

The Silent Battle: When the Hands That Feed Us Starve

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Context: This article sheds light on the struggles of apple farmers in Nepal, particularly in Mustang, where despite their hard work, they receive minimal returns due to middlemen, lack of storage facilities, and limited market access. It highlights the systemic issues that keep them in financial distress and explores potential solutions, such as cooperatives, government support, and technology-driven reforms, to ensure a fairer agricultural system.

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High in the mountains of Mustang, where the air is crisp and the orchards stretch across rolling hills, farmers wake up with the sun. They walk through rows of apple trees, their branches heavy with bright red fruit—apples so fresh and sweet that a single bite fills your mouth with juice.

Yet, despite their hard work, these farmers earn barely enough to survive. One elderly farmer, his hands rough from years of labor, handed me an apple and said with a quiet sigh, "*We sell these for just five rupees per kilogram.*"

Five rupees. That's all they get for apples that, by the time they reach Kathmandu, are sold for Rs. 200 per kilogram—even when the market is full of them.

I could hear the frustration in his voice. These apples—sweet, crisp, and homegrown—should have been their ticket to a better life. Instead, they were trapped in a cycle of exploitation. Another farmer sighed, brushing dust off his worn-out jacket. "Sometimes, insects destroy our crops, and we lose everything. We never want our sons to go through this struggle. That's why we send them to Gulf countries. At least there, they can earn a living."

The Unseen Hands Controlling the Market

Their words stuck with me. It's a bitter irony—Nepal, a country so rich in natural resources, imports millions of rupees worth of apple and orange wine from abroad, while its own farmers sell their crops for scraps. The reason? Middlemen.

In the heart of Nepal's agricultural system lies an invisible yet powerful chain of brokers, wholesalers, and commission agents who dictate the fate of farmers. These middlemen decide the prices, leaving the ones who work the hardest with the least. In Mustang, where apples thrive, farmers are forced to sell their produce for almost nothing, while consumers in urban markets unknowingly pay exorbitant rates. The real profit is absorbed somewhere in between—far from the hands of those who deserve it the most.

A Broken System: Why Farmers Always Lose

For generations, Nepal's farmers have been price takers, not price makers. They pour months of labor into their crops, only to watch their earnings slip through their fingers. Why does this happen?

1. **Lack of Storage and Processing Facilities:** Farmers can't afford to wait for better prices. Without cold storage, their apples will rot, forcing them to sell at whatever price middlemen offer.
2. **Limited Market Access:** In rural areas, farmers have no direct way to sell to consumers. They rely on traders who control pricing and supply chains.
3. **Debt Traps:** Many farmers borrow money from these same middlemen, creating a cycle of dependency. If a harvest fails, they are left in financial ruin.

It's not just apples. The same exploitation exists in Nepal's tea, cardamom, and vegetable markets. The system is rigged, and farmers are always on the losing end.

A Nation That Imports What It Can Produce

Nepal has the potential to be self-sufficient. We don't need to import foreign fruit-based products when we have fertile lands in Mustang and Manang, ready to produce world-class apples. Instead of relying on foreign apple wine, why not invest in our own? Imagine a **winemaking industry in Mustang**, where farmers sell their apples directly to processing factories, creating jobs and boosting Nepal's economy.

Countries around the world have found ways to protect their farmers:

- **India's E-NAM Platform:** A digital system that allows farmers to sell directly to buyers, eliminating middlemen.
- **Kenya's Mobile Banking:** Farmers receive instant payments through mobile transactions, ensuring fair trade.
- **European Farmer Cooperatives:** Farmers collectively own storage and processing facilities, allowing them to control pricing.

A Future Where Farmers Thrive

If Nepal is serious about protecting its farmers, real change is needed.

1. **Establish Farmer-Owned Cooperatives:** Giving farmers collective bargaining power can eliminate the reliance on middlemen.
2. **Government Support for Processing Industries:** Investing in winemaking and food-processing plants in regions like Mustang will create jobs and boost exports.
3. **Crop Insurance Programs:** Protecting farmers from climate disasters and pests will prevent them from falling into debt cycles.
4. **Technology-Driven Solutions:** A government-backed mobile platform providing real-time market prices and direct buyer connections could prevent price manipulation.
5. **Fair Price Regulations:** Setting a minimum support price for major crops would ensure farmers get a justifiable income.

The Cost of Doing Nothing

Every time a farmer gives up hope, we lose more than just a worker—we lose a way of life. Families are torn apart as young men leave for foreign lands, not because they want to, but because they have no other option. We are losing generations of agricultural knowledge, all because the system refuses to change.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Nepal has rebuilt itself before, and we can do it again. Our farmers don't need charity; they need fair opportunities. The next time you bite into a juicy apple, remember the hands that picked it. Remember the silent battle they fight every day. And ask yourself—how much longer will we let them fight alone?