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Magazine

BLUEBERRIES IN UTTARAKHAND:

SWEET POTENTIAL, ROCKY ROADS

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FROM THE FOUNDER & CEO'S DESK

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the latest issue of Just Agriculture—a publication dedicated to empowering, informing and inspiring the agricultural community. The landscape of agriculture continues to evolve, we are witnessing significant advancements in technology, sustainability practices, and global trends that are reshaping the way we produce, consume, and think about food, from precision farming to the integration of AI in crop management, innovation is at the heart of the agricultural revolution.

However, alongside these opportunities, challenges like climate change, supply chain disruptions and labor shortages remain pressing concerns that require our collective action and resilience.

At Just Agriculture, we are committed to being a bridge between these emerging technologies and the farmers, agribusinesses and stakeholders who will shape the future of agriculture. In this issue, we delve into topics that matter most: sustainable farming practices, the rise of agri-tech and the crucial role of policy in ensuring a thriving agricultural ecosystem. We also highlight success stories from across the globe, demonstrating how

adaptability and innovation are driving positive change.

I believe that the future of agriculture is bright, but it requires all of us—farmers, scientists, policymakers and consumers—to work together toward a common goal: ensuring food security, environmental sustainability and the well-being of future generations.

Thank you for your continued support and for being a part of this incredible journey. I hope this issue inspires you as much as it has inspired us to bring it to you.

Dr. D.P.S. BADWAL
Founder & CEO,
Just Agriculture-the Magazine

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FROM THE
CHIEF EDITOR'S DESK

Dear Readers,

It gives me immense pleasure to present the November 2025 issue of Just Agriculture, a special edition dedicated to highlighting one of the most transformative movements in recent times — the Viksit Krishi Sankalp Abhiyan 2025. As India steps firmly on the path of becoming a developed nation, this ambitious campaign under the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare is shaping a new era of progressive, sustainable, and inclusive agricultural growth.

This initiative is not merely a government program; it is a collective resolve to reimagine Indian agriculture through innovation, technology, and the unwavering commitment of our farming community. Across the country, we are witnessing a renewed energy in the fields, backed by strong institutional support from ICAR, agricultural universities, Krishi Vigyan Kendras, and allied departments, all working in synergy to turn vision into action.

In this issue, we bring to light the latest developments and success stories emerging from the heart of this national campaign. One of our lead features presents a comprehensive review of solar energy applications in agriculture, exploring how farmers are adopting clean and renewable energy solutions for irrigation, cold storage, drying, and protected cultivation. Solar energy is fast becoming a cornerstone of self-reliant and climate-smart farming.

We also cover vital topics such as cotton farming advancements, aquaponics as an emerging integrated farming system, and the role of

research and extension in spreading modern, science-backed agricultural practices to even the most remote corners of India. The issue captures the pulse of change and the spirit of innovation being nurtured under Viksit Krishi Sankalp Abhiyan.

At Just Agriculture, we remain committed to serving as a bridge between knowledge and practice, policy and ground-level impact. Through this edition, we hope to inform, inspire, and ignite further dialogue among students, researchers, farmers, policymakers, and agri-entrepreneurs who are contributing to the evolving narrative of Indian agriculture.

I invite you to engage deeply with the stories, research, and perspectives shared in this issue. Together, let us move forward with the shared vision of a "Viksit Krishi"—empowered, enlightened, and ever-evolving.

Dr. Sushila
Chief Editor,
Just Agriculture-the Magazine

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Natural Farming in India:
Concepts, Implementation and Impact

Ankit Yadav[1], Ashish Kumar Tiwari[2], Alpana Baijapi[3], Awanish Kumar[4]

[1]Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi

[2,3]Department of Agronomy, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi

[4]Department of Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi

Natural farming has emerged as a significant shift in India's agricultural strategy, promoting chemical-free, eco-friendly practices that enhance soil health and biodiversity. In recent years, the Government of India has been actively encouraging this approach through policy frameworks, pilot projects, and farmer training programs. This explainer examines the conceptual foundation, implementation strategies, benefits, and challenges of natural farming in the Indian context, drawing on official reports, parliamentary responses, and government guidelines.

UNDERSTANDING NATURAL FARMING

Natural farming is an agricultural method that relies on natural inputs, avoiding synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified organisms. It focuses on restoring ecological balance and making farming systems self-sustainable.

Natural Farming Includes

Soil Enrichment: Using locally prepared bio-inputs such as Beejamrit (seed treatment solution) and Jeevamrit (fermented microbial culture) to enhance soil microbiology.

Mulching and Cover Crops: Retaining soil moisture, preventing erosion, and increasing organic matter.

Intercropping and Crop Diversity: Growing complementary crops together to reduce pest incidence and improve yield resilience.

Minimal Tillage: Reducing soil disturbance to preserve microbial and fungal networks.

