

Organic Sikkim: “Ahimsa” on the Fields

Author - Rucha Chitnis, Published on - 10.6.2016

Written specially for the Vikalp Sangam website

Chandra Prakash Ghimeray tends to his grove of large cardamom

Chandra Prakash Ghimeray walks down his terraced farm and points to a grove of large cardamom on the far edge. We are in the village of Ranka in East Sikkim, a state that is the largest producer of large cardamom in India. Last year, Sikkim made world headlines by announcing it was the first Indian state to transition to fully organic agriculture. Ghimeray is hoping to ride the wave of economic possibilities of “Organic Sikkim,” where this coveted spice is a key value-added crop. Ghimeray has leased three acres of land, where he is growing a medley of fruits and vegetables. Ghimeray shares that he transitioned his farm to fully organic two years ago. “My production is still not optimum, but it will be in a year’s time. My wife and I are working very hard, and the government is supporting us with trainings and exposure visits,” he says.

Ghimeray transitioned his farm to organic two years ago.

“This is ahimsa cultivation. When you are farming organically, you are not killing your Mother Earth,” said Khorlo Bhutia, the spirited Secretary of the State for Agriculture of Sikkim. Bhutia is leading the charge on a mission that was considered unrealistic: transitioning an entire state to organic. “When you apply chemicals, everything is polluted. Our soil, air, water. Sikkim is a biodiversity hotspot. If our biodiversity is conserved, it’s good for our tourism. And for us, tourism is everything.”

Khorlo Bhutia believes that organic agriculture is “ahimsa farming”

The Lepchas, considered as the original inhabitants of Sikkim, called this Himalayan state,

Nye-mae-el

, quite simply a “paradise” on Earth. As a window to the revered Kangchenjunga, the third highest peak on the planet, this landlocked state is flocked by tourists from around the world who take delight in its natural splendour, monasteries and ancient culture. Tourism is bread and butter for many and a mainstay of the economy. The “Organic Sikkim” branding is seen as a strategic leverage for the government to attract local and global visitors. “Our population is around 6 lakhs. And last year we had nearly 11 lakhs tourists visiting Sikkim,” said Khorlo. “The organic state transition is our chief minister’s long-term view to generate employment, increase tourism and have a value addition component to Sikkim.” This dynamic “Organic Sikkim” vision is spearheaded under the leadership of one of India’s longest-serving chief ministers, Pawan Chamling, when a bold declaration was made in the state’s legislative assembly in 2003. In January 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a visit to inaugurate Sikkim Organic Festival and praised the state’s trailblazing journey in embracing a holistic agricultural model and stewarding its environment. Sikkim Organic Festival had various demonstrations on indigenous technical knowledge practices for sustainable agriculture. While some may view Sikkim’s chief minister as the rare politician with a green thumb, others note he has a mixed record. Chamling is also infamous for the contentious expansion of hydroelectric dams on the Teesta River, a move that has been criticized by Lepcha and Bhutia tribes. The chief minister acknowledged that when this announcement was first made in 2003, there were naysayers who doubted the audacious vision. According to Sikkim Organic Mission, it took 12 years to transition to an organic state. In the first phase, that spanned seven years, the government launched state-wide awareness programs, building the capacity of its field officers on organic farming practices and developing and documenting indigenous technical knowledge on bio fertilizers and pesticides. “We created livelihood schools, where 835 educated unemployed youth were taught organic farming practices. We developed soil-testing laboratories and set up integrated pest management mobiles. We also created seed processing units,” shared Bhutia. Over time, the state government eliminated subsidies for chemical fertilizers. Bhutia notes that today Sikkim is producing 80% of its organic seed needs and has created organic farming practices for 35 crops. In 2010, the implementation of the organic transition began as per guidelines laid down by National Programme for Organic Production. “We are focussing on optimum production,” emphasized Bhutia. “Look what happened in Punjab by the greed of the Green Revolution? They murdered their soil mother,” said Bhutia.

