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Oil from a Wasteland - The Jatropha Project in India - Part 1

The jatropha plant revives the Indian wasteland. The jatropha nuts are suited to produce diesel fuel and the project offers a new income for the resident farmers

Hope in the Semi-Desert

Stuttgart, Germany, December 3, 2004

It's a particularly hot September day in Chorvadla, Taluka Shihor, a village of 1,500 inhabitants located 50 kilometers from Bhavnagar, a coastal town that serves as a county seat in the Indian state of Gujarat. The villagers' survival depends on what they can grow in their fields. But because of the semiarid climate and barren soil of this region of western India, these small fields of corn and cotton and the small vegetable gardens bordered by thorny hedges will never look like a Garden of Eden. All the same, after several years of drought, this year's monsoon has finally brought plenty of rain that has lasted well into the fall.

The people of Chorvadla are now hoping that they can harvest enough food this winter to at least feed their families.



The semiarid climate and barren soil of Gujarat produce little more than meager harvests of corn and cotton.

They are subsistence farmers; there's seldom anything left over to sell. On the other side of the hill, at whose foot the village nestles, two women and a man are working on a piece of land that barely deserves to be called a field. The reddishbrown earth is as hard as concrete and full of stones rather than crumbly soil. It's covered by a thin layer of green from the annual grasses that sprout for a few weeks after the monsoon rains have fallen. A bird's-eye view from the top of the hill reveals that the field is part of a larger pattern that could have been created by an abstract landscape artist: A series of holes nearly half a meter wide and just as deep have been dug at regular intervals in this field and its surroundings to create a kind of 3-D chessboard.



The seeds of the jatropha plant can be used to produce biological diesel fuel.

The three villagers from Chorvadla are planting all their hopes in these holes, in the form of 25-centimeter-high seedlings of *Jatropha curcas*, a bush from the spurge family of plants which is commonly known as the physic nut. They hoe the earth, mix it with a little fertilizer and use it to fill up the holes, pour in a pail of water and hope that the

young plants will flourish in spite of their inhospitable environment. They've already planted thousands of these seedlings since summer 2003. The jatropha plantations around Chorvadla already cover an area of 10 hectares.

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