Unlike organic farming—which may still use certain permitted external inputs—natural farming promotes on-farm resource cycling, reducing dependency on purchased inputs altogether.

Government Initiatives under Natural Farming

The Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare has spearheaded programs to mainstream natural farming.

OBJECTIVES OF NATURAL FARMING

Promoting sustainable agricultural practices.
Reducing environmental impact from chemical-intensive farming.
Increasing farmers' income by cutting input costs and accessing premium markets.

INTEGRATED NATURAL FARMING COMPONENTS

Bharatiya Prakritik Krishi Padhati (BPKP): Part of the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY), targeting chemical-free farming using traditional practices.

National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA):
Supports natural resource management, water-use efficiency, and crop diversification.

Special Projects: States like Andhra Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh have received funding for large-scale natural farming adoption.

The Role of Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs)
KVKs serve as the primary extension network for agricultural innovation in India, and their role in natural farming has expanded rapidly based on field demonstrations of natural farming methods, training programs for farmers, rural youth, and extension workers and workshops on preparation of bio-inputs like Beejamrit and Jeevamrit.

COMPONENTS OF NATURAL FARMING

Beejamrit

A fermented mixture of cow dung, cow urine, water, and lime, used to treat seeds before sowing. The use of Beejamrit, prevents seed-borne diseases, enhances germination and introduces beneficial microbes to the rhizosphere.

Jeevamrit

A liquid bio-fertilizer prepared with cow dung, cow urine, jaggery, pulse flour, and soil from the farm. The use of Jeevamrit, boosts microbial activity, supplies essential plant nutrients and improves soil aeration and water retention.

Mulching

Covering the soil with crop residues or organic matter. The use of mulching, conserves moisture, suppresses weed growth and adds organic carbon to the soil.

BENEFITS OF NATURAL FARMING

Lower Input Costs: Elimination of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides reduces operational expenditure.

Premium Market Access: Growing demand for chemical-free produce in domestic and export markets.

Resilience against Price Volatility: Reduced dependency on external agricultural inputs shields farmers from price spikes.

Soil Health Restoration: Enhanced organic matter and microbial diversity.

Water Conservation: Mulching and soil structure improvements lead to better water retention.

Reduced Pollution: Less runoff of harmful chemicals into water bodies.

Food quality: Enhances food safety and nutritional quality.

Knowledge systems: Revives traditional agricultural knowledge systems compared with natural farming.

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Yield Transition Period: Farmers may experience initial yield drops as the ecosystem stabilizes.

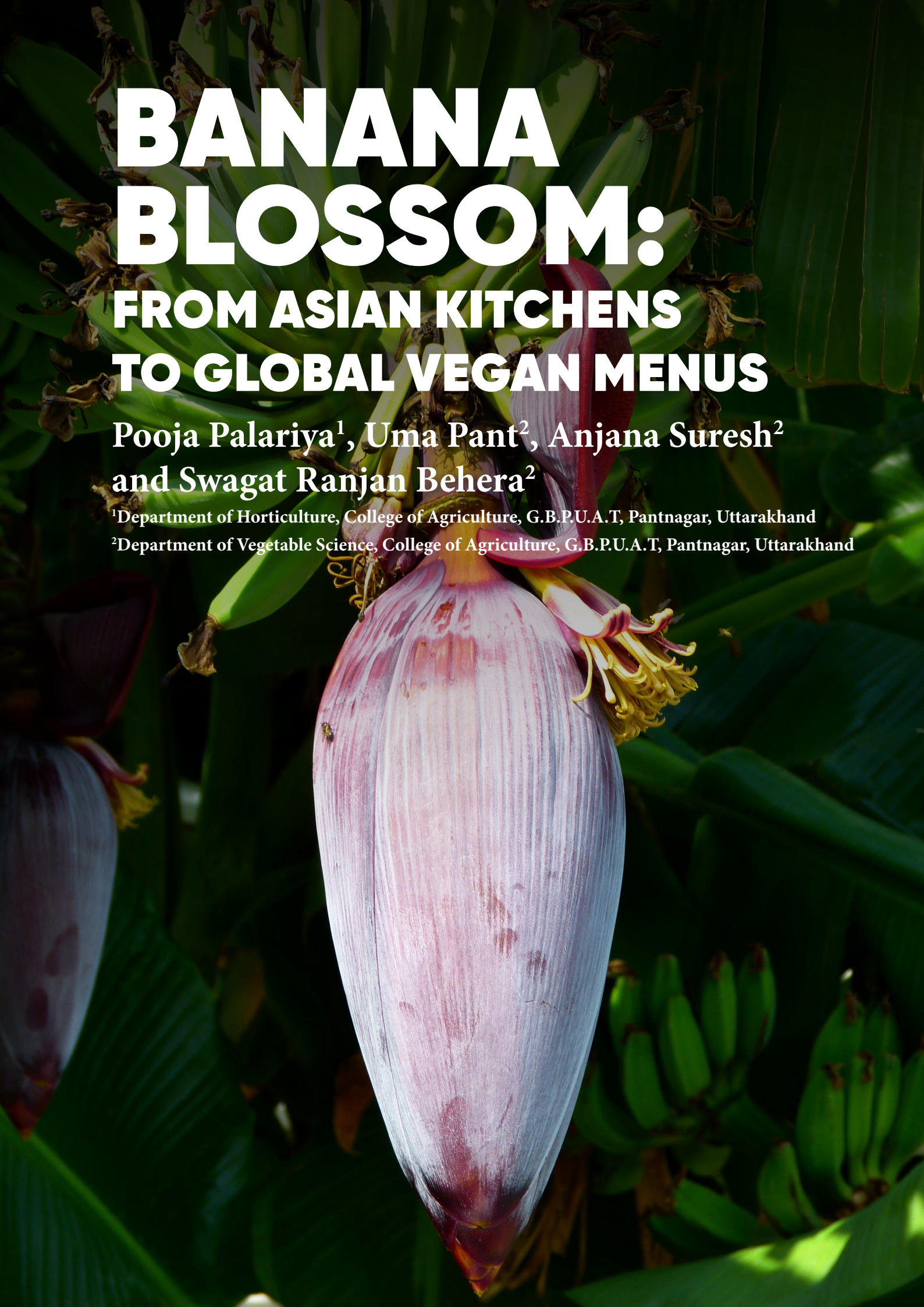
Market Linkages: Premium pricing for natural produce is not always accessible without certification.

