	–	₹75,000 (20% of revenue)	Includes roasting, cleaning, packaging
Total cost	–	₹2,00,000	Raw material + processing
Net profit	–	₹1,75,000	46% profit margin over 50 days
Employment	–	Family + 10–15 seasonal labourers	Local employment generation
Skills and knowledge	Traditional field labour	Scientific harvesting, grading, value addition	Trained via <i>Krusha Mela</i> , <i>Khedut Shibir</i> , ATMA

Note: Economic estimates are based on observed recovery, seasonal market price, and processing costs. Returns may vary with recovery and market price fluctuations.

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