India's Natural Farm Friend
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AGRICULTURE

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A.V. Sanghavi has dedicated his life to Earth-friendly ways of growing food-and made money doing it

Farming is not business but a religious work," says Ashok V. Sanghavi, master gardener at the innovative Sanghavi Farm in Southern Gujurat, India. He is dedicated to "the art of organic and natural farming." His farm, originally a rocky wasteland which required dynamite to till, is now an oasis of life and food.

"Study plants and you will come to know that plants generate things which they do not consume," Sanghavi told Hinduism Today's Delhi correspondent, Rajiv Malik. "The plants are totally dedicated to nature and humanity. They strictly follow the dharma of doing things for others, which is what Hindu sanskriti [culture/civilization] teaches us. Plants also have a jiva, or soul. We do injustice and cruelty to plants when we spray chemicals on them. When we do this to the plants, unfortunately they can neither run away, nor protest or speak out."

Mr. Sanghavi learned much of his technique from Bhaskar H. Save, creator of the highly successful Kalpavruksha ("wish-fulfilling tree") Farm in Umbergaon, India. They have

spent many years together promoting their system. "My meeting with Sri Save has an interesting story behind it," said Mr. Sanghavi, "At one point of time in my life--I am 52 years old now--I was fed up with life due to poor health and on the verge of committing suicide. That was the time when I remembered God. He made me realize the value of a human birth. I realized that ending life was very easy, just a two-minute job, but the challenge was to live and succeed in life. I realized that it is because of chemicals and fertilizers that we become sick and cannot live even for 100 years and die at half this age. So it was during these times of frustration that I met my Guruji, Sri Bhaskar H. Save, who had left his occupation and was working for the natural and organic cause. He had been called a madman, but slowly he proved by his results that he was correct. I sat at his feet for a long time and learned the techniques of converting wasteland into greenland without spending much money. It is unfortunate, but I have to say that today we can fairly easily improve the land and make it fertile, but it is difficult to improve the minds of human beings."

The duo's most amazing work is the turning of wasteland into viable farmland. "Sanghavi Farm was initially rocky land with no vegetation. It was so bad that we had to use dynamite for the initial tilling of the waste material." Now the land is an incredibly productive farm. In fact, many of its trees and plants produce significantly more fruits than farms that use standard, commercial techniques. And they yield much higher profits (at least 400%) because of the low costs. Take coconuts, for example. In Kerala, using modern techniques, trees produce around 200 coconuts a year. Using natural farming Sanghavi gets an average yield of around 400 coconuts. Plus, using modern farming, coconut trees fruit in seven to eight years

after planting, whereas Sanghavi gets coconuts in three years. Chiku fruit is another productive crop. Without watering, the natural farming technique yields 660-770 pounds of sweet fruit per tree per year. Hundreds of farms all over India have begun using their technique and have become very successfully. Every Saturday, Save and Sanghvi give free classes at their farms.

Save and Sanghavi's work has been recognized and lauded all over the world with numerous awards, including the Bajaj award, which will be presented by the President of India at the beginning of 2001. World-famous Japanese farmer, Mr. Mansanobu Fukuoka, author of the influential One Straw Revolution, visited their farm and said, "Save is a second Gandhi for India. I have not observed similar work in the whole world. My heartiest wishes are that people should get guidance and inspiration here."

"A farmer is performing his dharma when he engages in agriculture, not just for making a profit," Sanghavi said. "Through agriculture we serve the animal kingdom, we serve the humankind and we serve the environment. Then how could this be termed as business? It is performance of dharma. It is indeed a religious activity."

Both farmers also have temples on their farm land. Kalpavruksha Farm has a Yogeshwar Krishi Mandir where they are daily training 10 priests how to look for the Lord in the plants and worship them. These priests then carry out this work of performing pujas. Mr. Sanghavi, a Jain, has named his farm "Raja Rishabh Temple." The Jain samaj, or society,

gathers and worships there. "We do not perform any puja when we plant the trees," Said Mr. Sanghavi, "However, we do a bhoomi puja, [worship of the land] in the initial stages of tilling. After all, we are ripping apart the heart of mother land, and we seek forgiveness for this act from the mother when we do the bhoomi puja. This is a part of our ancient samskaras, or rites."

Save's Kalpavruksha Farm is currently being forced into closure as the multinational American company, Unocal, has been allotted the land to build a port, much to the dismay of Save and his family and followers. The government claims that the area designated for the port is wasteland--but not to the likes of Save and Sanghavi, who grow mangoes, chikus, bananas and coconuts on it.

Sanghvi summarizes his philosophies thus, "Chemicals and fertilizers interfere in the natural processes of plants. That is the root cause of the whole problem. God is not mad. There is a certain order in creation which has to be properly understood. All controls have to be natural, without disturbance from external elements. This is the important matter we need to understand.".

Sanghavi Farm Basics

*Never till the ground, except initially. Earthworms are natures tillers. They aerate the soil and leave nutrient-rich waste. Tilling cuts the roots and damages the delicate tissues.

*Feed the earth, not the tree, by putting kitchen food waste

and manure just below the ends of the trees branches. Earthworms and other organisms then eat it, leaving behind rich nutrients. We call this the "buffet system," as the plants eat whatever nutrients they need.

*Do not weed around trees. Weeds lock essential moisture in the soil and keep it from erosion. You can cut the weeds if they get too tall, but lay the cut weeds around the tree as mulch.

*Never use chemical fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides.

*Be conservative with water, using only what is necessary. The entire root area (under the branches) should be watered evenly, not all at the trunk, so that we do not "block the nose and mouth of the plants."

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