AFEW months back, I was at an artisanal products exhibition, where there was a stall showcasing organic leather bags. A buyer marvelled: “Wow, we have organic leather too?” The stall owner’s response was: “Sir, this is from animals that were fed only natural grass and organic oil-cakes when alive”.

Subhash Palekar’s Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) runs on four “wheels”:
- *Jiwamrita* (a microbial culture of dung and urine from indigenous cow species, jaggery, pulses, flour, bud soil and water).
- *Bijamrita* (a seed treatment solution with almost the same ingredients).
- *Mulching* (covering the soil with dried leaves and straw for moisture conservation and proper aeration) and *Bijamrita* (providing water outside the plant’s canopy).

These four elements will ensure that the crop receives enough nutrients through the action of living microorganisms in the soil, in addition to the water, carbon dioxide, nitrogen and solar energy for photosynthesis that come “free” from the monsoon, air and sun. ZBNF also advocates insect and pest management through decoction sprays of Agniastra, Bramhashtra and Neemstra, which are made using desic cow dung, urine, jaggery, garlic, papaya and pomegranate.

Whatever name they go by, natural farming approaches are now finding acceptance even from governments. Sikkim claims to have become India’s first fully organic state. Andhra Pradesh has established Rythu Sadhikara Coordination Committee’s ‘Sunday ho ya Monday, roz khaon ande’ ad jingles in the nineties did for our poultry industry? When scientists also haven’t accepted the technology. One criticism against ZBNF is that it doesn’t factor in the labour required for maintaining indigenous cows (which yield less milk), collecting their dung and urine, and making the various Jiwamrita, Bijamrita or Neemstra concoctions.

The least policy can do is to make agricultural research institutions providing training to farmers in organic agriculture, which both labour as well as knowledge-intensive.

Finally, there can be no better time for a communication campaign targeting farmers and consumers on the benefits of organic. What can policymakers do to make natural agriculture viable, especially for 85% of India’s farmers who have less than one-hectare holding?

Start with, they should recognise that India is a vast country with many agro-climatic zones, crops and, within that, myriad varieties, some high yielding and some local cultivars. While our policy focus earlier was to increase production, the emphasis now should be on what is an optimal model for each of these zones, crops, varieties and even different classes of farmers. Equally important to note is that each model – be it natural farming or growing high-yielding varieties/hybrids responsive to application of chemical inputs – has prerequisites. The organic models, including SRI, are more fastidious and labour-intensive, as they work at restoring ecosystems.

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