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The Nectar of Life: Fermentation, Soil Health and Bionativism in Indian Natural Farming

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In response to agrarian crisis, small-scale farmers in South India are experimenting with the application of agricultural ferments to their degraded soils. This article focuses on the “Nectar of Life”, a fermented preparation made by practitioners of Zero Budget Natural Farming out of the urine and dung of native cows. Based on ethnography in Wayanad, Kerala, and textual analysis of statements by Subhash Palekar, the inventor of the ferment, I unpack its recipe ingredient-by-ingredient and show that fermenting the Nectar of Life enacts a microbial ontology of agriculture. Through fermentation, natural farmers rethink soil care as a fundamentally relational activity that requires humans, cows, plants and microorganisms to work together for mutual benefit. However, fermentation and natural farming are also implicated in what I call bionativism, a nativism focused on biological belonging. The native cow as the cornerstone species of probiotic fermentation makes microbial thinking compatible with nativist politics and tropes of the Hindu Right. I analyze the ambivalences of combining probiotic perspectives on more-than-human health with a rejection of alien species. I show how fermentation practices produce not only living soils but also nativist objects such as native cows, native earthworms, and native soils as well as their foreign enemies.

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