Knowledge Gap: Requires intensive farmer training and follow-up support.

Livestock Availability: Dependence on cow-based inputs may be challenging in non-cattle-rearing regions.

FUTURE PROJECTION

With increasing global concerns about climate change, soil degradation, and pesticide residues, natural farming offers a viable pathway to sustainable food systems. Natural farming in India represents a paradigm shift from input-intensive agriculture to an ecologically balanced, farmer-centric approach. While challenges remain particularly in scaling up and ensuring market viability the movement is gaining momentum due to strong policy backing, grassroots engagement through KVKs, and growing consumer awareness. If supported with robust infrastructure, training, and marketing systems, natural farming could not only enhance farmers' livelihoods but also contribute significantly to national goals of environmental sustainability and food security.



BANANA BLOSSOM: FROM ASIAN KITCHENS TO GLOBAL VEGAN MENUS

Pooja Palariya[1], Uma Pant[2], Anjana Suresh[2] and Swagat Ranjan Behera[2]

[1]Department of Horticulture, College of Agriculture, G.B.P.U.A.T, Pantnagar, Uttarakhand

[2]Department of Vegetable Science, College of Agriculture, G.B.P.U.A.T, Pantnagar, Uttarakhand

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world has witnessed a growing fascination with plant-based foods. While soy, jackfruit and mushrooms have already made their mark in the vegan movement, a new star is blossoming quite literally. "Banana blossom", also called banana flower or mocha in India, is emerging as a trendy superfood celebrated for its versatility, nutritional richness and eco-friendly profile. Once considered a humble byproduct of banana farming, it is now gaining recognition on restaurant menus, health food shelves and social media feeds across the globe.

UNVEILING THE BANANA BLOSSOM

The banana blossom is the crimson-purple, teardrop-shaped flower that grows at the end of a banana cluster. Each blossom is layered with tightly packed bracts (petal-like structures), enclosing delicate florets that eventually develop into bananas if left unharvested. Traditionally, it has been consumed for centuries in South and Southeast Asia, especially in India, Thailand, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, where it features in curries, stir-fries, fritters and soups.

The Western world, however, is only just waking up to its potential, particularly as a plant-based meat substitute. Its fibrous, flaky texture makes it natural stand-in for fish, chicken or pulled pork in vegan recipes. From "banana blossom fish and chips" in London gastropubs to tacos in California's vegan cafés, this tropical flower is enjoying a renaissance.

THE NUTRITIONAL BRILLIANCE OF BANANA BLOSSOM

Banana blossom is not just a pretty face in the produce aisle; it is a nutritional gem that lives up to its superfood reputation. Beneath its layers lies an impressive package of health-boosting compounds that make it both delicious and functional. Banana blossom is rich in soluble and insoluble fibre; it supports digestion and provides a feeling of fullness that aids weight management. It contains vitamins A, C and E, as well as potassium, calcium and magnesium, that are important for immunity, strong bones and heart health. Flavonoids and phenolic compounds in banana blossoms help neutralise free radicals, reducing the risk of chronic diseases. Long treasured in Ayurveda and folk medicine, banana blossom is prized for its iron content, believed to boost haemoglobin and ease menstrual discomfort. With its light nutritional profile, it is ideal for calorie-conscious consumers.

