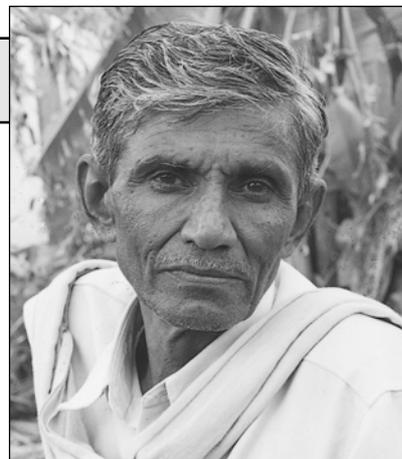


# Documenting farmers knowledge



For ages, Vedas and Sanskrit slokas were being taught by the priests to their children, without scripts, transferring the knowledge orally. But same has not been the case with agriculture knowledge. Agricultural technologies and good practices were not taught orally by farmers to their children, may be due to hard work and lack of time. The situation remains same even today though most of them are literate and know to read the script. For example, almost every farmer knew the scientific method of making compost. By maintaining proper moisture and regularly covering with tank silt mud layers, the volatilization of nitrogen from the compost pit was being checked. They also used to make heaps of 10 to 12 cart loads of compost in the crop land at one place and cover it with top soil (4 to 6 inches) to protect moisture, encourage further composting and to check the nitrogen volatilization. They used to incorporate the compost by ploughing as soon as possible after spreading the compost in the land. Since this technique was neither taught orally nor documented, such important scientific practices were lost during generations. Similarly, since the market rates are not documented or disseminated over the years systematically, no farmer could determine when most of the vegetable rates drop. Tomato glut during the months of April and May, is a clear example.

Documentation in agriculture, mostly in the form of research papers, is too elaborate with very little practical or result oriented information. Most of the time it is contradictory and not of much use for farmers. Similarly, publications on package of practices published by the Department of Agricultural Extension and the Agriculture Universities are focused on high cost chemical external inputs. These are not only expensive, but also destructive to soil health, environment and crop yields. More documentation on low cost, organic and local available inputs, with the experiences of successful organic farmers is necessary.

There should also be a sense of responsibility while publishing articles. Sometimes, a short time experience without much proven evidence is glorified. For instance, some 10 years back, there was an article in a local news magazine, that strawberry cultivation in Gulburga district, Karnataka state, would give huge returns to the farmer. Based on this information, atleast 100 farmers in Karnataka brought strawberry seedlings from Poona and started cultivating. However, it was realised later that there was hardly any demand for this fruit and farmers could not even sell the harvest, forget about the huge profits they were to make. It is unfortunate that the same magazine failed to report this failure, which could have prevented many more farmers jumping into the fray. Therefore, it is equally important to document bad experiences also.

Many farmers who have a scientific approach and practical knowledge, can hardly document their experience. Factors include lack of time and resources along with expertise in articulation. To some extent this can be overcome with a little support by an NGO, who works in that area. The staff of the NGO could document farmer's experiences while

acknowledging the source. This will serve as an inspiration and encouragement to the farmer.

NGO staff with agricultural background and interest could also document the traditional knowledge of aged people, about their early cultivation practices. Old women, particularly are a rich source of information on seed selection, preservation and also local traditional use of herbs in maintaining the health of humans and livestock.

Farmers also should make it a practice to maintain information on their day to day operations on the farm, to help them decide which crop is more economical. It is always good to take photos to compare with different situations and to convince or teach others. I myself have a very good experience of making a video film on SRI or Madagascar method of paddy cultivation. I use this to spread the message to farmers across many states in India. Audio documentation during discussions at the seminars, workshops and farmer's groups could be very good in disseminating knowledge on good practices.

Farming communities can also maintain a register of locally available bio-diversity and its usefulness in agriculture, animal husbandry and human health. Such a registry would help to check bio-piracy and illegal patenting by other countries.

It is better to discuss with as many people as possible before one concludes to document some practices. Farmer's Field Schools are very successful in educating farmer groups with pictures and charts on various good practices. Similarly, such charts related to the importance of plants, trees, birds and beneficial insects have to be displayed at least in the rural schools, so that the future farmers would know better about their importance.

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