

Relevance of ORGANIC FARMING in the DARJEELING HILLS an overview

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General Background

The Oxford Dictionary defines environment as totality of the physical conditions surrounding the earth. A part of the physical conditions includes the humans who have evolved with the physical conditions. This evolution has created a balance and symbiosis of communities with their natural environment.

This balance and symbiosis has been greatly upset by industrialization and modernization especially today, with the emphasis on economic growth and materialism. Exclusive economic growth negates the balance and symbiosis so essential to life. The stress on economic growth being equated to development has led to environmental degradation and its fallouts, which we are experiencing today. No more are the fallouts of environmental degradation a doomsday prediction. We experience it constantly in the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, the shelter we live in, the social space we interact in...

The challenge today is to be able to look beyond economic growth and refer to the oft maligned, ‘sustainable development’. The need is to rise above economic growth, to a holistic, organic and spiritual development.

Prior to the excessive stress on economic development, communities developed organically within their own environment. The communities depended on their immediate environment for their life, which evolved a system of livelihood based on the resources within their environment. This system might not be codified within the existing, ‘formal education system’ but it definitely is a sustainable one within the local environment. This system is highly decentralized and specific to the local environment.

With the onset of industrialization, mass production for the market and centralized top down planning it not only led to environmental degradation but to the negation of knowledge of communities not within the centralized, individualistic, ‘mainstream system’. The process of negation was gradual as well as with a stroke of a pen with centralized promulgation of laws and acts.

Darjeeling Background

Darjeeling, the northern most district of West Bengal, is the only Hill district. Darjeeling is rich in its biodiversity due to various factors such as physiographic, edaphic, climatic, biotic and altitude. The Himalayas are a very young mountain range so is very sensitive and is an ecological hotspot.

Environmental degradation has also reached Darjeeling. There is a rapid loss of habitat and biodiversity in the hills and the Red Panda, Himalayan Salamander and the Himalayan Flying Fox are in the endangered list. Deforestation is an important problem that the hills are facing and the fallouts like water crisis, land slides and soil erosion, energy crisis and even microclimate changes are already being felt. Darjeeling today has 41.2% of the land under forest; of this more than a quarter of the forest has undergone degradation to less than 10% canopy cover. (Sanskritayana 1997). There have been noticeable symptoms of excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides in tea gardens, in that morbidity rate amongst the pesticide sprayers is higher than the others, aquatic life is being depleted, weeds and pests are attacking the plantations with virulence leading to the increased use of chemicals. The latest entrant of the diesel vehicle has added to the never heard before air pollution to the so-called clean air of the hills. Noise pollution is also a new phenomenon and the excessive use of poly bags in addition to its existing problem of carcinogens and clogging of waterways.

Relevance of Going Organic

In such a scenario the adoption of organic farming is a positive and economically viable option. In today's world organic farming has great relevance, in a world with growing environmental degradation and ecological destruction. To the person practicing, it means a healthier living environment as well as access to a growing niche market. Going organic has special relevance in the Darjeeling Hills context, which is an ecologically fragile zone and is a bio-diversity hotspot. Darjeeling is famous for her natural beauty and agricultural products of tea, spices and oranges. These products are specific to the Darjeeling area and command a niche market.

In the growing environmental awareness going organic will add value to the already niche products of Darjeeling. The economic benefit can be measured in increased price offered for the products. The intangible benefits of going organic are tremendous. Darjeeling is also tourist destination and going organic is also catering to the growing consciousness of eco-tourism.

Thus, going organic is viable environmentally, economically and socially for the Darjeeling Hills.

Organic farming is a way of life. A way of life, which empowers individuals to explore their capacities within existing natural systems and resources. It is also an approach to life, which is communitarian and based on self-reliance.

Specific Background of Going Organic

Going Organic has implications at all levels: individual, community, state and international community. Acceptance of organic farming as a way of life at the individual level is the core of going organic. The individual and the community needs to be completely committed to the organic way of life as it is a cyclic, continuous process with a belief and trust on the natural process of interdependence and the web of life. This commitment is of utmost importance as the organic lifestyle depends on the individual responsibility and creativity.

Going organic has to translate into individual and community action. Capacity building as well as providing logistic support to the individual and the community is of utmost importance. The

role extends further today in the aspect of marketing the concept of the organic products. It necessarily means addressing access to the niche premium organic market. A market, which does not necessarily behave in the regular economic models of pricing and product placement. It also means addressing the issues of organic certification, labeling the marketing. The growing international community needs to know of such developments as well as made partners in the process.

Steps in Organic Farming

Organic farming is a way of life and does not necessarily mean a static farming system using subsistence traditional farming systems. It means constant evolution of the natural farming systems incorporating cutting edge scientific research, which goes beyond formal western learning systems. The ultimate aim being the birth of a proactive scientific farmer who is constantly evolving and improving systems and the knowledge base. This evolving systems and knowledge base is multidirectional and based on dialogue, learning and sharing from each other.