HEALTH BENEFITS: ANCIENT FLOWER, MODERN POWER

- Boosts immunity: Its vitamin C and polyphenol content help improve immune defenses, particularly important in an age of lifestyle-related health challenges.
- Manages diabetes and heart health: Early research suggests that banana blossom extracts may improve insulin sensitivity and help regulate cholesterol levels, though more studies are needed.

- Promotes gut health: Thanks to its fibre and prebiotic qualities, banana blossom fosters beneficial gut bacteria, improving digestion and overall well-being.
- Supports women's health: Folk remedies in India and Sri Lanka have long recommended banana blossom curry or soups for easing menstrual cramps, promoting lactation and strengthening reproductive health. Emerging studies support its iron-rich and antioxidant properties, which may indeed contribute to these traditional claims.

THE CULINARY STAR OF VEGAN DIETS

One of the most exciting aspects of banana blossom is its culinary adaptability. Its mildly bitter, nutty flavour pairs well with spices, while its layered, fleshy texture mimics seafood remarkably well. Marinated and deep-fried banana blossom fillets are making waves as a sustainable alternative to battered fish. In India's Bengal and Kerala regions, it features in spiced curries, fritters (mochar chop) and coconut-based stews, while in Thailand and Vietnam, fresh banana blossom is shredded into tangy salads and broth-based soups. Shredded blossoms can replace pulled pork or chicken in tacos, wraps and sandwiches.

Shredded banana blossom

SUSTAINABILITY AND MARKET POTENTIAL

Bananas are one of the world's most widely cultivated fruits, and their flowers are often discarded as agricultural waste utilising banana blossoms not only reduces waste but also creates new value chains for farmers, especially in tropical countries like India, the Philippines and Indonesia. The global market for plant-based foods is projected to grow steadily, and banana blossom fits perfectly into this demand. Entrepreneurs are already exploring packaged, canned or frozen banana blossom products for export to health-conscious markets in Europe and North America.

Banana blossom fried fish

CONCLUSION: FINAL BLOOMING THOUGHTS

Banana blossom is more than just a culinary curiosity; it represents the convergence of tradition, nutrition, sustainability and innovation. From temple kitchens in Bengal to Michelin-starred vegan restaurants in Paris, this tropical flower is proving that the future of food can be as nourishing as it is environmentally responsible.

BLUEBERRIES IN UTTARAKHAND:
SWEET POTENTIAL, ROCKY ROADS

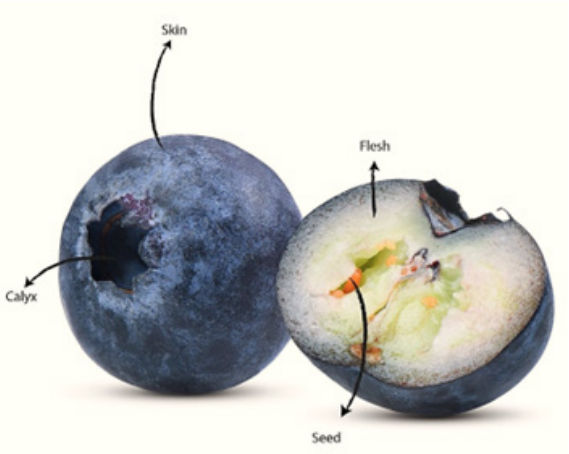
Pooja Palariya[1], Prachi Pant[1], Swagat Ranjan Behera[2] and Uma Pant[2]

[1]Department of Horticulture, College of Agriculture, G.B.P.U.A.T, Pantnagar.

[2]Department of Vegetable Science, College of Agriculture, G.B. P.U.A.T., Pantnagar,

INTRODUCTION

Blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), once considered a luxury fruit in India, are gradually finding their way from niche orchards and high-end supermarkets into the attention of progressive hill farmers and agripreneurs. Often referred to as a "superfruit" due to their high antioxidant and vitamin contents, and export potential, blueberries are celebrated as a high-value cash crop. Their global popularity, combined with increasing domestic health-conscious demand, has created promising opportunities for cultivation in India's cooler regions. Among Indian states, Uttarakhand in particular, with its cool mountain valleys, temperate climate, accessible markets (Dehradun, Haridwar) and growing horticulture support, is emerging as a promising frontier for blueberry cultivation. However, this opportunity comes with notable constraints, from soil and climatic requirements to market and post-harvest challenges. This article highlights the key opportunities and the practical challenges of growing blueberries in India, with emphasis on Uttarakhand's hill-agroecology.



Blueberry fruit and its parts.

WHY BLUEBERRIES SUIT PARTS OF INDIA AND UTTARAKHAND?

