

Workshop ‘Pests, Diseases and Life forms in Rice Eco-system’

at Sambhav, Nayagarh 20-23 September 2009

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Since I am curious to understand how knowledge about SRI spreads, I wanted to take a closer look at training programmes and followed the invitation to the workshop on “Pests, diseases, and life forms in the rice eco system” by Sambhav. I had been at Sambhav previously to better understand SRI and its meaning, but I wanted to experience how trainings in agriculture do look like, not just on what is taught but also how it is imparted and how knowledge transfer occurs. Sabarmatee had told me the training programme was responding to the increasing demand for information on the topic with many farmers facing pest attacks on their crop. She described the training as a process of mutual learning in which the participants’ knowledge and experience is incorporated. The idea was to “learn about pests and diseases in rice systematically which will empower [the participants] technically and help them to understand SRI better” (Sabarmatee in the workshop invitation letter).

The participants arrived at Sambhav from 19 September in the evening and in the course of the next day the group had grown to 36 people from 25 different NGOs and 12 districts of Orissa. The workshop was facilitated by Prof. Radhamohan, Prof. S.K. Panda (Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology), S. Manimaran, and Sabarmatee. The whole team of Sambhav provided for a smooth flow of the workshop and delicious meals. Moreover, various visitors enriched the programme through their participation, among them Jacob Nellithanam (Chattisgarh), Biswaranjan Sasmal, Basant Kumar Dash and Simanchal Nahak.

Reading material was provided in Oriya and English, but the main part of the workshop took place interactively, in plenary sessions, group work and presentations, on-field teaching and observation, and practical experience. The daily activities started early in the morning and often lasted beyond sunset. For me, it was insightful to observe such an interactive and dedicated community and to see how the SRI community learns at Sambhav. Participants sitting side by side on the floor were discussing, listening, and taking notes with such a rigor and enthusiasm one would be happy to find in each university course.



Community of learning (left), S.K. Panda (OUAT) teaching in the field (right)

However, practical questions and difficulties were at the centre of the programme. Days included not only learning about pests and diseases of the rice plant, but also cultural activities brought to life by

the participants themselves. The on-field learning sessions and practical experiences were of particular value to the participants. The best place to study and understand the rice plant properly, turned out to be the field where the discussions were lively and focused with many of the participants contributing to the discussions and sharing their experiences and observations. It seemed to me that the organic ecosystem at Sambhav provided for the environment in which one easily understands how much sustainable rice cultivation is a matter of a well-functioning ecosystem and of a mutually learning community living within it. After an intense discussion on the properties and advantages of indigenous varieties, the group decided to confirm by oath to protect indigenous varieties of the rice plant and enhance biodiversity (see picture below).



The field served as the classroom at times (left); Taking the oath to protect indigenous varieties (right)

Sabarmatee's energy and organisation, the common learning experience, the good organic food and the efforts of the Sambhav team made my stay a most enjoyable one. I hope everyone learned as much as I did during the days at Sambhav. Still, in particular because of my lack of the language Oriya, some questions remained open to me:

Are pests of the rice plant a new problem? Are we experiencing changing patterns of pest appearance and behaviour? Why is there an increased interest in knowledge about pests? Why do people want to know about ecological approaches to pests and diseases of the rice plant? What about the relationship between pests and changing climatic patterns and conditions? Is drought not a much more prominent problem this season? What has been the response of farmers and others to this?

I would appreciate any responses to this or reflections on the workshop either through email sriximb@gmail.com or in the SRI India and/or Orissa e-groups. This would certainly help me to better understand the ways of learning, interaction, and networking in the SRI community. Ultimately, my study has the objective to help improving processes of knowledge exchange in agricultural innovation and related issues of development.

I owe my thanks to Sabarmatee and the Sambhav team who made my research field trip possible and who provided for the most welcoming hospitality during my stay. Many thanks also to Sarbeswar Behera, who volunteered as a translator and who took the hardship of a long bus journey upon him to help my research and me.



Workshop participants produce bio-pesticides (left), goat help identifying the right plants (right); participants attentively listening to the experiences of a fellow learner



Heading to the field

