Baner-based agrotech company all set for Silicon Valley limelight

Pune: Two 24-year-olds hope with their eight-month-old startup to revolutionize the way farmers in the region grow and sell their products.

LeanAgri, headed by Sai Gole and Siddharth Dialani, operates out of Baner and delivers personalized farming solutions using an app and an SMS delivery system. Parameters such as climate, water and soil are data crunched using an algorithm to advise each farmer on certain inputs, including the amount of nutrients that need to be used for a particular type of soil or crop.

Operations started on April 21 this year and the company, with a test bed in Raigad district, is now headed to San Francisco to raise capital. Gole had earned a spot in the Top 10 in the Women Entrepreneur Quest, 2017 — a national contest for startups founded by women. The Silicon Valley trip will be an all-expenses paid experiential-learning visit, during which Gole will have a chance to network with leading technology companies, startups, incubators, accelerators and academic institutions.

LeanAgri at present is helping farmers across 45 acres. The company promises to increase yield. “We use our algorithm to prescribe nutrient solutions. There are three main categories — soil, climate and water. there are sub-categories under these which further expand the base of the algorithm,” Dialani says.

“Each farmer then receives farm-specific advice from us. The advice stretches over an entire season and we even have a follow-up system that allows us to gather real-world feedback from the farmer,” Dialani adds.

Simply put, farmers will receive an SMS at 10.30am alerting him or her of the field’s fertilizer schedule. For those who’ve never received formal agricultural training, that tiny SMS is years’ worth of research.

However, Maharashtra will, perhaps, be one of their biggest challenges. Years of drought have turned hectares into arid plains and wives to widows. Politics and failed policies have added to the misery.
“I remember the day we found one of our first customers. He was passing by when he stopped and asked about the technology we were using. He hadn’t seen anything like it. We then found out that the man owned an NGO that was helping farmers set up their fields and he was interested in the technology,” says Gole, originally from Nagpur.

“Farmers in remote regions don’t have access to cutting-edge research. Our data analysis rides on a platform that has penetration. That makes a difference,” she says.

In January, LeanAgri secured funding from Travis Kalanick at UberPitch, the cab aggregator’s venture to discover the ‘brightest startups’. “Just as Uber, a taxi firm, doesn’t own any cabs, LeanAgri is an agricultural company that does not have any farms,” Gole says.

“We are associated with Icrisat (International Crop Research Institute of Semi-Arid Tropics). Agronomy support, crop growth data and nutrient analysis is provided by Icrisat. Trials and research are being conducted in collaboration with Icrisat to validate techniques developed by LeanAgri,” she adds.