**Influence of Organic and Natural Farming Practices on Soil Microbial Biomass Carbon and Enzymatic Activity in Arecanut and Black pepper cropping system**

**Abstract**

An experiment was conducted to study the effect of different farming practices on microbial biomass carbon and enzyme activity in arecanut with black pepper cropping system at Horticulture Research and Extension Crenter, Sirsi. The study reveals that the higher microbial biomass carbon (270.20 mg kg-1), microbial biomass nitrogen (28.42 mg kg-1), dehydrogenase (18.55 ug TPF g-1 24 hr-1) and acid phosphatase (19.22 ug PNP g-1 h-1) activity was recorded at the surface soil (0-20cm) of organic farming practice followed by natural farming practice as compared integrated and chemical farming practice. So it can be concluded that both organic and natural framing practices contribute to sustainable agriculture by enhancing soil health, which is essential for long-term crop productivity and ecosystem resilience.

**Key words:** Arecanut, Black pepper, Organic farming, Natural farming

**Introduction**

Intensification of conventional farming systems has led to extensive usage of agrochemicals, agricultural machinery, high-demanding varieties resulting in negative impacts on the environment such as groundwater pollution and atmospheric contamination that amplifies the greenhouse effect. The environmental pressure generates a negative effect not only on human health and natural resources but also on the sustainability of agriculture production itself (Mylonas *et al.,* 2020). Arecanut (*Areca catechu*) and black pepper (*Piper nigrum*) are two economically significant tropical crops in Western Ghats of Karnataka. This unique cropping system has gained attention due to its potential for sustainable and diverse agricultural production. The important problems associated with these soils are P fixation, heavy rainfall during monsoon season resulting in nutrient losses through run off, leaching of basic cations and poor nutrient retention capacity due to low CEC (3-15 c mole kg-1) (Tandon and Ranganathan, 1988) However, the conventional farming practices employed in the cultivation of these crops have raised concerns related to environmental sustainability, soil health and long-term productivity. With increasing challenges such as rising input costs, soil degradation, pollution and the specter of climate change, there is a growing imperative to explore alternative farming systems that harmonize with natural processes and prioritize the well-being of both the agroecosystem and its stewards.

Organic and natural farming practices emerge as a beacon of hope, offering a holistic approach to agriculture that can meet the challenges posed by population growth, environmental degradation and global warming. Organic farming is a special agriculture approach that promote and enhances agro-ecosystem health such as soil biological activity, biological cycles and biodiversity. Natural Farming (NF) is considered to be agroecology based diversified farming system, which integrates crops, trees and livestock, allowing functional biodiversity (Rosset and Martinez-Torres, 2012) to drastically cut down production costs by replacing the chemical fertilisers and pesticides with home-grown product like Ganajeevamrutha, Jeevamritha, Beejamritha, Neemastra, etc., and adopting intercropping and mulching (Palekar, 2005; 2006). Organic farming aims to enable the soil to provide the crop with all the nutrients it needs for healthy growth and development. These farming systems enhance beneficial microflora to maintain soil quality and soil health and also these microflora act as plant growth promoters (PGP) and biocontrol agents against the phytopathogens. The transition from conventional practices to organic and natural farming is a crucial step towards ensuring sustainable food production and safeguarding the environment. One of the critical aspects in evaluating the sustainability of these alternative systems lies in their impact on soil health, particularly in terms of microbial biomass carbon and enzymatic activity. Soil health is a cornerstone of sustainable agriculture, its preservation and enhancement are closely tied to the well-being of soil microbial communities. Soil microbes play pivotal roles in nutrient cycling, organic matter decomposition and the maintenance of ecosystem stability.

Soil microbial biomass carbon, an essential component of soil organic matter, serves as an indicator of microbial activity and can influence soil fertility and overall agroecosystem productivity. Enzymes secreted by these microbes are key catalysts in various biochemical processes, including nutrient cycling and organic matter decomposition. By keeping all these points in consideration the present investigation was carried out with an objective to study the impact of organic farming and natural farming practices on soil microbial biomass carbon and enzymatic activities in arecanut-black pepper cropping system.

**Material and methods**

The investigation was conducted at Horticulture Research and Extension Center, Sirsi. Geographically Sirsi is located in the agro-climatic Zone 9 (Hilly zone) of Karnataka. The study area lies between 14°37' North latitude and 74° 85' East longitudes. The altitude of the study area is 590 m above mean sea level. The soil of the experimental site was sandy loam to sandy clay loam in texture.