Blueberries thrive in well-drained, acidic soils (pH 4.5 to 5.5) and require cool winters for dormancy (varies with variety). They also prefer moderate summers and protection from last frost during the flowering stage for good fruit set and quality. In India, mountain belts, such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and parts of Kashmir, and some high-altitude areas of the Nilgiris or Western Ghats provide suitable temperature regimes favourable for blueberries. The mid-elevation valleys of Uttarakhand (1,000 to 2,200 m amsl) can supply sufficient chilling hours (cold exposure) that many highbush and rabbit eye cultivars require, making the state a logical candidate for scaled adoption. The temperate summers of the state further enhance fruit development, while increasing urban connectivity allows access to local and regional markets for fresh and processed berries.

OPPORTUNITIES IN BLUEBERRY CULTIVATION

Blueberry farming in India presents remarkable opportunities for farmers, particularly in hill states like Uttarakhand, such as:

1. Premium prices and consumer demand

Blueberries are highly valued worldwide as a "superfruit" due to their exceptional antioxidant content, vitamins and perceived health benefits. In India, the domestic market for blueberries is still largely dependent on imports from the United States, Chile and Europe. This makes locally grown blueberries a high-value alternative with scope for import substitution. Farmers entering this niche early can benefit from premium prices in domestic markets, especially in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, where health-conscious consumers and high-end restaurants are driving competition. The expanding wellness and nutraceutical industries in India also open avenues for blueberries in processed forms, such as dried berries, jams and juices.

2. Suitability for hill farmers and smallholdings

Many small and marginal farmers in Uttarakhand cultivate traditional fruits such as apple, peach or plum, which often face market saturation or price fluctuations. Blueberries, on the contrary, are a novel crop with strong demand and limited supply, which can bring a new revenue stream to rural households. Because blueberries can be cultivated in raised beds, containers or marginal lands, they can be integrated into existing orchards or small holdings without displacing food crops. This kind of diversification reduces dependency on few traditional crops and increases resilience against market and climatic risks. Moreover, since blueberries require careful management but relatively less

Blueberry crop grown in a substrate under a polyhouse with water and nutrients supplied through fertigation (left). A soil-grown blueberry crop protected by plastic cover (right).

land, they are ideal for farmers seeking high returns from small holdings typical of Uttarakhand's hilly terrain.

3. Technological and varietal advancements

The earlier limitation of high chilling requirements has been partly overcome with the development of low-chill southern highbush and rabbit eye varieties, making blueberries adaptable to warmer zones and mid-altitudes. These innovations allow farmers outside the traditional temperate belt to experiment with blueberry farming. In addition, advancements in protected cultivation systems, substrate culture and precision irrigation make it feasible to grow blueberries in controlled environments even where soils or climate are suboptimal. Together, these technologies open the door for commercial expansion in Uttarakhand.

CONSTRAINTS IN BLUEBERRY CULTIVATION

Despite its promise, blueberry cultivation in India faces several constraints that farmers must carefully consider:

1. Limited access to quality planting material and expertise

Certified nurseries producing disease-free, true-to-type blueberry plants are scarce in India, forcing growers to rely on imported saplings that are expensive and sometimes poorly adapted to local conditions. Moreover, without standardised rootstocks and locally tested cultivars, farmers risk poor establishment, low yields and crop failure. This is compounded by a lack of technical know-how among extension workers and farmers regarding pruning,

canopy management and specialised nutrient needs of blueberries. Unlike traditional fruit crops, blueberries require highly specific management, which makes capacity-building essential.

2. Soil and wate management challenges

Blueberries thrive only in acidic, well-drained soils rich in organic matter. Many hill and forest soils in the Himalayan region, including large parts of Uttarakhand, are naturally slightly acidic or near-neutral, though soil pH is locally variable and some valley or calcareous sites may be neutral to alkaline. So, site-specific soil testing is essential before planting. Achieving and maintaining the optimal pH range of 4.5 to 5.5 often requires amendments such as elemental sulphur and pine needle mulching, or container-based systems, which increase the cost of cultivation. Additionally, blueberries have shallow root systems and are sensitive to both drought and waterlogging. Reliable drip irrigation and careful water management are, therefore, indispensable. In regions where irrigation infrastructure is weak, establishing a productive orchard can be difficult.

3. Climate sensitivity

Blueberries require specific chilling hours for dormancy, and not all parts of Uttarakhand can provide the conditions needed by northern highbush varieties. Lower valleys may face inadequate chilling and heat stress during summer, affecting fruit quality and yield. Conversely, higher elevations may experience late spring frosts that damage flowers. Without proper cultivar selection and protective cultivation, these climatic risks can result in major yield losses. Such risks make blueberry cultivation less forgiving compared with more resilient traditional crops.

4. Post-harvest handling and market limitations

Blueberries are delicate fruits that bruise easily and require a robust cold chain system from harvest to consumer. In India, cold storage and refrigerated transport are underdeveloped in hilly regions. Farmers unable to access cold chains are forced to sell at low prices in local markets, undermining profitability. Moreover, the absence of organised grading, packaging and branding systems limits the ability of small farmers to reach high-value metropolitan and export markets. Without cooperative efforts or private-sector investment in post-harvest infrastructure, the commercial viability of blueberries remains restricted.

