

# SIKKIM BEATS ODDS TO BECOME INDIA'S 1<sup>st</sup> ORGANIC STATE

By Athar Parvaiz

On January 18 this year, the small north eastern state of Sikkim was officially declared '100% Organic' by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, during the inauguration of the Sikkim Organic Festival in the state capital, Gangtok.

At the function, Modi expressed his appreciation of Sikkim's achievement and recognised it as the result of tremendous hard work and sustained belief. "When the idea of organic farming would have been shared over a decade ago (in Sikkim) I am sure people would have opposed this. But farmers in Sikkim did not give up...Sikkim has shown the way and what we are seeing today is the result of tremendous hard work and belief in an idea," the prime minister was quoted as saying after the event.

The seeds of the organic movement were sown in Sikkim more than a decade ago, when the Sikkimese government floated the idea that the state should go completely organic. Set in the Himalayan mountain range, Sikkim spreads over 7,096 sq km. The government's idea was to convert its cultivable area of 76,000 ha into organic farms.

## AN IDEA TAKES ROOT

In the predominantly agrarian state of Sikkim, there were well founded reasons for the government and the people to opt for the organic route. The idyllic hill state has an arduous terrain and lesser cultivable area than other agricultural states in India. Furthermore, Sikkim holds scope in organic farming, since its agricultural practices vary widely from those employed in other parts of India, where chemical fertilisers and pesticides form the fulcrum of farming.

However, the idea of going organic remained dormant as it did not figure in the policy making process. Finally in 2003, the state's Chief Minister, Pawan Chamling, gave the idea a political push. His government passed a resolution in the state assembly and enacted a policy to shift to organic cultivation. "I am pleased to announce a long awaited policy initiative in declaring Sikkim as a 'Total Organic State', meaning that the use of chemical fertilisers will be gradually done away with," Chamling had told fellow legislators in the state assembly.

Pursuing organic farming as a state policy sparked off a movement and swiftly put the state's organic agricultural movement on a fast track. Cultivation area under organic farming started adding up until it reached its full capacity by the end of year 2015, following a blanket ban on chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

## AGAINST THE ODDS

Notwithstanding its current glorious status as a pioneer, turning completely organic did not come without impediments. Dr S Anbalagan, executive director, Sikkim Organic Mission (SOM), an exclusive wing set up by the government to boost organic farming in the state, is candid that they had to work patiently to convince all stakeholders involved. According to him, the government adopted clear cut approaches, taking into consideration both advantages and disadvantages of going organic, as well as, the prevailing scenario of fertiliser and pesticide consumption across the country. "As part of the organic mission, we also had to initiate establishment of basic

Photo by Adip Tirwa

infrastructure and statutory requirements to effect the actual organic farming process in the absence of a national policy, standards, accreditation, certification and marketing systems," he elaborates.

Similar sentiments are echoed by P D Rai, the only Member of Parliament from Sikkim. "Despite the loud opposition and noise from many of our farmers, the Sikkim government gradually won over people from all walks of life to back the mission," says he.

Besides convincing the farmers and other stakeholders to convert to organic, the state also had to fight the limitations of modest landholdings, modest resources, nil connectivity via rail or air, dearth of market linkages and lack of manpower due to the exodus of its youth to other states in pursuit of better remunerative prospects and education.

Retaining its focus on the organic mission, the state discouraged the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and guided farmers to substitute them with organic manures and fertilisers, as well as, biological plant protection measures. Cultivation area under organic farming started increasing. Plant diseases and pests were controlled by biological means. As the farmers

slowly shifted to organic farm inputs, a blanket ban on chemical fertilisers and pesticides was introduced.

The government extended further support by providing requisite infrastructural facilities. Given the lack of a national policy, the state government had to effect a set of accreditation and certification norms to bring the process to fruition.

Thus, with the last of the farmlands receiving organic certification by December 2015, Sikkim became the first Indian state to achieve complete organic cultivation, on its 76,000 ha of agricultural land where well over 6,000 farmers pursue organic farming.

Those who effected the change are happy their patience and perseverance paid off and they could accomplish their mission in a short span of five years.

## EFFORTS TO BOLSTER MISSION

The state government established SOM and commenced work at the grassroots in 2010 with the goal to achieve 100 percent organic farming by 2015. The organic mission is part of an organic movement under which the Sikkimese government backed the movement

Landlocked Sikkim has combated the absence of connectivity, an exacting terrain, limited cultivable land, modest financial resources and exodus of manpower to other states, to emerge as the country's first 100% Organic State



Another enterprise, Mevedir, a service provider in the organic farm sector, has partnered with SOM to offer varied services such as training, capacity building, processing and exports. Their primary role in the organic mission has been the certification of 8,000 ha of farmlands in the state.

Hence, collaborations with privately owned enterprises have helped Sikkim with market linkages, training and certification.

## OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

According to Anbalagan, the stage is set to catapult Sikkim's organic movement to new heights. He opines that the youth should capitalise on the opportunities that will arise from the state's newly acquired organic status.

Renzo Lepcha, chief operating officer of Mevedir, predicts employment opportunities since infrastructure is expected to improve owing to the budgetary provisions this year—something he hopes will attract the migrated youth back to the state. He believes value addition to crops and developing high value-low volume products such as cardamom would bode well for the farmers and the state. "Thanks to the recent budgetary announcement in the union budget and the declaration of Sikkim as a complete organic state, more avenues and opportunities will come up in the employment sector as infrastructure will now be taken care of with the advent of more resources," Lepcha says.

The government has already identified crops such as ginger, large cardamom, buckwheat and turmeric as unique products of Sikkim, with a huge demand. Anbalagan says their focus on high value crops is due to the limited extent of cultivable land.

Current challenges include transportation of the produce to markets, financial limitations, insufficient supply chains, control of pests

and diseases in cash crops such as ginger and cardamom, and timely supply of organic pest repellents and biofertilisers. Some regions also face irrigation problems. Furthermore, being landlocked with no rail and air connectivity poses a serious transportation problem. Lack of cold chains, reefer vans, processing units, food parks and packaging materials within the state compounds the problems.

Anbalagan claims efforts are on to address the issues by establishing processing plants for value addition, creating cold storage facilities and connecting the region to the rest of India for transportation of produce. However, addressing technical challenges will take a few years as a lot of research is needed to resolve them, opines Anbalagan.

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## THE ROLE MODEL STATE

To further its cause, the state government has opened Sikkim Organic Stores in New Delhi. Plans are also underway to open outlets in other cities. The state government is positive that its organic status would boost ecotourism as well, providing financial support.

Buoyed by the achievements of the state government and the Sikkimese farmers, the Centre envisages the north east as a hub for organic farming, a hope that has been reflected in its allocation of Rs 115 crore (USD 17 mn/ EUR15 mn) to Organic Value Chain Development in the North East Region in the 2016 budget. All north eastern states share the same topography and by and large follow organic farming methods, and hence the transition to organic would be relatively simple for them.

According to P D Rai, the current zeitgeist at the global level about the positive impacts of organic farming for food security, soil health and human health, worked in Sikkim's favour. The state has demonstrated that a strong political will combined with strategies to implement policies can produce desired results.

In light of its many limitations, achieving the organic status in only five years can be considered a profound victory for Sikkim, and other states in the country could also be inspired to take steps to switch to organic farming in a phased manner.