

Sunderbans women sow faith in the land

Ajitha Menon

Seated in her mud house, Rita Kamila speaks with confidence about the benefits of integrated farming, organic food, vermi-composting and biogas. The proof is in the lush greenery surrounding the house, located in Rammohun village, under Patharpratima P.S. in the Sunderbans delta area of West Bengal. Here, clearly, is a well-trained, self-sufficient farmer who has achieved a sustainable source of livelihood in one of the world's top climate hotspots. Rita has worked almost single-handedly for five years on her 4.5 *bighas* (one *bigha* is approximately one-third an acre) to ensure the right mix of cultivation, poultry, fishery, and cattle.

At nature's mercy

Integrated farming is not only changing the way families cultivate paddy or vegetables, but also influencing the quality of food and livelihood practices. Moreover, it is increasing their resistance to the vagaries of weather in an area that is prone to tidal floods, cyclonic storms, and large-scale land erosion.

Rita recalls with horror how they earlier grew only paddy, that too in a low-lying stretch of 2.5 *bighas*. A few vegetables were grown on the remaining land haphazardly. Almost every year, tidal floods from the Gobadia river destroyed most of the crop. Similarly, the vegetable yield was barely enough to feed her family of four. Recurring floods, cyclonic storms and soil salinity made farming untenable, forcing her husband Debashish to become a machine van driver instead.

Integrated farming

In 2008, Rita joined the 12-member self-help group Shanti Mahila Dal. She was trained in integrated farming by the Area Resource Training Centre, sponsored by the Development Research Communication and Services



Rita Kamila's farm now provides a sustainable source of livelihood. - WFS

Centre. “I learnt about the different components of integrated farming and the need for land shaping. Initially, I was hesitant about land shaping as I was worried it would affect my small plot. But the training gave me confidence, and I decided to take a chance. At that stage, I had nothing to lose,” recalls the 32-year-old farmer. Her plot already had two ponds, so a connecting trench was dug along the inner boundary to provide irrigation all year round. The trench also acted as a natural drain for the flooding saline water, thereby lowering soil salinity. The excavated soil was used to elevate the outer border and vegetables were planted in it. The fertile soil from pond excursion was spread over the paddy field. “I put in some money of my own along with the Rs 5,000 I received from the DRCSC to undertake land shaping. I already had some perennial trees, but I planted a few more like neem, *subabul* and bamboo. I started mixed-cropping for my vegetables. In the low-lying area, I planted saline-resistant paddy and used the organic paddy seeds provided by the ARTC,” she says.

With a chicken coop overhanging the pond, the chicken waste became food for the fish. Feeding on insects and pests, the small fish acted as natural water purifiers. “The fish bred faster; the chicken, let loose in the garden, acted as natural weed removers. I learnt to collect the dung from my two cows and make vermicompost to replace chemical fertilisers. I was finally a full-fledged organic integrated farmer,” she says, smiling.

Thanks to these changes, Rita’s farm began to yield two paddy crops a year, as well as three seasonal crops of vegetables. “My family now enjoys organic vegetables and grain, and healthy fish and poultry. I even have leftovers for sale. I earn around Rs 12,000 to Rs 14,000 by selling the extra *boro* paddy and another Rs 5,000 from the surplus vegetables each season,” she says. Her farm made a giant leap forward when she set up a biogas plant. “I got a subsidy of Rs 5,000 from the West Bengal Renewable Energy Development Authority and managed to invest Rs 9,000 by myself. Today, I use biogas for cooking,” she says proudly.

Thriving practice

According to Debabrata Guchhait, the 32-year-old Village Development Volunteer with DRCSC, 20 such integrated farms are thriving in about six villages under the Ramganga, Brajaballavpur and G-Plot gram panchayats of Patharpratima block in South 24 Parganas district. Eight SHGs are involved. “We have involved small landowners. A large number of men have left for urban areas in search of alternative livelihoods, so it’s largely the women who are involved in our integrated farming and other climate change adaption projects,” he says. In Hingalgunj block of North 24 Parganas district, 14 integrated farmers in three villages are working with seven SHGs. There are six components in integrated farming, including permanent tree and plant management to produce coconut, papaya, lemon, mango and banana among others. “I did not have any permanent trees on my small plot but ARTC gave me Rs 300 for seeds and some saplings,” says 28-year-old Anjali Giri of Dakshinshivpur village. Her husband, a migrant labourer, is away most of the time. Anjali has an integrated farm on one *bigha*.

Animal husbandry is another component. Rita has 27 chickens and two cows, while 37-year-old Gauri Mondal has 40 chickens and ducks, besides three cows on her four-*bigha* integrated farm in Indraprastha village. “My earnings from eggs and milk are good. My husband, a mason, is always away from home but I am happy with the fruits of my labour on the farm,” she says.

The other components include cultivation of water-growing plants (such as leafy varieties), fishery, seasonal management of crops, and conservation of beneficial insects and worms. “Earthworms are good for the soil. I don’t have a big plot, I grow paddy on a part of it and a nutrition garden on the rest,” says Saraswati Mondal of Indraprastha village. The 29-year-old farmer owns one cow, and now she wants to set up a biogas plant and acquire two more cows.

Shouldering Burden

Although integrated farming is bringing food security, economic upliftment, and increased protection against climate change, it is largely the women who are working themselves to the bone on their farms. As Guchhait says, “They work tirelessly from 5.30 a.m. to 10 p.m. doing housework, caring for children, and then toiling on the farm.” But they still do not have any property rights, points out Mamata Khanra, a 25-year-old Village Development Volunteer. “The land on which they work so hard is usually in the name of male members of the family. They are often in danger of losing the fruits of years of hard work if divorced, widowed, or when the son gets married.” Yet, ever optimistic, the women of the Sunderbans are satisfied with their gains, and even hope that their menfolk will return to work side by side with them. “Finally, we are seeing a sliver of hope against the natural disasters, which have been the bane of our lives. We have started to think that our vulnerability to climate change has decreased considerably,” says Saraswati.

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