

1

## AGRICULTURE

In our last year's report we said agriculture was promising to be the main area of our work in the coming years. That still remains our thinking but this has not been a year when that promise came to be fulfilled. We shall have to wait. This is, of course, not saying that our agriculture work has not progressed. What we are trying to say is that we are still to do anything in this programme that outstrips our work in other fields.

The work for our agricultural staff has taken on a new dimension. We do not farm on our own: There is no model plot and we have given back all our leased plots. Extension work is all that we do. This calls for intensive interaction with local farmers, and preparedness to answer their queries and to open up new horizons for them.

The use of azolla on paddy fields, minimising the need for urea, has been widespread in four villages. The cultivation of Dhaincha before a paddy crop also grew in popularity. The demand for rock phosphate outstripped our supply. Our laboratory made biofertilizers - azotabactor, rhizobium, PSB - were this year used by more farmers in more villages and in more plots, which leads us to believe that in a few years they would be widely used.

Obviously there is a long way to go before any appreciable impact is felt, given the massive scale of agriculture in our area, but the thing to note and to notify is that our recommended practices in almost every stage of farming have found takers. Their numbers cannot but increase. It would be foolish to expect a radical change in a matter of a few years, but we are for the present content to be slow and steady. We shall win the race for sure, and shall be fast and steady when the need arises.

We are deliberately not giving the details of figures as these mean but little unless the total agricultural atlas is consulted. Briefly, new crops (for this area) like French bean, wheat, khesari, soya bean, sunflower, pulses, maize, etc. have been grown with encouraging results. Mixed cropping has had fewer takers but there was a variety of choices and partner crops on the field. Relay cropping, or Poirra in local parlance, was quite a success in a few plots to start with. In this, just before the rainy season paddy is harvested, the seeds of the next crop there can be a wide choice but wheat proved most popular with our collaborating farmers are broadcast, thus utilising all the residual moisture in the soil and dispensing with ploughing the field. The good results surprised a number of farmers who had followed the progress of the experiment and we expect quite a few of them to try this in the coming year.

2

Integrated pest management was practised by around 50 farmers in the Boro season. We want to totally eliminate pesticides, as these kill indiscriminately, with great loss to the ecology because beneficial or at least harmless organisms are also destroyed. Instead we try to popularise pest controllers which, as the name implies, make harmful pests ineffective but kill nothing. Neem and jute seeds, tobacco, garlic plus kerosene - all these have been used as neutralisers with success. Farmyard manure is being used widely, mulching has struck root. There have been setbacks, but not anything that can be called a failure. Untimely heavy rain, particularly hailstones, severely damaged the pre-kharif crop. Gram was hit hard by pests. At places soya did not grow well.

As we said, our agricultural workers now do a full-time extension job. To spread the new concepts and also to help farmers at all times, it is imperative that they know their subject thoroughly and also keep abreast of recent developments. For this we arrange regular training courses and workshops for them. Some local farmers have also attended certain of these, and then farmers and workers can compare notes. We also arrange exposure visits for both to other districts of West Bengal to familiarise themselves with conditions different from ours. Our agricultural supervisor was part of a team that visited Guntur in Andhra Pradesh. Workers, in both the old villages and the new, meet the supervisor, sometimes other staff of Swanirvar and/or representatives from the State-level sustainable agriculture network of which we are a founder-member, at least once a month for a review of the work done and to plan for the future. Twenty-four such meetings were held in the old villages and eight in the new. Three introductory trainings were held this year. The first was on kitchen garden and herbal medicine, with 20 women from different NGOs listening to three of our workers. Another training on the same subjects was held for 28 women from villages in or near our project area, the difference being that the first was for four days, the second for two. Another four-day training was on different aspects of sustainable agriculture and the participants included 31 workers from NGOs in various districts.

