

Experimenting with ancient knowledge

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In the early 1990's, a group of farmers in the village of Malnad in the state of Karnataka, India, were facing increasing agricultural problems. They joined forces to explore a new agricultural development strategy, one that was not simply economic but which also promoted moral, ethical, spiritual and ecological values. In 1996 this group became a registered body under the name *Krishi Prayoga Pariwari (KPP)*. Today more than 10,000 farmers are involved in the organisation.

Krishi Prayoga Pariwari is engaged in three activities: promoting eco-friendly agriculture, revitalising local health traditions and educating young people for their future roles as traditional leaders in their communities.

The agricultural research activities carried out in co-operation with the *Compas* program started in 1998. KPP collects information on present farming practices as well as ancient agricultural texts on palm leaves. On the basis of this knowledge, KPP is designing on-farm research for testing existing practices and supports revalidation of the ancient practices described in these old texts. Tests can be carried out to measure the efficacy of a technology but they can also lead to a better understanding of the cause and effect of a phenomenon. Through experimentation modifications to indigenous practices are developed which enhance their productivity and their relation to ecological circumstances or cultural context.

Proven technologies are disseminated through seminars, workshops and training. Over the five past years more than 25,000 farmers have participated in these programmes. KPP also produces books and a regular newsletter in Kannada the local language.

Lokopakaram

KPP draws inspiration from the traditions of India, as described in the *Lokopakaram*, the first known scientific literature in Kannada. Written in 1025 AC as a palm script, it was first published by the Madras Oriental Research Institute in 1950.

Lokopakaram is a text consisting of ten chapters. It deals with subjects such as *Vrksayurveda* (treatment of plants), *Udarkargalam* (water divining and sources of underground water), *Vasthusilpa* (architecture) and *Naravaidyaki Prakarana* (human medicine). To quote stanzas 6 and 7 of the *Vrksayurveda* chapter on fruit seed selection, treatment and sowing: "Select seeds from fallen, well-developed, ripened fruit. Treat with cow

dung and dry for five days. Soak seeds in milk for a week and mix them with the juice of *Solanum indicum* and salt water. Incense the seeds with *Embelia ribes* and ghee. Sow the seeds at the right time with joy and enthusiasm. Fresh water should be sprinkled for good growth. Shravana, Magha, Mula, Chitra, Vishaka, Mrugashira, Rohini and Hastha are good astral times for sowing".

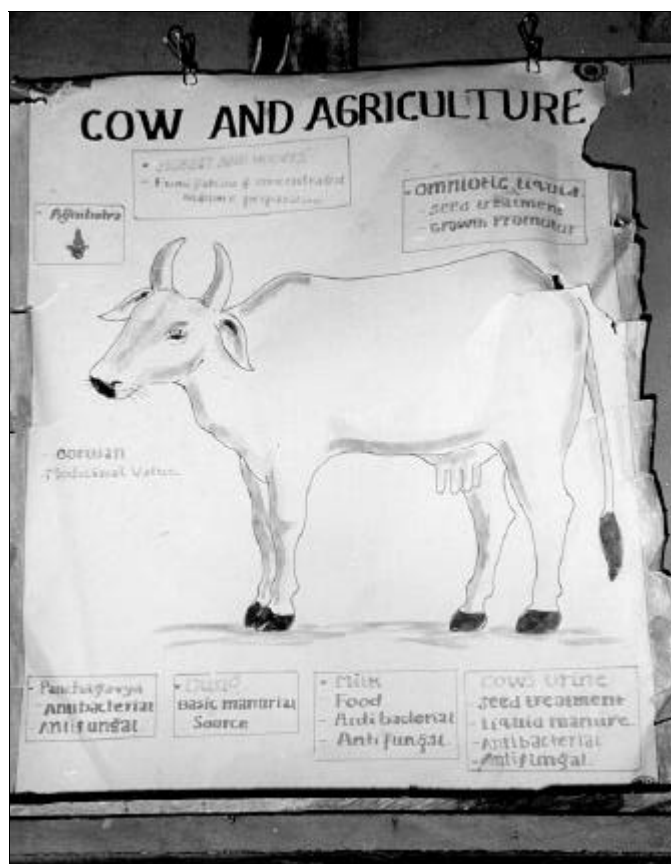
Are these ancient techniques still useful today? An experiment was carried out by the Karnataka Government Department of Forestry.

According to the practice described in the *Lokopakaram*, 10 kilos of leaves of three different tree species, *Ankole (Alangium salifolium)*, *Sabbasige (Anethum sowa)* and *Fenugreek (Trigonella foenum-graecum)* were added to the soil around a single *Phyllanthus* tree. Then fresh fox meat was added and the soil was irrigated daily. *Vetivera* and *Witanisa somnifera* roots were used to cover the stem portion and water was sprinkled over this. One kilo of honey was diluted and applied once a month for three months. The treatment resulted in the tree growing very fast. It yielded 10 times more biomass than surrounding plants.

This is a good example of the work of KPP: stimulating research in ancient practices that result in eco-friendly tech-

niques. Results show that these techniques can be used today. However, we suggest that instead of fox meat, the flesh of animals that have died a natural death should be used.

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The cow is sacred and has multiple functions in agriculture (KPP poster).

Photo: Bertus Haverkort