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## BETTER CROP

# Equipping farmers with agritech

**Desta Global's online portal gives farmers relevant information in a format that is easy to understand**

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NEW DELHI

In September last year, some villages in Amravati district in Maharashtra's Vidarbha saw yellow mosaic virus infestation in soybean crop. A team of experts went around villages to study the disease, while farmers in other villages were also asked to send in photos of their crop. Possible solutions to the problem were put up on Facebook, where thousands of farmers from across Maharashtra could access the information. The exercise helped farmers prevent crop loss by 40%, according to Desta Global estimates.

According to World Bank data, 60.6% of India's total land was agricultural in 2011-2015 ([bit.ly/1VgLv9v](http://bit.ly/1VgLv9v)), and agriculture added 17.8% to the country's gross domestic product in 2014 ([bit.ly/1U52Rot](http://bit.ly/1U52Rot)). Still, farming in India is more dependant on good fortune than knowledge. From identifying the right crops for the right soil to preventing them from pest attacks, it's a matter of chance since most farmers are not aware of technological advances that can help improve their lives livelihood.

Desta Global, whose experts fanned out to the Amravati villages, was started to change that. "We treat farmers as entrepreneurs," says chief executive officer (CEO) Mohnish Sharma. The



**Network target:** DestaTalk is currently in touch with some 20,000 farmers via SMS and WhatsApp groups. The company wants to reach out to 10 million farmers across India by December.

Boehm, an American investor, as a platform to provide rural farmers information, innovation and technology.

## Previous chapter

"My wife and I have a social investment business, BOMA Investments, which invests in for-profit businesses that have a positive social or environmental purpose," said Boehm in an email. "We had been thinking of working in the agricultural sector for about seven years. The idea was to focus on the inputs side of agriculture—soil preparations, seeds, fertilizers, and labour saving equipment."

"When I met Nishant in Hyderabad five years ago, it became possible to start such a business," Boehm said. Banore has since moved on to the US to pursue other interests while Boehm is still actively involved with the company.

The idea was to improve the income of farmers by 10%. The problem was identifying a way to

site to buy and sell agricultural products such as seeds, fertilizers, farm tools, etc. (DestaMart); an online portal to provide farmers relevant information (DestaTalk); and a portal to host a curated list of farming-related innovation (DestaLabs).

"By 2014, they realized that the company can't be (like) an NGO," said Sharma who came on board as CEO in 2014, referring to non-government organizations that are mostly mandated not to charge for their services. "Before this, I was running a small financial journalism company in Mumbai. Ron's experience was that the initiative should be doing social good but for profit," he says.

So, they started organizing fairs in villages that connected government officials and agricultural experts with local farmers.

For DestaTalk, the Eureka moment came in January 2015. A team was visiting Sangli. "We distributed pamphlets among

up for the service," said S. "And then, I was told that I could only get 1,200 because the people who were writing the names couldn't do it fast enough."

## Challenges

The biggest challenge for Desta Global has always been the shortage of manpower to financial constraints. It took the only investor so far, I think, in \$2 million. "It is a long marketing for us and there is a lot of time that we can do it. There are limited resources that we have at our disposal. Desta Talk. But we are fair in investing," said S. He said the company, started with investment from Boehm, is now actively looking for series-A funding.

## The digital advantage

Access to information and communication technology plays a crucial role in development. Mobile network penetration has helped the business immensely. "It has helped us connect with farmers on a regular basis. Right now, we are in touch with some 20,000 farmers by SMS and over WhatsApp groups," says Sharma.

## Future plans

All of Desta Talk's content is in Marathi. Sharma says the company is focused on Maharashtra right now. Sharma wants to impact 10 million farmers in India by December. "We want to do with Desta Talk around the country in the next three years and provide content in local languages," said S.

Mint has a strategic partnership with Nesta Foundation

company was founded in 2010 by Nishant Banore of Mumbai, who was a student at ISB, Hyderabad, with the help of Ronald  
monetize the business to make it sustainable. The solution was three-pronged: an e-commerce web-  
villagers promising them free information online or through cellphones. Within three days, more than 1,200 farmers signed  
*snip win Digital Empow Foundation, which ho Manthan and mBi awards.*