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Little Help for India's Wonder Crop: Jute

Posted by Dr. Dhrubajyoti Ghosh on August 15, 2011



That the battle between environmentalists and agricultural experts is all set to intensify is well known. That the fight will be over the unprecedented loss of human life, biodiversity stock and severe damage to ecosystems — water quality, food quality, soil quality — being caused by dangerous agricultural practices thanks to the overuse of fertiliser and pesticide by sections of the farming community is also well known. The concern here is not about that though. By and large, environmentalists and agricultural experts agree that there are a few crops that have positive ecological impact: the concern is that even this area of commonality is being betrayed. The best-known example in India is jute, once known as India's golden fibre, which is cultivated over eight lakh hectare, engaging around four million farm families. There are several points that commend jute cultivation.

- An hectare of jute plant can absorb 15 tons of carbon dioxide and release more than 10 tons of oxygen through a jute growing season of about 100 days.
- Jute products are 100 per cent biodegradable and are also recyclable.
- If jute waste is dumped in an open field the mixture of soil and jute becomes natural manure. Jute is well known as one of the best replacements for plastic bags and can reduce the consumption of mineral oil to a large extent. The damage caused by plastic bags need not be discussed here.
- More importantly, growing jute needs very little fertiliser and pesticide, so much so that its effect on the ecosystem is yet to become a cause of concern.

- Furthermore, the green leaves, which the jute plant sheds (about six tons per hectare) are rich in macro and micro-nutrient content.



Yet jute is a much-ignored agri-product. Jutebased handicrafts, which come in a plethora of remarkable design and uses, have not become popular enough in the national and international markets and deserve dynamic promotional initiatives. Given the inadequately developed market, jute growers suffer from lack of demand and receive poor prices from the intermediary buyers. Particularly distressful is their lot in areas where yield is lower because of soil quality. A case in point will be the plight of jute workers in the Beldanga block of Murshidabad district in West Bengal. During the second week of July 2011, a number of farmers told this writer in

a village in Beldanga Block, Murshidabad district, that they spent Rs 12,000 per acre to grow jute (JRO-524 variety) and expected less than Rs 5,600/acre when they sold it, that too if the middleman was happily disposed towards them. Have they discussed their plight with anyone? Yes, they have: they have submitted representations to various places with little to show for them. Political parties have assured them of action; they were asked to join processions to affirm their loyalty but they are yet to see the fruit of these efforts.

Jute has been grown in Beldanga Block for more than 20 years and the returns from jute cultivation have shown a diminishing trend for about a decade. On July 26, 2011, a technical team from the Central Research Institute for Jute and Allied Fibres (CRIJAF) went to Beldanga to impart training. After the training the local farmers politely reminded them about the cost and benefit of growing jute. The scientists were apologetic and said they had no idea about the reality, said a local farmer, Pradyut Mondol. Elsewhere, there are fixed worker wages, those who are in service have a fixed salary, private tutors take fees they negotiate but the jute farmers do not have any assured return that can even cover their cost of production.

It takes four months to grow jute. Expectedly, the remaining eight months are used to grow other kinds of crops that can compensate the loss incurred in growing jute. Essentially one crop of paddy followed by one crop of pulse is the principal choice. The pulse crop is broadcast, does not need irrigation or additional nutrients. The residual water and nutrient after growing paddy is good enough to grow the crop. Monsoon paddy is also important as it provides the basic food need for the farmer's family and also a little more earning to overcome pauperisation.

The point is not about the way the jute growers defend their propensity to hold on to a losing proposition. Apparently, a farmer thinks it a matter of shame to keep his land uncultivated in these parts: it is a ritual that

people from the city or policymakers at different levels know little about or even try to understand. There is definite need for state intervention. The country has a national jute policy to develop 'a strong vibrant sector' that can,

- ensure remunerative prices to jute farmers in the country
- produce good quality fibre and products to meet the growing needs of the country and international buyers
- increasingly contribute to the provision of sustainable employment and economic growth for the nation and finally
- compete with confidence for an increasing share of the global market.

The farmers should be able to feel the impact of a policy intended to serve their purpose, their lives and livelihood. The policy statement will have to travel far beyond the confines of officialdom and make its presence felt where it is needed most. Probably the jute growers of Beldanga block will no longer grow jute after a while. After all, the price of jute in other districts in the current year, although lower than the previous years, is much better (Rs 2,200 per quintal where one acre of land produces about 12 quintals of jute) than what the Beldanga farmers get. This rate prevails in both Nadia and North Dinajpur districts, which are best known for growing jute in West Bengal.

What most jute growing areas; probably most wetland crops (essentially paddy) lack is able stewardship. Dealers in fertilisers and pesticides have done immense harm by inculcating the practice of overuse. This must be replaced by institutional stewardship that will honestly and scientifically guide the farmers so that they do not lose on account of a worthwhile product that they grow; because they do not damage the soil by overusing the chemical inputs; and because they do not waste water by overusing it. The task of stewardship runs down to setting up a support system comprising

- strict monitoring of the local vested interest working in tandem with the different levels of the market
- provision of a certain amount of assistance to encourage an environment friendly crop: for example, technical guidance to reduce the growing expenses and access to improved accessories; preferably free of cost for the initial period
- organising low interest credit (so that a farmer is comfortable and gets money exactly when he needs) and
- transparent policing of the manipulating intermediaries and overseeing the payment to the farmers to spare them threat-based buying. These are by no means extraordinary assistance to ask for but most jute growers in India do not get even this help.