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Sikkim makes an organic shift

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GANGTOK: The next time you stop by in Sikkim, you might want to look for a souvenir with a difference — perhaps a packet of organic paddy or ginger — as the state looks set to go completely organic.

Silently, this ecological hotspot of the eastern Himalayas has moved towards sustainable agriculture in a big way, covering almost 90% of its agricultural land. Use of chemical pesticide, insecticide or chemical inputs was slowed down as early as 2003 but what was awaited was blanket certification. Now, even that seems to be on the fast track. Of 70,000 hectares of arable land in Sikkim, 6000 hectares is already organic-certified. By 2015, Sikkim aims to be completely organic certified.

Organic farming combines ecologically-sound modern technology with traditional agricultural practices including crop rotation, green manure and biological pest control to ensure reduction or total elimination of chemical inputs. In several parts of Sikkim, farmers have succeeded in growing completely organic maize, paddy, ginger, cardamom and turmeric while expanding the practices to other horticultural crops.

The first step came in May 2003, when the state government withdrew the subsidy on fertilizers. From 2006-07 onwards, the transport and handling subsidy and commission to the retailer was also withdrawn. Alongside, the government also adopted a seven-year plan to phase out use of chemical fertilizers, by gradually replacing these with organic sources.

“The government had taken the decision because it had seen the adverse impact of chemical fertilizers on our soil, water and on human health, considering ours is a biodiversity hotspot,” says S K Gautam, secretary in the department of food security and agriculture.

He, however, points out that there are difficulties since only 11% of the land is cultivable, making the state food-deficient. “We need intensive cultivation in the arable land if we have to become food sufficient. An action plan is being prepared that will be ready in a couple of months that will help leverage yield from organic agriculture,” he says.

There are a few stumbling blocks, too. The organic manure produced in the state is insufficient and it has to make do with imports from Hyderabad and Pune. Additionally, vermi-compost kits are given to farmers by the government besides assistance for green manure and urine pits.

The spinoffs, however, are encouraging. “Village tourism in Sikkim will obviously improve. Homestays will become more popular. We believe that the organic tag will boost the inflow of tourists, especially international tourists,” said Lukendra Rasailly, general secretary of Travel Agents Association of Sikkim.

“We understand that only organic farming can help us maintain our soil quality and prevent pollution of our water sources. It will also be the key to highend tourism,” hopes Rasailly.

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