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FERTILE GROUND IN ASSAM, INDIA

CULTIVATING A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS

By Peggy Carswell

...an update from Fertile Ground: East/West Sustainability Network, a decade of promoting organic farming practices in Assam, India

One of the challenges facing the organic movement here in Canada – and all around the world – is finding and training the next generation of community leaders to carry the movement forward. This is true here in Canada, but perhaps even more so in the remote northeast corner of India, where a small group of Canadian volunteers has been supporting development of the organic movement for the past 10 years.

As we've travelled throughout the Indian state of Assam (located south of the eastern Himalayas), village elders, business people, ed-

ucators and friends have pointed out that many of the traditional varieties of rice and vegetables have disappeared, and that young people from rural Assam are turning their backs on village life in big numbers.

To be successful, we need to develop an understanding and a definition of organic that combined traditional values and farming practices from that region of the world with effective low-cost techniques and methods in use here in the west.

But something interesting is taking place, and a new generation

of organic enthusiasts is on the rise. Many of these young people hope the growing demand for organic products both globally and locally will bring them better-paid jobs and a higher standard of living. There is also a large number who are motivated by a genuine desire to protect their culture and environment and to improve the lives and working conditions of people in the agricultural sector.

My husband Kel and I first travelled to northeast India in 1998. We returned a year later to locate a source of organic tea for a local fair trade project. At that time, only a few growers were interested in the idea of growing "organically", but there were no written materials on the topic, no models and no teachers. Almost all of the farmers or agriculture extension workers we approached along the way had no

idea what the term actually meant.

Eventually we found a source for our tea, but I decided to return to Assam to help the small-scale tea growers and farmers I'd met, those who were searching for alternatives to the chemical inputs that were being widely promoted by extension staff, educational institutions and large corporate-owned tea plantations.

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An essential element of our success has been to demonstrate our personal commitment, returning year after year, developing relationships built on trust and shared values.

So, before returning to Assam, I began studying everything I could find about the people of Assam and about tea cultivation, and looked at successful farming practices based on both traditional and organic approaches in India and other regions that have similar climate and geography. There wasn't even a word in the Assamese language for the term "organic", a concept most often linked to crops exported to western countries, like Canada and USA, dependent on expensive inputs.

With help from Assamese friends, I began visiting villages and organizing workshops for farmers and tea growers, distributing resource materials that had been translated into the Assamese

language. Before long, I was spending 3 or 4 months of each year living and travelling in Assam and we decided to set up Fertile Ground, a non-profit registered charity based on Vancouver Island.

THE VALUE OF DEVELOPING MEANINGFUL, LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

An essential element of our success has been to demonstrate our personal commitment, returning year after year, developing relationships built on trust and shared values. Development models that parachute "experts" into a society to deposit gems of information and then leave, never to return, don't work.

Since Fertile Ground was established, I've spent the winter months in Assam, often accompanied by Kel, and sometimes a volunteer or two. Together, we've created 3 demonstration gardens – centres where people can learn how compost and compost "teas" improve soil fertility, why crop rotation is important, and the importance of saving their local seed varieties.

The gardens are located in geographically and culturally different parts of the state, and have attracted hundreds of farmers, tea growers, students, educators and business people, as well as visitors from Nigeria, US, Germany, Australia and other parts of India.

Planning and development of these community centres is carried out in partnership with local groups. The centres have created employment for several local people whom we've trained, encouraged and supported to become resource people for their own communities.

Because of its isolated location and a long history of communal and inter-tribal conflicts, Assam



remains somewhat cut off from the rest of the country. Until recently, most of the organizations working to promote organic and traditional agricultural practices in other parts of India have been reluctant to travel in the northeast. As a result, the organic movement has been slower to take hold in Assam than in most areas of the country.

The participation of people of all ages from across Canada who've travelled to Assam to help out at various projects has been a welcome and popular component of our work. Our youngest volunteer was 9 years old and the eldest in his early 70s. Many have been students from colleges and universities. Volunteers have donated funds to furnish and repair schools, made short videos, purchased much-needed tools, built playground equipment and constructed a lot of compost piles! All have shared our commitment and interest in organic farming, as well as an interest in celebrating and sharing the diversity of our different cultures.

We've established strong connections with funders, tea-growers associations and schools, but perhaps most importantly, have become mentors to a growing number of young people who are emerging as leaders of a true "green revolution" in Assam.

One way we've been able to help is to arrange for these young people to travel to other parts of India to visit organic farming projects and meet other experienced farmers, trainers and activists. For instance, Ms. Pompy Ghosh, one of Fertile Ground's organic demo

One way we've been able to help is to arrange for these young people to travel to other parts of India to visit organic farming projects and meet other experienced farmers, trainers and activists.

garden coordinators, travelled to New Delhi to meet Vandana Shiva and some of her co-workers, and in February, she and two other young farmers travelled to Bangalore to attend a meeting of the Organic Farmers Association of India – the first time delegates from the north-east have been “at the table”.

This year, we also organized Assam's first seed “mela” (festival) to promote seed-saving and the cultivation of traditional rice and vegetables varieties. Dr. Debal Deb from the state of Orisha, Erinanne Harper (a young organic grower from Salt Spring Island here on Canada's west coast) and local seed-saver Mahan Borah spoke to hundreds of farmers and students. The event received a lot of media coverage, and has helped raise awareness of the importance of protecting local seed varieties right across the state.

Mahan, who is also a young farmer, has tracked down several farmers from his area who grow and save local seeds, produced a series of short videos, and planted over 90 different varieties of rice at a new “in situ” seed bank being

set up with a little help from Fertile Ground. Information about his work and other seed-saving initiatives is posted on www.seed-sofassam.net.

Three new ventures were recently launched by a small group of well-educated and motivated young Assamese entrepreneurs. The organizers are determined to transform farming into a more viable and sustainable livelihood for their people. Pabhoi Greens, Farm2Food Foundation and Axum Agri are exploring innovative ways to increase local food security and help farmers generate higher incomes – and working hard to rekindle the connections their people have to their agricultural roots.

As we look back on the things that Fertile Ground and our partners have achieved over the past decade, we also look forward to new connections and initiatives that will support the growing number of people – particularly young people – who are taking part in Assam's new “green revolution.”

Information about Fertile Ground's projects and upcoming volunteer opportunities are available on our website: www.fertile-ground.org You can follow our work with small-scale tea growers,

and learn how we're changing the world one cup at a time, at www.smallteacoop.com



Peggy Carswell is a community development worker and organic grower from the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island. She has worked on a voluntary basis in northeast India for the past 15 years, and is the founder of Fertile Ground: East/West Sustainability Network. The organization is committed to strengthening grassroots organizational capacity and works directly with Assamese farmers, small-scale tea growers and farming families to promote sustainable and traditional agricultural practices.



Sanjeev Sonowal at work at the Demonstration Garden in Ambikapur, Assam.