

The Return of the Earthworm: A Brief Note on AID's Work in the Sunderbans

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All the farmers and gardeners who have been part of AID and its partners Mukti & BTS' agricultural work in the Sunderbans are practicing organic agriculture of both paddy and vegetables on a part of their land while some are doing it fully. A buzz has been created in the area about it. Many of these farmers have been trained by Saathi Revathy and many more have been trained by the trainer-farmers of the area.

Based on my interaction with about 150 farmers in their fields and discussions in smaller groups later on, this is what I have gathered qualitatively.

- Most farmers cultivating paddy have taken a mixed approach and used a little bit of chemicals (much less than usual). These farmers are making a gradual transition. The pressure from other fields using chemicals remains palpable. It was heartening to see that we have developed enough trust with the farmers that no one felt the need to present a rosy picture.
- There were several **reasons** why farmers have taken up organic farming. The reasons cited most frequently were – 1) Human health (2) Loss of soil fertility due to chemical use (3) Cost is lower (upto Rs 1500 per one-third acre) (4) Small farmers don't mind the extra labour because it is their own. And some farmers said they would even be satisfied with a slightly lower yield.
- The advantages as seen by the farmers are: healthier plants, healthier soil (earthworms returning), less insect attacks, vegetables bearing fruit over a longer period of time (6 to 7 months for Karela and chillies)
- Farmers growing vegetables both for sale and as nutritional gardens have adopted the organic techniques in their entirety because it requires lesser amount of organic fertilizers compared to paddy.
- The local infrastructure for organic manure is slowly rebuilding. The number of cows in the villages have reduced because hand-held power tillers have replaced traditional ploughs, hence the dearth of cowdung. Now people are treating cowdung as a precious material and are also collecting all household waste for making compost.

- The organic techniques are spreading through training as much through informal social network. Farmers are teaching their neighbours and relatives. Basudeb Haldar gives free Amrit Pani to all his students who come for tuition. Some senior farmers sit in their weekly markets and discuss about organic methods and people gather around them.
- Herbal tonic, Amrit Pani, Cow urine besides compost and cowdung seems to be the most popular bio-inputs. Those who are slightly better off have been using coconut tonic and Jeevamritham powder.
- In a very interesting 100% organic plot, there were patches where the paddy plants were significantly healthier. These patches coincided with where the farmer have dumped the compost before spreading it across the field. This clearly exemplified the lack of enough organic manure in the field and primarily in the villages.
- Women farmers participation has been key in sustaining the use of these methods through 4 paddy seasons. They talk about the health benefits of organic farming much more than the men farmers.
- In the remote island of K-plot about 100 farmers, predominantly women, have taken up organic agriculture on parts of their land. They have used only herbal tonic and Amrit Pani as bio-solutions.
- Organic methods seem to work better with indigenous seeds rather than hybrid ones.
- Organic produce is well accepted in the local village markets but tends to get a lower price in wholesale market due to irregular shapes and a lack of shine.



Working with the landless & most marginalized

Although in the agri work that we are doing in the Sunderbans we are working with very marginal farmers whose average land-holding is one-third or two-third acre, we are not able to reach the extremely marginalized people of the village. These are landless families living in the periphery of the villages often on the embankments being the most vulnerable to natural calamities. These people are socially, politically and economically marginalized and fall through the social safety net which is created with exactly such people in mind.

It is very difficult to look at the world through their eyes and hence we remain distant to their world. AID has worked with these communities during the food crisis after Aila where we started 5 participatory community kitchens. AID also supported the rebuilding of 17 homes in K-plot for such families that survive on begging and catching crabs and small fishes in the river. Many other migrate seasonally to Kolkata to provide the cheapest labour.

We have been having discussions with our partners BTS, Mukti and also DRCSC (Service Centre) on how to engage with these communities and reduce the distance to them. While BTS and Mukti are thinking of work like raising awareness about government schemes or desilting of ponds which will allow landless families to lease land in the winter for cultivating one crop etc. a trip has been decided to a landless community that lives on the silt-build up by a river in the Sunderbans.

Earthworms, farmers best friends, are slowly returning to plots where organic methods are being followed bringing hope, strength and an indication on striving on the right path. But with the landless and the left-out we have we have to journey on a slightly different path.