PRACTICAL PATHWAYS FOR UTTARAKHAND GROWERS

For the hill farmers of Uttarakhand, a cautious, site-specific approach is critical for successful blueberry cultivation.

- **Starting small:** It is advisable to start small with trial plots, whether in raised beds, acidified soils or container/substrate systems, in varied microclimates to assess growth, flowering and fruiting before large-scale planting in orchards.

- **Variety selection:** Growers should focus on selecting appropriate varieties (Table 1) according to chilling requirements and locations.
- **Soil and water management:** In Uttarakhand, the adoption of drip irrigation not only saves water but also ensures uniform moisture supply critical for flowering and fruit development. Raised beds and mulches can help maintain soil moisture, prevent erosion on sloping lands and moderate soil temperatures. Organic matter addition and soil acidification can correct soil pH, which lead to reduced plant stress, enhanced nutrient uptake and improved fruit quality.
- **Climate protection:** Protected cultivation using shade nets, row covers or low tunnels can mitigate heat stress during unreasonably warm periods and protect flowers from late frost. Mulching with organic materials or black polythene can further buffer soil temperature extremes and retain soil moisture.
- **Canopy management:** Careful pruning and training of bushes improves air circulation, reduces disease pressure and encourages uniform fruiting.
- **Collective action:** Forming farmer collectives or cooperatives allows shared investment in essential infrastructure such as nurseries, cold storage, grading lines and transport, and also negotiates better contacts with buyers or processors, ensuring that high-quality fruit fetches premium prices.
- **Institutional support:** Leveraging government schemes and extension support can help in offering subsidies, technical guidance and training workshops, as well as providing access to certified planting material, improved cultivation practices and links to emerging domestic and export markets.

Table 1. Blueberry varieties to consider.

Variety type	Suitable	Chilling Requirement (hours)	Remarks
Northern Highbush	Cold, high-altitude valleys	800-1,000	Ideal for colder sites
Southern Highbush	Lower valleys/ foothills	200-400	Performs well in warmer spots
Rabbit eye	Moderate altitudes	300-600	Heat tolerant, good yield

CONCLUSION

Blueberry cultivation in India, and Uttarakhand specifically, presents a combination of promise and practical challenges. The temperate valleys, growing consumer demand and emerging technological support in the state create a viable pathway for high-value horticulture; however, success requires overcoming constraints such as soil and water management, climate sensitivities, limited planting material and post-harvest logistics. With strategic planning, careful varietal selection, cooperative approaches and access to institutional support, farmers of Uttarakhand can turn blueberries from an exotic fruit into a locally-adapted, economically rewarding crop. For enterprising growers willing to adopt modern practices and leverage collective resources, blueberries offer a sustainable opportunity to diversify income and participate in India's expanding superfruit market.

A FRAGRANT LEGACY: UNVEILING THE REIGN OF SAFFRON

Raghavendra N R[1*] and Shahnawaz Ahmed[2]

[1]Department of Genetics and Plant Breeding, College of Agriculture, VC Farm, Mandya, UAS, Bengaluru.

[2]FPO Development Officer, JKCIP SKUAST Jammu.

INTRODUCTION

Saffron or Kesar (Crocus sativus L.) The most expensive spice in the world, stigma is the economical product which symbolizes luxury and well known for its unforgettable flavor and medicinal value. The word saffron is derived from the arabic word 'Zaffran' and believed to have originated from Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor and Persia spreading eastwards to Kashmir, China, Southwest Asia, and Middle East. India contributes 5% of the world's total production of which 90% is supplied only from its Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) regions. India, renowned for its rich spice heritage, produces nearly 3.83 tonnes of saffron annually, primarily from Jammu & Kashmir. However, the domestic demand exceeds 100 tonnes each year, creating a substantial gap between production and consumption. This imbalance highlights an immense opportunity for expanding saffron cultivation across suitable agro-climatic zones beyond traditional cultivated areas. Moreover, the high market value with premium Kashmiri saffron fetching up to ~₹4.95 lakh per kilogram makes it an economically lucrative crop. With advancements in cultivation techniques like hydroponics emerged as a promising alternative to traditional field methods. Hydroponics allows saffron to be grown without soil, using nutrient-rich water solutions and controlled environmental conditions. This method ensures optimal temperature, humidity, and light, leading to better flowering and higher-quality stigmas. Although the initial investment cost is high, the long-term returns from premium-quality saffron make hydroponics an attractive avenue for entrepreneurs, Agri-startups, and progressive farmers aiming for sustainable spice cultivation.

BIOCHEMICAL COMPOSITION AND AROMA PROFILE OF SAFFRON

Saffron stigmas are a rich repository of bioactive secondary metabolites that define its unique colour, flavour, and aroma. More than 150 volatile and aroma-yielding compounds have been identified, alongside numerous non-volatile constituents, predominantly carotenoids such as zeaxanthin, lycopene, and various α- and β-carotenes. These compounds collectively determine the quality, sensory attributes, and therapeutic potential of saffron.