Capacity Building

Capacity building of the individual farmer is the basic step that must be adopted. Capacity building also implies the change in mindset of the farmer from a static subsistence one to a dynamic, creative and evolving farmer. Capacity building on improved farm management that includes soil, crop, seeds, livestock and water management. The management system the farmer develops must be integrated within all the resources of the farm. It also must be integrated to upstream and downstream resources. The capacity building must be based on improving on the life experiences of the farmers.

Capacity building of the community must be focused on increasing community learning, sharing and interdependence as organic farming cannot be adopted in isolation especially when one is working with small and marginal farmers.

Organic Certification

Access to the organic market needs the certification of the products and the processes. Certification with the help of a largely accepted certifying agency is of utmost importance to gain entrance and acceptability in the organic market.

When it comes to small farmers developing systems of internal control systems and internal regulation systems of organic farming code at the farmer and the community level ensures community responsibility as well as reduces the cost of certification as external inspection time is reduced.

Certification is not one time but continuous process beginning with the intention to organic, initiating the process, the in-conversion period and the organic certification, which needs to be constantly renewed. The in-conversion period depends on the performance on the farmers and can extend from a single year to three years before the final certificate is given.

Capacity building of the farmer, community and the apex body where records are centralized and digitized on the ICS and IRS is needed.

Marketing

Fair Trade Labelling

Accessing the ethical market beyond the environmental standards requires the Fair Trade Labelling ensuring ethicality of the product and the process enabling the product and the production community access the premium pricing.

Product Placement

Organic products need to be placed in the niche area of the market catering to the consumers who believe in the organic way of life, supportive of the ethical fair trade and the ones who take it for the fad value. Catering to all these segments of the market is essential. The product, process and the profits need to be marketed as one single entity. This ensures and makes the practice of organic farming viable to all and not just the ones who take organic farming as a way of life as it enables the practitioner immediate tangible economic benefits.

Recommendations

1. Capacity building of farmers on organic farming.
2. Promotion of small farmers organic tea.
3. Awareness of consumers on the benefits of consumption of organic products.
4. Access to niche organic market through proper marketing, product labelling and placement
5. Declare Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council to be an organic area.
6. Facilitation by DGAHC on organic certification

Case Study

Harsing, Dabaipani and Yankoo Busties lie on the Lebong Spur of the Darjeeling – Jalapahar Range and form the major portion of what constituted the Harrison and Mineral Spring Tea Estate, which closed in 1952. Proposed Sanjukta Vikas Co-operative (SVC) was the outcome of the participatory survey and planning undertaken by the people and Darjeeling Ladenla Road Prerna in 1996. It is a people based organisation with 448 families as members. The SVC and Darjeeling Ladenla Road Prerna work in close collaboration with each other.

Activities:

a. Milk co-operative

basely Help Group- with savings and credit as one of their activities.

c. Consumer co-operative shop

d. Community Based Water Management

e. Women's Self Help Group

f. Afforestation programmes

g. Appropriate Technology – smokeless chulas

h. **Organic Farming** – SVC practices organic farming as a way of life and out of the organic agricultural produces **Green Leaf Tea** @ Rs. 24/- kg at the source is sold by SVC to Tea

Promoters of India Private Limited which has been processing and selling this as the only multi-cropping, co-operative based organic tea from Darjeeling since **22nd May 1998**. The organic farming methods undertaken are– through organic methods of soil improvement, farm, seeds and pest management with inclusion of Effective Micro-organisms Technology and Bio-Dynamic Farming.

The **Institute of Market Ecology(IMO)**, Switzerland has given a **Producer Organic Certificate** to 308 members, 80 members under-conversion second year in-conversion, maintaining organic farm standards under ECC 2092/91, Naturland, Bio-Swiss(EU Standards), National Organic Program(USDA, USA standards) and National Program for Organic Production(Indian standards).

SVC, Prerna and TPI devised the **Internal Control System and Internal Regulation System of organic farming(ICS & IRS)** in 2002 and which is updated every year(current version 3.15/04/04). This is a novel experiment, which decentralizes organic farm certification and promotion at the community level. The ICS and IRS enshrines the roles and responsibilities of organic farming at the farmer, hamlet, SVC, Prerna, TPI and IMO levels. It includes individual farm documentation, farm practices, internal and external inspection procedures.

Fair Trade Labeling Organization included SVC as a partner member in 2003. FLO labeling ensures that the products sold under the label is ethically produced, marketed and profits shared.

These experiences can be adopted for the other parts of Darjeeling. **Ripple effect** and intervention of Prerna has ensured that these **experiences are shared, adapted and adopted** in other areas of Darjeeling. Prerna is working with 5 rural communities of Maria Busty, Kangkebong-Pringtam, Gitdubling in Kalimpong subdivision and Mamring –Sittong, Chimney-Deorali in Kurseong sub-division based on the experience of Harsing, Dabaipani and Yangkhoo Busties. Some of the techniques are being used in **solid waste management in Darjeeling Municipality Area**.

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