

Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative

S/J farmers visit suicide families; learn organic

By Cheku Dorji in Dewathang S/J

On 10 March this year, Bal Bdr. Singh, age 35, farmer from Balran village, Punjab, committed suicide by swallowing a farm pesticide. Less than two weeks later, a busload of Samdrup Jongkhar farmers arrived in Balran village.

It wasn't planned that way. In fact, the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative organic farming study tour to India, including the stop in Punjab, was planned months in advance.

But the sad reality of chemical farming in India is that you'll encounter what our Bhutanese farmers experienced almost any day you arrive in India's pesticide-laden countryside. In the last decade, more than 200,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide — that's an average of 55 every single day for 10 years!

In fact, three members of Bal Bdr. Singh's family had already committed suicide before him. And 12 farmers had already taken their own lives in just the three Punjab villages our Samdrup Jongkhar farmers visited.

And those same villages were once among the most fertile, prosperous, and agriculturally productive in all India. But years of increasingly heavy chemical use have killed off the healthy microbes that naturally fertilize the soil and made the soils dry and unproductive.

The Punjab farmers told our 26 Bhutanese visitors that they now have to pump ever more chemicals and inorganic fertilizer into the soil to get it to yield anything at all. And every time they do that, the soil quality deteriorates even further. They are caught in a vicious cycle from which they cannot escape.

With output falling and the price of chemicals rising annually, the farmers have gone deeper and deeper into debt to the point of despair and suicide. And that's why Bal Bdr. Singh swallowed pesticide and killed himself on 10 March, 2011.

Punjab's "Cancer Express"

But chemicals were not Bal Bdr. Singh's only cost.

While these farmers used to pass on their own local seeds from generation to generation, they are now paying ever more for the costly imported so-called "high-yield" seeds that require heavy inorganic fertilizer and chemical use.

And the village water supplies are now so heavily contaminated with agricultural chemicals that they're totally undrinkable. These poor villagers told our Samdrup Jongkhar farmers that they now have to buy mineral water for drinking – “just like the tourists” they said with a sad smile!

And suicide is not the only cause of death attributable to India's so-called 'Green' (chemical) Revolution. Far larger numbers of farmers die of cancers caused by those same agricultural chemicals — either inhaled through pesticide sprays, digested in poisoned water, or from bodily contact in their fields.

Punjab now has a train they call the “Cancer Express,” which travels regularly to hospitals and is filled with cancer patients and their families.

Not everyone is hurting now. Big companies, like U.S.-based Monsanto, which market those “high-yield” seeds and chemical fertilizers and pesticides to India and other nations, are profiting handsomely, as are the banks, middle-men, local suppliers, and loan sharks to whom those farmers have gone so deeply into debt.

Shocked – but not surprised!

World-renowned scientist and pioneer of organic agriculture in India, Dr. Vandana Shiva, who accompanied our Samdrup Jongkhar farmers, gently told the Punjab villagers the reason for their visit. Speaking softly, she looked at them with tears in her eyes, and said: “They don't want to make the same mistake as the farmers of Punjab and so they are here to see with their own eyes.”

The Samdrup Jongkhar farmers were shocked and almost speechless – deeply moved by what they had heard in the past days and by the human and ecological tragedy they had witnessed. But some, like Kinzang Dorji, age 49, from Momling village in remote Lauri Gewog in Samdrup Jongkhar, were not surprised:

“Five years ago, I used half a bag of urea because people said I'd get more yield,” he said. “I did get more yield that year. But next season I noticed the soil was drier and not as healthy looking. And when I pulled out weeds, I saw their roots were clumped together – not separate and easy to extract like before. I never used that urea stuff again, and I never will – specially not now!”

And a Dewathang farmer reported that, following the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative launch in December, local shopkeepers had vowed to stop selling inorganic fertilizers like urea, and to bury their remaining supplies under a memorial stupa commemorating the end of chemical farming in Samdrup Jongkhar.

In the presence of the Punjab villagers, Dr. Shiva deeply thanked the Samdrup Jongkhar farmers for travelling so far, and for the service they are doing for their soil, their country, the world, and all sentient beings, by setting such a good example in going organic. And she praised their natural, earthy intelligence and compassion that was guiding them the right way.

Into the light – Going Organic

And then, truly as if journeying from the darkness to the light, Dr. Shiva took our 20 Samdrup Jongkhar farmers (from all 11 S/J gewogs), the S/J District Agriculture Officer, three S/J agriculture extension officers, two National Organic Program representatives, and the accompanying Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative coordinator, to her celebrated Navdanya organic training farm in Dehradun.

Early on, Navdanya soil scientist Sri Hari Raj Singh taught the Bhutanese group about the relationship between soil, the living organisms in the soil, and human beings, and expounded the basic Navdanya philosophy simply and clearly: “If you want something from the soil,” he said, “then give something back. This is the basic principle of life and of being human.” He then taught how to differentiate the various soil types, what the basic needs of soil are, and how to take soil samples properly.

Over the next 11 days, under the skilled and brilliant guidance of Navdanya’s top scientists and farmer trainers, our Samdrup Jongkhar farmers learned the very best in organic farming methods.

