

Ashes to yield: organic farming's new mantra

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IN the din of concerns expressed over agriculture in Parliament, a small — but interesting — detail on organic farming got drowned.

The government revealed that an organic farming research group working for over three years at the CSK Himachal Pradesh Agricultural University in Palampur has observed improved crop growth when the soil was treated with the by-products of *homa*, primarily ashes, along with organic manure.

In response to an unstarred question by the BJP's Shreegopal Vyas in the Rajya Sabha, Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar also said that the research has shown crop diseases to have been treated by the chanting of *mantras*.

"Yes, we have observed better crop prospects when the *bhasmas* were integrated with other components of organic farming. At present, these are only observations from our experiments and not a scientific confirmation. But we hope to publish our controlled observations within a year and a scientific paper

on it a few years later after proper scientific validation," Dr Y S Paul, Head of the Department of Organic Agriculture at the university told *The Indian Express* over the phone.

Paul said researchers found that *bhasma* produced after *homa*, using cowdung cakes, *desi* ghee and unbroken rice at sunrise and sunset, appeared to have better nutrient composition in terms of nitrogen, potassium, magnesium and zinc as compared to by-products obtained otherwise. The *homas* are usually performed in specially designed pyramid shaped copper utensils.

Pawar told the Rajya Sabha that experiments on wild marigold and aloe vera, which were fed organic manures treated or mixed with *homa bhasma* and Him-Bio — a biofertilizer developed at Palampur that contains a *homa bhasma* treated with four different extracts of local fungi called trichoderma — produced a higher yield than when they were treated simply with organic manure. Paul said the organic research group had observed better yields in pea and maize too when treated with *homa bhasma* manure.

The research, which began in April 2006 with about Rs 40 lakh from the National Centre of Organic Farming, is aimed at scientific validation of this kind of organic farming that is being practised in many parts of the world, including Brazil and Germany, Paul said.

The 20-member research team is working on the project is looking at the possible role of *mantras* and *homa bhasma* in purifying the environment and consequently improving crop yield.

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