FLAVOR AND AROMA COMPOUNDS

The distinctive flavour of saffron arises primarily from picrocrocin, a bitter monoterpene glycoside that contributes to its unique taste profile. During the drying process, picrocrocin undergoes enzymatic degradation to yield safranal, a volatile aldehyde that imparts saffron's characteristic aroma. Safranal is less bitter than its precursor and is considered one of the major contributors to the overall fragrance. Another important volatile compound, 2-hydroxy-4,4,6-trimethyl-2,5-cyclohexadien-1-one, imparts a "saffron, dried hay-like" scent. Although present in smaller concentrations than safranal, it has been identified as the most potent aromatic compound, highlighting the complexity of saffron's volatile profile.

NUTRACEUTICAL AND MEDICINAL SIGNIFICANCE

The synergistic interaction of saffron's bioactive compounds contributes to its nutraceutical, pharmacological, and therapeutic value. The carotenoids crocins and crocetin possess potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, helping to mitigate oxidative stress and protect cellular integrity. Safranal and picrocrocin have demonstrated neuroprotective, antidepressant, and anticarcinogenic activities, while carotenoids like zeaxanthin support ocular health and immune modulation. Recent studies further suggest saffron's potential in enhancing mood, memory, and cognitive function, as well as its application in metabolic and cardiovascular wellness. Collectively, these findings underscore saffron's dual identity as both a culinary luxury and a functional medicinal spice, justifying its revered title "The King of Spices."

MAJOR BIOACTIVE COMPOUNDS IN SAFFRON

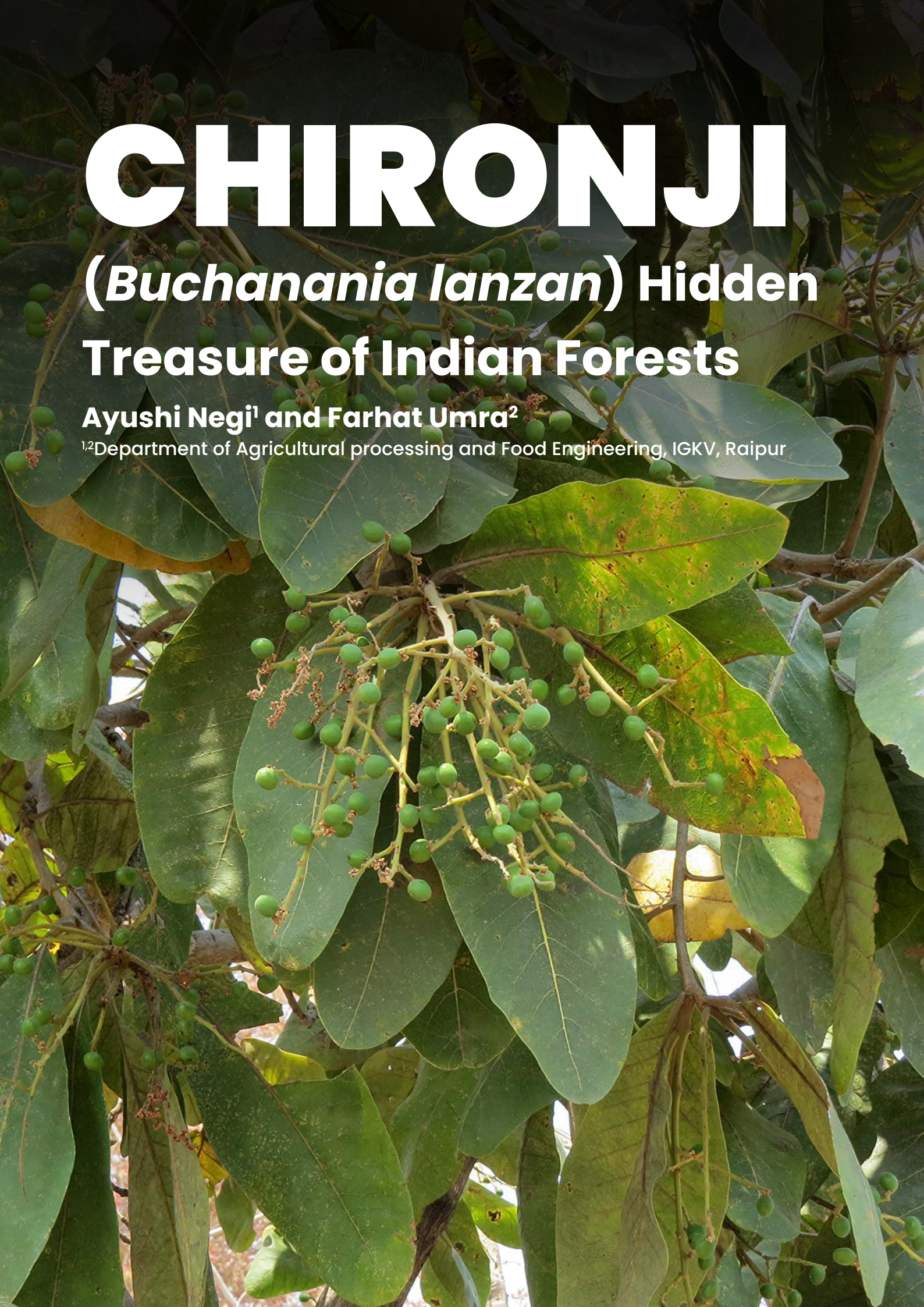
Saffron revered as "The King of Spices," owes its exceptional sensory and medicinal qualities to a complex array of bioactive metabolites. Its rich golden colour derives mainly from crocins and crocetin, while the flavour and aroma are imparted by picrocrocin, safranal, and other volatile compounds. Saffron possesses significant nutraceutical and pharmacological potential, possess antioxidant, neuroprotective, antidepressant, and anti-inflammatory activities. Despite India's long tradition with saffron cultivation, domestic production remains insufficient to meet rising demand, highlighting the scope for expansion through improved agronomic practices, hydroponic systems, and regional diversification. Integrating traditional wisdom with modern technology can enhance productivity, quality, and sustainability ensuring that saffron continues to reign supreme as a symbol of flavour, fragrance, and functional health benefits.