**Experimental Details**

The experiment was laid out a randomized block design (RBD) with four treatments and five replications. The treatments included (1) Integrated nutrient management practices (INM), (2) Organic farming practices, (3) Natural farming practice, (4) Chemical farming practices. The details of the four treatments imposed in arecanut and black pepper are T1: INM (100:40:140 g N/P/K per palm per year + 25 ton of Farm yard manure (FYM) + 5-6 ton of vermicompost + biofertilizers was applied as recommended by the University of Horticultural Sciences, Bagalkot). T2: Organic farming (25 ton of FYM + 5-6 ton of vermicompost + biofertilizers were applied), T3: Natural farming (Ganajeevamrutha 400 kg/acre in split doses during the pre-monsoon (200 kg/acre) and post-monsoon (200 kg/acre) period. Jeevamrutha was sprinkled on soil (200 l/acre) at 15-day intervals) and T4: Chemical farming (100:40:140 g N/P/K per palm per year was applied as recommended by the University of Horticultural Sciences, Bagalkot). Additionally, 1kg of lime/palm/year was applied uniformly to all the treatments during the pre-monsoon period as per the recommendation. 1% Bordeaux mixture is also sprayed during the monsoon period.

**Soil Sample Preparation and Analysis**

Soil samples were collected at three depths of 0–20, 20–40 and 40-60cm in root zone at 60 cm from the tree trunk. Soil samples were processed by drying under the shade, powdering with a clean wooden mallet and passing through a 2 mm sieve. The processed samples were stored in polyethylene bags for analysis in the laboratory. The soil microbial biomass was determined following the chloroform fumigation incubation method (Jenkinson and Powlson, 1976) and the biomass C was calculated (Jenkinson and Ladd, 1981).

Pre-incubation of soil samples was done to restore the normal biological activities. A known quantity of soil was moistened to field capacity (60% of MWHC) and incubated at 37 ± 2 0C in a BOD incubator, three days for dehydrogenise and 7 days for phosphatase. The samples incubated were adopted to bring back to the original levels of biological activity (Basavaraj, 1984). Acid phosphatase activity was determined using the method described by Tabatabai and Bremmer (1969). Dehydrogenase activity was determined using TTC (2, 3, 5-triphenyl tetrazolium chloride) as a terminal acceptor of protons and electrons from organic compounds being oxidized (Gerba and Brendecke, 1995).

**Statistical analysis**

Data obtained during the investigation was subjected for two factorial RCBD. By taking nutrient management practices and soil depth as factors. Statistical analysis was performed at a 5 % level of significance using OPSTAT software.

**Results and discussion**

**Microbial biomass carbon and nitrogen**

Microbial biomass carbon (MBC) refers to that labile fraction of soil organic matter that constitutes living microorganisms smaller than 5–10 µm3. The MBC and MBN were significantly differed with depth and nutrient management practices. The surface soil (260.95 mg kg-1 and 29.16 mg kg-1 respectively) reported significantly higher MBC and MBN as compared to subsurface soil. The content of MBC and MBN were recorded substantially higher (267.70 mg kg-1 and 32.36 mg kg-1 respectively) under organic farming practice and it was significantly on par with natural farming practice followed by INM practice. Whereas, the lower (198.44 mg kg-1 and 20.15 mg kg-1 respectively) value of MBC and MBN content was recorded under chemical farming practice (Table 1). The variation could be attributed to the difference in microbial population which was influenced by SOC content. Due to the supply of additional mineralizable and ready hydrolyzable carbon sources through manures resulted in higher microbial activity and higher soil microbial carbon (SMB-C) and nitrogen (SMB-N) in organic farming practice as compared to chemical farming practice. This is in conformity with the results of Banger *et al.,* 2009, Dutta *et al*., 2022 and Katti *et al.*, 2020.

**Dehydrogenase enzyme activity**

Soil microorganisms produce soil enzymes which play an important role in maintaining soil ecology, physical and chemical properties, fertility and soil health. Soil enzymes convert toxic compounds into non-toxic compounds and also play vital role in mineral uptake by the plants (Mastiholi *et al.,* 2023). Das and Varma (2010) reported that, among all the enzymes in the soil environment, dehydrogenases are most important indicator of overall soil microbial activity. Dehydrogenase activity basically depends on the metabolic state of the soil biota.

Among different nutrient management practices, dehydrogenase activity was higher in organic farming practice and natural farming practice (19.52 and 18.61 µg PNP g-1 h-1, respectively) compared to INM and chemical farming practice (16.88 and 16.02 µg PNP g-1 h-1, respectively) as given in Table 2. The incorporation of organic manure like FYM, vermicompost and liquid organic manures like ghanajeevamruta and jeevamruta and mulching with crop residues enhanced the dehydrogenase activity because degradation of added material provided intra and extracellular enzymes and increased microbial activity in the soil (Bhattacharyya and Chakraborty, 2005). Application of organic and natural farming inputs enhanced microbial population and further enzyme production. Hence, application of organic inputs helped in enhancing dehydrogenase activity (Singh and Dhar 2011; Mahanta et al. 2017; Biswas et al. 2018; Małachowska-Jutsz and Matyja 2019).

