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Agriculture

This year we joined a permaculture network which has four other members, one in North 24 Parganas, one in South 24 Parganas, one in Midnapur and Service Centre, in Calcutta, which also acts as coordinator of the network. The network members regularly visit one another's area to discuss the progress of work, and this year we sent -three people to Pondicherry for intensive training.

Our basic goal, to make agriculture economically and ecologically sustainable, seems simple but "chemical" agriculture is very hard to replace, despite the farmers' clear realization that it is damaging in the long run. But in the long run, said Keynes, we shall all be dead, and until and unless abort-term alternatives are found the farms will persist with what he knows is damaging the soil, adding to his costs, it's and 'Will finally turn out to be counter-productive. Unfortunately we are in no position to offer hind anything right now. We are experimenting with various things, and it would be foolhardy to claim any success in farming after only two seasons results. All we can do is to keep detailed records of our experiments, in the form of input-output data, periodic soil tests, photographs etc. We do keep in touch with local farmers, but do not wish to involve them in our experiments just as yet, for we do not have the means to compensate them for any loss- they might suffer by opting to do as we do.

I shall very briefly explain a few of our experiments. First, crop rotation. The principal aims are, to eliminate the use of chemical fertilizer to facilitate regeneration of the soil; to stop use of chemical pesticides or weedicides and to replace them, if necessary, with botanical pesticides ; to find the most appropriate crops that can be grown together , as mutually beneficial and to optimise production. Then, permanently raised beds and circles, covered with mulch, to grow a variety of vegetables. The principal aims are, to eliminate tilling or ploughing, to conserve soil and water with the help of the mulch, to mix the crops on each bed and circle so that they can grow to be mutually beneficial, to totally forgo use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, to try botanical pesticides when necessary, to plant various pest-repellent or pest-trapping plants, to plant trees on boundaries which will supply green leaf manure and mulch material.

We have continued with our work of improving the quality of fruits by budding various trees. We have distributed betel nut saplings from our nursery to more than 100 households. My report this year does not contain the names of individuals and organizations who have helped us. One reason is that they are too numerous and the second, stemming from the first, is that it is unwise to risk unwitting omissions. We do remember all of them with gratitude and hope that in the coming years, too, they will find- our work worthy of support. We on our part intend to remain true to our commitment.