

THE SILENT REVOLUTION

Subhash Palekar's philosophy of natural farming has met with great success and is now practiced by more than 50,000 farmers in Karnataka, says **Chandan Gowda**

IN the wake of the acute food shortage in the 1960s, the architects of the Green Revolution pushed for the widespread acceptance of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, high-yielding seeds, and intensive water irrigation. It is now evident that these technologies have caused a lot of harm to the ecosystem: dead soil, contamination of the food chain and groundwater and heightened vulnerability of crops to pests.



Subhash Palekar

Luckily, this yield-centered orientation to agriculture has met with dissent in different parts of the country over the last three decades. One of the highly creative and robust voice of dissent belongs to Subhash Palekar, a philosopher of agriculture from Maharashtra. Accessible only in Marathi for a long time, his thoughts on agriculture have recently become available in a two-volume book in English, *The Philosophy of Spiritual Farming: Zero Budget of Natural Farming*.

Palekar's ideas on natural farming evolved from his research done in Maharashtra between 1988 and 1996. Using eclectic textual evidence from the Vedas, historical and literary works, he claims to have rediscovered principles of natural farming that existed a few thousand years ago. Natural farming, for Palekar, is a "spiritual penance (*sadhana*)" incorporating the ascetic practices of self-purification and self-mastery. He believes in a method of cultivation which makes the already existing nutrients in the soil, such as phosphate, potash, zinc and calcium available in absorbable form by the plants. This is made possible by the millions of micro-organisms present in *Jeevamruta* (Nectar of Life), a solution Palekar obtained from a mixture of water, dung and urine of indigenous cattle, jaggery and besan flour. Seed and plant diseases are treated with the help of cheap easily available materials like buttermilk, black pepper, neem and tobacco.

Jeevamruta is not a fertiliser; it only activates the soil ingredients necessary for a plant's healthy growth.

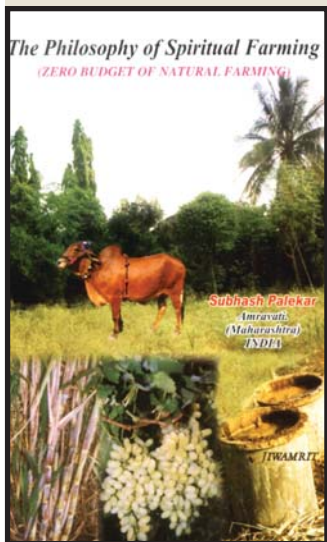
Since it is to be mixed with the water normally given to plants (or just sprinkled across the field, in the case of dry land cultivation), it involves a lot less labour than that required for putting fertilisers and pesticides. Palekar also offers detailed prescriptions for mulching, soil aeration and pest control, suggesting alongside the modifications required in their application across different crops and soil conditions. The valuable knowledge present in traditional farming, he angrily reminds us, has not found research attention at the agricultural universities.

Besides enabling the growth of safe, healthy produce, Palekar's model eliminates the cost of fertilisers, pesticides and seeds and greatly reduces the incentive to borrow, one of the chief causes for farmer suicides in the country. Hence its evocative title, *Zero-Budget Natural Farming*. Palekar distinguishes his model from organic farming, usually seen as the alternative to chemical farming. While vermicompost, biodynamic and other kinds of organic farming avoid the use of artificial chemical inputs they still violate the principles of natural farming since their methods do not enable processes of self-replenishment found in nature. Now an industry with massive commercial interests, the techniques of organic farming are also proving to be unaffordable for individual farmers.

After meeting with considerable success in Maharashtra, Palekar has aroused much curiosity among farmers in Karnataka. The levels of excitement caused by his ideas have not been seen since Masanobu Fukuoka's cult book on natural farming, *One Straw Revolution*, became available in Kannada in 1988. Many politically committed groups have extended a spirited reception to his ideas. Swami Anand, a Mysore-based farmer-activist, has helped co-ordinate over 70 heavily attended workshops and demonstrations of Palekar's agricultural methods across the state in the last three years. (More than 900 such workshops have been organised in Maharashtra). Palekar was present for many of these events, lecturing in Hindi, with a Kannada translator by his side, on the evils of the agro-chemical industry and the importance of reviving the land through natural farming. Over 50,000 farmers are now practicing his method on their fields in Karnataka.

Anand's book on Palekar's philosophy of natural farming, written in Kannada, has sold more than 40,000 copies. Palekar wants agriculture to remain a livelihood option in rural India. He wishes to renew faith in natural farming and its ecological sanity at a time when talk of economic growth rates, IT, biotechnology, India's imminent super-power status and the like threatens to colonise our imagination of the future. Palekar's proposal for living with the soil is, without doubt, a refreshing episode in contemporary Indian politics.

