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## *A green experiment*

PiyasreeDasgupta Tags : Cyclone Aila, Sunderbans Posted: Sunday , Jan 10, 2010 at 0128 hrs Kolkata:

For 20 days after cyclone Aila hit his village in the Sunderbans in May 2009, Prashanta Singha and his family of ten took refuge in the local high school, waiting for the waters to recede. The cyclone had submerged a greater part of the K-Plot area in Achintanagar panchayat, under the Pathar Pratima block in Sunderbans.

“We were at a loss. Not only were our crops destroyed, the sea water had entered our fields and refused to recede for at least 10 days. When it finally did, the soil was so saline that it was impossible to cultivate anything,” says the 24-year-old Singha, who is from a family of farmers and owns 4.5 bighas of cultivable land.

Word went out, reportedly even from the block-level government authorities, that the land couldn't be cultivated for at least three years. They had an unhappy precedent too. “In 1981-82, a similar flood had left the land so saline that it couldn't be cultivated for two years,” says Susanta Giri, who is associated with a local club, the Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha (BTS).

It was then that BTS, along with NGOs like Mukti and AID (Association for India's Development), decided to look for a solution to the problem. They found that thousands of kilometers away, in Tamil Nadu.

Coimbatore-based Revathi Thiruvekataswamy, director of the Tamil Nadu Organic Farmers' Movement, came down to Baikunthapur block to train farmers in sustainable agriculture, organic farming and easy desalination of land. “I had been working on sustainable agriculture for long. It was only after the tsunami in 2004 that I tried implementing sustainable agriculture methods in disaster situations. After Aila, I worked with farmers in the affected villages of Bengal, helped them reclaim their land and encouraged them to take up organic methods of agriculture,” says Thiruvekataswamy.

After the flood waters receded, the farmers, on Thiruvekataswamy's suggestion, started toying with the idea of taking up organic farming. “We tried several other methods of desalinating the land.

All our efforts failed. We were so depressed that the idea of experimenting with organic cultivation didn't appeal to us initially," says 52-year-old Jagadish Chandra Naiya, a resident of Ambikanagar village.

But Thiruvankataswamy used photographs and videos of farmers who had benefited from organic agriculture in Tamil Nadu to convince 20 farmers to switch to green farming. "Initially they were hesitant, but I guess desperation drove them to give it a try. These farmers are very knowledgeable even if they have never had formal education. But in such remote villages, the idea of organic farming is still very new," says Thiruvankataswamy.

So seven months after the cyclone hit Uttoli village in the Sunderbans, Bishwanath Sahu, a farmer, thought he would give up trying to reclaim his land. But two months after he gave organic farming a try, his three-and-half bighas of land was reclaimed. He has already harvested a crop of rice with significantly less investment than before. "We don't buy chemical pesticides anymore. Instead, we make herbal tonics with local herbs and plants like neem leaves, lota leaves, bontulsi, rabanlata etc," says Sahu, who has harvested paddy, okra and mustard from his fields.

"When saline water stagnates in agricultural land, it makes the soil so hard that no plant can grow in it," says Singha.

Thiruvankataswamy first advised the farmers to plough their land so that the saline top soil is dug out, treat the soil with bio-manure solutions and dig trenches so that the saline top soil is washed away in the rain. "All these demanded no complicated chemical treatment, just physical labour," says Sahu.

It was a cheaper way of farming too. "While we spent Rs 1,200-1,500 on pesticides on one bigha land, we spend nothing more than Rs 500 now," says Naiya. "Also, a bigha that used to yield around 375 kg of paddy now yields 450 kg," says Pulin Jana, a volunteer with BTS and a farmer at Cooltooli village in the Sunderbans.

After the 20 farmers were convinced to turn organic, at least 100 farmers across 10-12 villages under the Baikunthapur village panchayat have decided to make the change.

Sridhar Haldar and Ganesh Naiya were among those who held out initially. But after their neighbour Jagadish yielded a successful crop, they too have taken to organic farming.