

Report of Al Jazeera TV about Punjabi Farmers in Georgia

Al Jazeera published an article about Punjabi Farmers buying lands and settling in Georgia.

“Thousands of Punjabi farmers have bought land in distant Georgia lured by cheap prices, angering some locals.

As authorities in Georgia have made it easier for foreigners to buy land in the country, thousands of Indian farmers have purchased fertile land in the country, Al Jazeera TV reports from Georgia. Locals in Tsnori have sold hectares of soil to migrants of Indian citizenship, while those in Gurjaani, Telavi and Kvareli often used the financial assistance received as compensation for the natural disaster in the region for purchasing vehicles and setting up household conditions, instead of developing their farms. The locals in Kiziki - who have already sold around four thousand hectares - have negative views on their new neighbors from India, stating they do not like the closed-in behavior of the latter, while views also surfaced on the newcomers’ alleged stinginess and reluctance to pay debts.

Tsnori locals find it difficult to judge what will the process of selling their agricultural soil lead to, although they are confident that locals in Gurjaani, Telavi and Kvareli have not been wishing to use finances for agricultural work. What was the compensation money used for? The question brought us to the Kvareli Municipality town of Gavazi, where one of the first locals we encountered told us the money was “not wasted.”

Economy experts have definite answers to what can be called “purposeful usage”, but we could use a version by another Gavazi local, irritated by the behavior of his co-residents.

It is probably difficult to judge who will have a better harvest in the coming Fall – the Tsnori Indians or the Gurjaani Kakhetians, but we can change direction and forecast an influx of new taxi drivers from Kakheti in Tbilisi, which is already packed with transportation.

Samgori, Georgia - Larisa Maisuradze was astonished to see the sudden proliferation of foreigners driving farm machinery near her sleepy village, about 25 kilometres south of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.

Her home is sandwiched between the lone street that runs through the small village of Samgori on one side, and a vast tract of underutilised farmland on the other. "I didn't know what was going on, I was so surprised," Maisuradze recounted on a recent afternoon. "There were all these Indian farmers driving tractors here."

Maisuradze said the unusual scene from that day months ago are etched in her memory, as she never imagined she'd have so many neighbours from a land so far away. The Indians Maisuradze witnessed that day were the first wave of many who have come to Georgia to farm land in the Caucasus region in recent months. The government is seeking to bolster domestic agricultural production to help Georgia become more food self-sufficient. Most Georgians farm small plots of land for sustenance only, not enough for commercial production. Agricultural production has plummeted from 12.8 percent of the country's GDP in 2006 to just 8.3 percent at present. Georgia has stepped up the immigration of people with agricultural know-how and farmland sales to foreigners, as the country's abundant and agriculturally potent conditions have not been properly utilised by local farmers.

Many Georgians, however, view the influx of foreign farmers as an "invasion". Estimates suggest thousands of Indian farmers - mostly from the northern state of Punjab - have immigrated since 2012. Masuradze admits it was difficult to develop relationships with the new arrivals, but it didn't take her long to realise they were "nice people". "There's no drinking water in the fields, so they always come here to

drink water. I give them water and in return they always bring me some vegetables from the farm - tomatoes or potatoes or something else. They are nice people, very hardworking and calm," said Masuradze

Ramanjeet Singh Pardhan, a Sikh farmer from Punjab, owns nearly 30 hectares (74 acres) of farmland that stretches beyond Maisuradze's home. One of the reasons Pardhan chose Georgia is because land here is so inexpensive. "I can buy a hectare of land for US\$1,000-\$1,500. I can't imagine finding something that cheap in Punjab," the bearded farmer said. **"You can't compare the prices. I sold one hectare of my land in Punjab and with that money I could buy 200 hectares [495 acres] of land in Georgia."** **Pardhan grows Wheat, Potatoes, Tomatoes, Garlic, Onion, Kharbuja Tarbooz and a variety of other crops.**

The 42-year-old recently walked through a fresh morning mist that hung over his fields, and bent down to grab a handful of dirt. "Feel the texture of the soil, it's great. It's very suitable for the crops we'd like to grow. It's not very different from the soil we have back home," he said. Stroking his turban he added jokingly: "I am a true Punjabi at heart. We have this inherent hunger for buying more and more land. There's not one Punjabi who is satisfied with the land he owns." Though he is trying to adapt to Georgian life, Pardhan faces some hurdles. The culture and language are "different", and the food is "not spicy". "Of course, I miss my family and my friends but most of all makki di roti aur sarso da saag [corn bread and mustard spiced curry]," he said longingly.

Pardhan found out about agricultural investment opportunities in Georgia through a newspaper advertisement by an immigration agency. Posters welcoming immigrants to Georgia are stuck on the walls of **CCA Mohali** Immigration Consultancy office on the top floor of a shopping mall in a Tbilisi suburb. **The agency has facilitated the migration of about 200 farmers since last year, according to DS Khaira** Managing Director of the firm, who also hails from Patiala, Punjab.

Punjabi farmers find Georgia attractive because of the lack of red tape, said **DS Khaira**. "Everything is transparent ... and there's no corruption here - unlike India. If all goes well, there will be more [Indians] to come." The agency is also planning to open a **Georgian-Russian-English language school in Mohali** in Punjab state to prepare farmers before they head to their new home.

Ranjeet Singh - Cousin of DS Khaira - who owns 150 hectares of farmland land in Georgia - saw yet another business opportunity with the wave of Punjabi immigrants.

"We are running an inexpensive hotel (DHABA) and canteen for the new arrivals. When they arrive, they can come here and feel at home. They can speak Punjabi and eat Punjabi food and get to know other Punjabis in Tbilisi," Singh said.

But for Singh, Georgia doesn't feel like home. "Georgians are very nice people. But we are very different from them. The culture is different, even the religion is different. But there's a business opportunity here,"