A total of 155 study circles were conducted in 14 villages, with a total participation of 2614 men. The subjects discussed included micro nutrients, rock phosphate, and bio-fertilisers, IPM, budding etc. For women there were 97 such circles in 12 villages, with an attendance of 1349. The topics covered were kitchen gardens, nutrition, herbal medicine, seed conservation, women's groups etc. Awareness camps were held for men in 10 villages and 492 attended the 17 camps that discussed IPM, PSB, pulses, the Rabi crop etc. Altogether 199 women attended seven such camps in as many villages.

Given the dimension of the problems in agriculture that we intend to tackle we have to reach out to a much larger number of people. This we do by putting up stalls at different village fairs in the area. We display posters, keep pamphlets and books on various aspects of sustainable agriculture, and exhibit various things that might interest a casual visitor. And they usually do, too. Around 5000 people visited our stall in the three fairs we attended this year, two four-day affairs and one for a day less. Our workers are always ready to hold a detailed discussion with any visitor who wants it. We also arranged a stall at the annual function of our Fatullyapur centre where around 600 people came and asked questions. And they do not just ask questions and go away to forget all about the answers. This is borne out by the later demand for the printed matter that we offer for sale, for the various saplings we produce in our nurseries, for the different good-duality seeds for the new crops that we propagate, for rock phosphate and biofertilisers, the latter produced in our laboratory, etc.

At the level of mass communication we have distributed 1500 posters on 15 subjects in 10 villages and 100 walls, or what pass for them, in 10 villages now have some agricultural message on them.

And of course we have our cultural team of adults to present the message of sustainable agriculture, and blood donation. It was invited regularly, at least once a month on an average, to perform in some village, in or near our project area, and once an organisation in Hooghly district called us over. There are usually 300-400 spectators, but at least once the team played before no fewer than 800 people. We are afraid our repertoire has remained stagnant this year but there has been no let-up in our training. There were nine workshops for the cultural workers to hone their skills.

Kitchen gardens, or nutrition gardens as some prefer to call them, fall as much in the agriculture section as in the health, and as a matter of fact and convenience, this year since January we have made it a semi-separate section, as far as holding monthly meetings of those who work for the propagation and maintenance of the gardens is concerned. Four such meetings have been held since then, and earlier the progress of and plans for the gardens used to be reviewed at meetings of the agriculture and health departments.

To persuade families into preparing a kitchen garden following our suggestions, we held 97 study circles with 1347 people attending. Awareness camps were held in 7 villages with a total participation of 199 people. We now have 350 gardens in 10 villages and do not wish to increase the number, as proper supervision then becomes difficult. No chemical is used in

4

these plots and at least 100 use the “compost tea” popularised by us as fertiliser. There are live hedges, mostly of herbs; the plant types are chosen so that maximum use it made of sunlight and different properties of the soil, and the goal is to keep the plot green and to produce something throughout the year so that the family, often with nothing but the homestead, has something nutritious to eat every day of the year. It is heartening to see that after they have been convinced of the utility and have learnt the techniques of planning and designing the garden, some families are using other plots they can lay their hands on and getting into shape new gardens. We not mollycoddle our beneficiaries and when we see that a family is getting the idea that it does not have to do anything, or much, and that our workers will tend the garden for it, we have a last meeting with it and say good-bye.

The first two years we took the responsibility of procuring good seeds for the vegetables and plants with edible leaves, particularly for the new crops we were introducing. But now most households are keeping their own seeds and some are handing over their excess seeds to us for use elsewhere. We encourage growing at least a few herbs in every such garden, so that dependence on allopathic medicine, carelessly prescribed and expensively used, goes down. Most of these were even not so long ago common in our area but we have introduced some others also. Now common conditions like fever, colds, dysentery, leucorrhoea, some skin diseases, sprains, insect bites, etc. are cured at home. Prophylactic use of certain herbs has also become common.

Due to our efforts 200 families in 7 villages grew mushroom in the winter. The first crop was a reason able success but then the spawns proved to be of erratic efficacy and the weather also played hicks.