

## **Necessity of Community Activities for Younger Generations**

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West Bengal accounts for but 2.7% of India's total area yet it must support 8% of the country's people. Agriculture centered on rice farming is the main industry accounting for 50% of the state's income. Compared to other states, a high percentage (94% versus a national average of 78%) of the state's population consists of small land farmers who have less than 1 hectare per household (0.85 hectare versus a national average of 1.55 hectare). The fact that about 70% of the state's population is related to agriculture and agricultural villages is an important background for community activities. \*

Our NGO -- Development Research Communication and Services Centre (DRCSC) -- has been engaged in the regional development of agricultural villages including the continuous diffusion of agriculture in this state for nearly 25 years. One thing we noticed was that, in order to improve the standard of living and environment in the local area, it is important to look not only from the perspective of adult residents but also from the perspective of the next generation's children. Especially in small scale farming, we believe it to be effective for young persons, to learn the significance and techniques of environment-emphasized agriculture that identifies and effectively utilizes local resources for agriculture. Along with these ideas, the DRCSC began environmental education projects for rural areas some 7 to 8 years ago. At the same time, other organizations were providing training to younger generations.

Amongst these cooperating organizations was a women's NGO known as Nisththa. Founded in 1975, Nisththa conducts multilateral activities aimed at improving the health, education, child labor issues and revenue of women. One of those activities has been a "continuous agriculture class" offered every Sunday over the past 5 years to girl students age 14 to 16. The children also receive instruction from a DRCSC specialist twice a month. The truth of the matter is that women perform the bulk of the farm work, but the male head of the house reaps more of the produce and revenue. Men are called "farmers" but women are not. The objective of this "class" is to increase the number of women farmers in the area with sound skills and also aggressively promote farming as a future job option. It will prevent marriage at a young age and the migration of young women to urban areas in pursuit of low wage jobs. Above all, Nisththa is a rural village on the outskirts of Calcutta, therefore, other issues exist such as the sale of farmland for commercial or industrial use and the excessive use of agrochemicals. However, if

organic farming that protects the environment does well, income should rise because of the nearby city. Already, more than 100 girls have been through the year-and-a-half training course. Amongst these 100 students, they have emerged as young trainers to teach other women in their villages. These women are beginning to think of themselves as being “engaged” in agriculture rather than just lending a hand. This attempt by Nishtha to foster in women the ability to take responsibility for agriculture and make decisions has been suggested as one effective way to develop communities.

\* Sources:

- 1) “National Bureau of Soil Survey & Land Use Planning”, Soils of West Bengal for Optimizing Land
- 2) West Bengal/CMIE at [www.cmie.com/database](http://www.cmie.com/database)



Nishtha's “continuous agriculture class” is a year-and-a-half course for 20 female students. Participants learn techniques at the demonstration fields of the organization.



After completing the course, the 20 women break up into 5 groups to teach what they learned to their mothers, relatives and other women in their villages. They also learned communication and teaching skills in the course.