**Table 1: Microbial biomass carbon and nitrogen status in acid soils as influenced by different nutrient management practices in arecanut with black pepper cropping system**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Treatments** | **Microbial biomass carbon (mg kg-1)** | | | | **Microbial biomass nitrogen (mg kg-1)** | | | |
| **Soil depth (cm)** | | | | **Soil depth (cm)** | | | |
| **0-20** | **20-40** | **40-60** | **Mean** | **0-20** | **20-40** | **40-60** | **Mean** |
| **T1** | 270.20 | 234.38 | 255.79 | 253.46 | 28.42 | 27.65 | 26.04 | 27.37 |
| **T2** | 289.23 | 269.29 | 244.57 | 267.70 | 34.12 | 33.54 | 29.43 | 32.36 |
| **T3** | 282.76 | 267.12 | 239.76 | 263.21 | 31.04 | 28.87 | 26.82 | 28.91 |
| **T4** | 201.61 | 215.61 | 178.11 | 198.44 | 23.06 | 20.11 | 17.29 | 20.15 |
| **Mean** | 260.95 | 246.60 | 229.56 |  | 29.16 | 27.54 | 24.90 |  |
| **Interaction** | M | D | M x D |  | M | D | M x D |  |
| **S. Em.±** | 2.58 | 2.23 | 4.46 |  | 0.13 | 0.11 | 0.22 |  |
| **CD at 5%** | 7.37 | 6.38 | NS |  | 0.37 | 0.31 | NS |  |

**Acid phosphatase activity**

Acid phosphatase is an important enzyme that cleaves the phosphate bound and makes it a simple hexaphosphate group secreted by both plants and microbes (Tabatabai, 1969). The higher (23.44 µg PNP g-1 h-1) phosphatase activity was recorded in surface soil compared to the sub-surface soil layer (18.49 and 14.74 µg PNP g-1h-1 in 20-40cm and 40-60cm respectively) (Fig. 1). The decrease might be due to the distribution of organic matter content and microorganisms in the soil profile (Khaziev and Burangulova, 1965).

Phosphatase activity was higher in organic farming and natural farming practices (23.44 and 20.79 µg PNP g-1 h-1) compared to INM and chemical farming practice (17.12 and 13.85 µg PNP g-1 h-1) (Table 2) this might be attributed to the long-term application of organic manures, which has a positive impact on microbial biomass and soil organic carbon, stimulating phosphatase activity and increasing enzyme levels in the soil. These findings are consistent with those of Nannipieri *et al.,* 2011 and Meena *et al.,* 2014, who found that long-term organic manure application to soil can greatly boost phosphatase activity due to the supply of energy sources.

**Table 2: Dehydrogenase and acid phosphatase enzyme activity status in acid soils as influenced by different nutrient management practices in arecanut with black pepper cropping system**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Treatments** | **Dehydrogenase (ug TPF g-1 24 hr-1)** | | | | **Acid phosphatase (ug PNP g-1 h-1)** | | | |
| **Soil depth (cm)** | | | | **Soil depth (cm)** | | | |
| **0-20** | **20-40** | **40-60** | **Mean** | **0-20** | **20-40** | **40-60** | **Mean** |
| **T1** | 18.55 | 16.44 | 15.64 | 16.88 | 19.22 | 17.12 | 15.02 | 17.12 |
| **T2** | 22.55 | 19.53 | 16.47 | 19.52 | 31.23 | 22.32 | 16.78 | 23.44 |
| **T3** | 20.80 | 18.87 | 16.17 | 18.61 | 26.34 | 20.10 | 15.94 | 20.79 |
| **T4** | 17.00 | 16.32 | 14.75 | 16.02 | 15.89 | 14.44 | 11.22 | 13.85 |
| **Mean** | 19.72 | 17.79 | 15.76 |  | 23.17 | 18.49 | 14.74 |  |
| **Interaction** | **M** | **D** | **M x D** |  | **M** | **D** | **M x D** |  |
| **S. Em.±** | 0.29 | 0.25 | 0.50 |  | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.25 |  |
| **CD at 5%** | 0.81 | 0.70 | 1.41 |  | 0.40 | 0.35 | NS |  |

T1- Integrated nutrient management, T2- Organic farming practice, T3- Natural farming practice

and T4- Chemical farming practice

M- Nutrient management practice, D- Depth, M x D- Interaction between nutrient management practice and depth, NS- non-significant

**Figure 1: Dehydrogenase and acid phosphatase enzyme activity influenced by different**

**nutrient management practices in arecanut with black pepper cropping system**

NOTE:

T1- Integrated nutrient management, T2- Organic farming practice, T3- Natural farming practice and

T4- Chemical farming practice

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, present study reveals that natural farming and organic farming practices contribute positively to soil health by enhancing the soil organic carbon, microbial biomass carbon and enzymatic activities. These outcomes suggest a sustainable ecosystem characterized by active nutrient cycling and improved soil fertility, a promising prospect for the long-term sustainability of agriculture.

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