With rapt attention and palpable enthusiasm, they studied and practiced in the fields a range of organic composting methods, soil sampling, pollination and terracing methods, healthy soil fertility management, how to make organic and biological agents to control insects, pests, disease, and weeds, and how to select and properly store local seeds.

Over and again, our farmers vowed that the first thing they would do returning home was to make and apply these organic manures and pest control substances and to improve their soil fertility in all the ways they were learning.

Their only concern, in the words of one farmer, was: “We need someone from SJI to follow up with us on this training, particularly the composting methods. Otherwise we will forget or make mistakes, because most of us cannot read and write.” Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative staff has made that commitment, taken detailed notes from the training, and will visit the farmers for follow-up

But Navdanya’s gracious hospitality extended beyond farm training. To their delight and surprise, the Samdrup Jongkhar team was taken on an extraordinary sacred pilgrimage to nearby Mindroling Monastery, where they were blessed by Khenchen Rinpoche and taken inside the monastery’s revered big stupa – a rare privilege not afforded to visitors or even to most monks at the monastery itself.

It was a tearful departure from new-found Navdanya friends. The Dzongkhag Agriculture Officer, Tashi Dawa, expressed sincere and profound gratitude and appreciation to Navdanya for helping the farmers of Bhutan learn and experience the organic way of living. Each Samdrup Jongkhar participant then individually

thanked the Navdanya staff and organization for all they had learned and for the precious knowledge they would not take back home and put into practice.

Taking the initiative

Following their intensive Navdanya training, the Samdrup Jongkhar farmers went high up into the Himalayan hill country of Ranikhet, Uttarakhand, where the steep slopes reminded them of their own Samdrup Jongkhar terrain. But here, every single plot of arable land was not only farmed, but carefully terraced to retain the soil nutrients on the slope.

Dewathang farmer Rinchen Wangmo was amazed: “Most of the steeper land is uncultivated in our place and most of our people don’t do terracing,” she remarked, “and I think that is why soil nutrients are washed away during rainy season. If we terrace like this, we could use so much more of our land, we could keep our soil healthier, and we could grow so much more.”

But what impressed the Samdrup Jongkhar farmers most were the people they met. Kindly hosted by Grassroots India, they visited organic cooperatives that were successfully marketing organic hand-knitted woolens, natural fruit preserves and pickles, honey, produce, and other foods. Self-help groups were restoring degraded local environments, planting trees, improving water supplies, and training local youth in masonry, carpentry, and as “barefoot engineers.”

Staying in the homes of local village families, our farmers could not stop talking later about how inspired they were to see and learn how ordinary villagers can take such wonderful initiatives by themselves to improve their environment and lives, and how local village youth had taken on such interesting and meaningful work, thereby effectively stemming the rural-urban migration trend in that area.

Training for the common folk

And when our farmers got home to Samdrup Jongkhar and sat down together with the DAO and extension officers to talk and reflect, there was almost an air of disbelief at what they had just experienced — with literally everything being new. None, for example, had been on a train before and most had never even been to Thimphu, let alone a huge city like Delhi.

And any kind of training abroad is a privilege usually reserved for civil servants — an opportunity no common farmer ever expected to have. In this respect too, the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative is breaking new ground, as it also did in March when it sent six illiterate village women from Lauri Gewog for six months training in India as ‘solar engineers.’ These SJI trainings have been funded by Canada’s International Development Research Centre.

As Namtong, age 38, from Wangphu Gewog, said: “I am very thankful to Rinpoche and to the SJI for giving this opportunity to people like us which I would

never have thought possible.” He was referring to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, who last year started the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative to develop that dzongkhag in a self-reliant, ecologically friendly way.

And something they had not anticipated at all, or ever expected to experience in their lives, was literally being ‘ambassadors’ for their country. As one participant said: “This was such a great cultural exchange between our two countries and we were there representing our country, Bhutan.”

But with all those new experiences, their deepest impressions were still as farmers. They could not get the despair of the Punjabi farmers out of their minds. Talking to them as farmer-to-farmer, our Samdrup Jongkhar farmers felt the Punjabi villagers’ pain as if it were their own.

And when they came home to Samdrup Jongkhar, our farmers vowed never to go down that deadly chemical road or to let their country do so. It was as if they dedicated that vow to Bal Bdr Singh of Balran village who had taken his own life just one month earlier, and to his 200,000 compatriots who have committed suicide in India over the past ten years.

And then there was the other side too. All they had learned at Navdanya and Ranikhet about organic farming methods, terracing, forming cooperatives and so much more, gave our farmers a new confidence, energy, determination, and enthusiasm to apply all they had learned, to make a real difference in their villages, and to serve their dzongkhag, their people, and their country in a way they had never thought possible.

In the words of Karma Tenzin, age 44, from Phuntshothang Gewog said: “This training gave me lots of encouragement to work as a farmer, and now I am really and truly proud to be a farmer.”

Another farmer put it more broadly: “We’re enjoying the new charm in our lives” that this experience produced. Three weeks after setting out, the farmers returned to their Samdrup Jongkhar villages with smiles on their faces!

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