The government of Sikkim is promoting ginger, turmeric, buckwheat and large cardamom as key crops for organic export. While transitioning to an organic state was no small feat, the task was easier given the size of the state and agricultural land. Sikkim is one of India’s smallest states, second to Goa, with total geographic area of 7,096 square kilometres. Farmland is a little over 10% of the total area. The government was tasked to convert some 75,000 hectares to organic. Sikkim also has the smallest population with a little over six lakhs. According to the government of Sikkim, farmers in Sikkim also used much lesser quantities of chemicals compared to other states. “Our fertilizer consumption was seven-10 kilograms per hectare per annum compared to the national average of 70,” remarked Bhutia. Anti-dam activist, Dawa Lepcha, views the transition news with cautious optimism. “We are happy about the organic effort. However, at the grassroots level, things are superficial. My name is added to the list of organic farmers, but I have never been consulted. There are people in my village with no land papers, but their names have been included as organic farmers. Everyone should support the organic mission but the implementation seems haphazard,” he observed. Lepcha is also concerned about market linkages given the mountainous terrain and remoteness of many rural communities. “Rural realities are different. We also need quality healthcare and education,” he adds. Sikkim is also not food sufficient given a large floating population of migrants, tourists and the army. Inorganic produce from West Bengal fills a large gap in the state’s food production. Besides the tourism leverage, the Sikkim government is priming four key crops for organic export, namely ginger, turmeric, buckwheat and its famed large cardamom. Cymbidium orchid is also part of the value-added export commodity. Sikkim, incidentally, is India’s largest producer of large cardamom and cymbidium orchid. However, transporting fragile produce on a mountainous terrain to faraway urban centres in India is not a simple feat. “We are geographically isolated and incur a lot of transportation costs,” concurred Dr. Anbalagan, Executive Director of *Sikkim Organic Mission*. Scaling production, marketing and nailing competitive prices will also pose as a formidable challenge. “We have identified five crops and plan to produce them to a marketable surplus. We have clustered areas for growing these five crops, which will be grown by [farmer] grower groups. We are trying to create an organic value linked chain for these groups,” he said. So far, around 187 farmer groups have been certified organic, where the state government has footed the bill for the certification costs. “We have created a platform for our farmers, so it’s up to them to take it forward. This is also an opportunity for young farmers,” said Dr. Anbalagan.

Sikkim is the largest producer of Cymbidium Orchid in India

This year, a new organic farmer’s market was opened in Gangtok. Jashoda Tiwari, a farmer from South Sikkim, has been selling fresh veggies and greens in one of the stalls for several weeks. “My farm transitioned to organic two years ago,” she says. “At first it was hard. We were still learning organic techniques that worked for our farm. The horticulture inspector told us how to use cow urine and cow dung to create natural fertilizers and pesticides. My production is still low,

but I am happy that Sikkim turned organic. We won't fall sick from eating food with chemicals," she says. When asked if farmers are tempted to use chemical fertilizers on the sly, she shakes her head. Flouting the rules can lead to consequences. In 2014, the state enacted the Sikkim Agricultural, Horticultural Inputs and Livestock Feed Regulations Act that criminalises sale, export or use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers; an offense may lead to imprisonment for up to three months or a fine ranging from twenty-five thousand rupees to a lakh. *One of the Farmers selling their produce at a new organic farmers market in Gangtok* While Laal Bazaar, the large, lively fruit and vegetable market in Gangtok, is teeming with locals, the organic market has few takers. It could be a while for Gangtok residents to warm up to organic produce prices. Meanwhile Ghimeray is keeping his hopes up. "My wife and I are working very hard to tend to our land and crops. We are hoping for the best," he says. As farmers in Sikkim weave a new paradigm of farming, some ripple effects of "Organic Sikkim" seem to be in motion: The chief minister of Meghalaya has expressed interest in scaling organic farming in the state; the central government is promoting various initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture. "Already the government of India has launched a scheme, Organic Value Chain Management for North Eastern states," said Dr. Anbalagan. "We have done what others have not ventured into. Now we also need support to take this forward."

All photos by the author

Contact

the author