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Natalie Imbruglia speaks with patient Hauwa Saadu (20) at the Kwali Rehabilitation Centre in Kanu, Nigeria



Photo credit: Lucian Read/WpN/UNFPA

VOICE OF HOPE

SINGER AND SONGWRITER NATALIE IMBRUGLIA'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CAMPAIGN TO END FISTULA HAS DRAWN WORLDWIDE ATTENTION TO THIS LITTLE-KNOWN CONDITION, SAYS **COLIN TODHUNTER**

HOW many of you reading this article have heard of the condition obstetric fistula? Not too many, I suspect. Until a couple of years ago, I had never heard of it either. I first heard about it from the Australian singer/songwriter Natalie Imbruglia who was talking about it on a UK television news programme as an official spokesperson for the UN-backed Campaign to End Fistula.

Fistula is a horrendous condition that affects poor young women in Africa, the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent. It is caused by a hole in the birth canal brought about by prolonged labour without suitable medical intervention, usually a Caesarean operation. Apart from having to cope with the trauma associated with giving birth to a stillborn baby, left untreated, fistula can lead to a woman getting ulcerations, kidney disease and nerve damage in the legs.

Two million women have the condition, with up to 100,000 new cases emerging each year. In the main, they have little say in who they marry, when they marry and the social pressure to give birth can be intense. It affects women living far from medical services, who may be undernourished, giving birth at a very young age and/or who have births in quick succession.

The condition is characterised by leaking urine and faeces. The misery is endless, the smell can be overpowering and the cleaning up constant. Husbands leave, family and neighbours ostracise the women and a life of intense isolation and hardship ensues. Early marriage and poverty cut off many life opportunities for these women, including access to education, meaning that they later have little, if anything, to fall back upon in terms of economic independence.

Until recently, the condition was usually out of sight, out of mind to policy makers. However, the Campaign to End Fistula is in the process of changing that. I recently



contacted Natalie Imbruglia and asked her about her involvement in the Campaign to End Fistula.

● **How did you initially hear about fistula and the Campaign to End Fistula?**

I was talking to Richard Branson about wanting to get more involved in a charity and he thought I would be drawn to fistula, and he was right. I became an Ambassador for Virgin Unite and they linked me up with UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), the agency leading the Campaign to End Fistula. I was horrified that I had never heard about fistula before, so within weeks I was on a plane to Nigeria and Ethiopia to learn more about it.

● **What was your particular motivation to get involved with a campaign to eradicate fistula?**

This issue struck a chord with me. It was so devastating to me that all these women were suffering from a condition that is preventable and treatable. I just didn't think it should be happening in this day and age. It didn't seem like fistula was being talked about at all and I was alarmed by the lack of attention it was receiving. I felt that these

women needed a voice. That's what made me so keen to get involved.

● **How did your trip to Africa affect you and how did it enhance your understanding of fistula?**

My experience in Africa was shocking at first, but the women are so inspiring. In Nigeria I visited various hospitals in Kano and Katsina. I met women who were waiting to have fistula surgery, and women who had already had their surgery. I also went to a village and met a woman who was getting on with life in her community after surgery.

I met a girl who lived with fistula for 16 years. It was just horrible—her baby had died, her husband had left her and she had been ostracised by her community. After she'd been treated, she was just so ecstatic and looking forward to having another baby.

It's amazing to think that for 300 US dollars, a simple surgery can give a woman her life back. These women are so happy that someone is helping them. To see their dignity restored is a wonderful thing.

● **There are obviously huge social, cultural, economic and**

health issues at work, but what do you think is the best way forward for eradicating the condition?

The Campaign to End Fistula is working in three main areas: prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. Prevention is really the key to ending fistula. One of the main ways we can prevent fistula is by making sure that women have a professionally trained midwife on hand during the delivery who can recognise complications and refer them to a hospital for emergency care if needed.

Education is also important — educating men, the community and spiritual leaders about this problem, and educating women so that they understand the need for appropriate care during pregnancy and childbirth. Through the Campaign, we also focus on treating women who already have fistula, and teach them skills so that when they go back into their community they are economically independent.

For the past few years, I've been trying to raise awareness and funds for the Campaign to End Fistula — it's important that people know what fistula is, and to know that they can help. You can go to www.EndFistula.org to learn more about fistula and how to get involved.

The Campaign to End Fistula is bringing the plight of women affected by the condition to a wide audience. In just a few years, \$20 million has been mobilised by donors to help the campaign. Some cynics may ask what is the point of rich and famous individuals getting involved in certain issues that affect the lives of people with whom they have very little in common. But that would be missing the point entirely. If it were not for Natalie Imbruglia, I would never have heard about fistula. If it were not for Natalie Imbruglia, I would never have written this article that you see here today. Ms Imbruglia says that she did not want to be part of the silence. Neither did I. When you think about it, none of us should be. ■