Compound	Chemical Type	Primary Function	Contribution
Crocins (cis- & trans- forms)	Water-soluble carotenoid glycosides	Pigmentation	Impart deep yellow-orange colour; responsible for saffron's colouring strength
α-Crocin	Major crocin isomer	Pigmentation	Contributes to saffron's characteristic golden hue
Crocetin	Dicarboxylic carotenoid	Aroma precursor	Forms the backbone for crocin esters; imparts mild aroma and antioxidant properties
Protocrocin	Glucoside derivative of zeaxanthin	Bitter compound precursor	Converts to crocin; contributes to saffron's bitterness
Picrocrocin	Bitter monoterpene glycoside	Flavour compound	Responsible for saffron's distinct bitter taste; precursor of safranal
Safranal	Volatile aldehyde (monoterpenoid)	Aroma compound	Provides the characteristic aroma; less bitter than picrocrocin
2-Hydroxy-4,4,6-trimethyl-2,5-cyclohexadien-1-one	Volatile organic compound	Aroma enhancer	Adds a "saffron, dried hay-like" scent; strongest contributor to fragrance
Zeaxanthin, Lycopene, α- & β-Carotenes	Carotenoids	Antioxidant pigments	Contribute to colour stability and nutritional value

CHIRONJI (*Buchanania lanzan*) Hidden Treasure of Indian Forests

Ayushi Negi[1] and Farhat Umra[2]

[1,2]Department of Agricultural processing and Food Engineering, IGKV, Raipur



INTRODUCTION

India has one of the richest ethno-botanical traditions in the world with the presence 15,000-20,000 medicinal plants species (Rana et al., 2016). Several medicinal plants species are being widely used to treat a plethora of acute and chronic diseases all over the world and considered as "Chemical Goldmines" due to the presence of natural chemicals. In the developing world, peoples heavily rely on plants for their livelihood, nutrition, health and income. In the present scenario, more than 90% of medicinal plants species are facing threat because of excessive and unsustainable collection, overexploitation, or un-skilled harvesting. Buchanania lanzan, commonly known as Chironji, is more than just a wild tree—it is a lifeline for many tribal communities in India. Revered for its nutritional, medicinal, and economic value, this forest gem has long been a staple in traditional Indian medicine and cuisine. But as demand grows and unscientific harvesting continues, this valuable tree faces the threat of extinction, urging us to rethink our approach toward its conservation and sustainable use. In India tribals and local villagers relay on local medicinal plants to heal their illness. Over-exploitation and unscientific harvesting practices hinder the sustainability of the species which is leading the species to extinction. Poor attention and sheer negligence, degeneration of indigenous knowledge, high biotic, anthropogenic pressures, and over-exploitation by the natives are some of the major causes for the fast rate of depletion of the species. Lack of knowledge about the plant is one of the major reasons of it being underutilised by many.

A TREE ROOTED IN TRADITION

Buchanania lanzan, commonly known as char, achar and *Chironji,* belongs to family Anacardiaceae. *Buchanania lanzan* stands out not only for its wide distribution across India's dry deciduous forests but also for its diverse range of applications in health, nutrition, and livelihoods.

Known locally by various names—Char in Hindi, Priyala in Sanskrit, *Charoli* in Marathi, and *Nooramaram* in Malayalam—*Chironji* trees grow naturally in the tropical forests of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and several other Indian states. It was first described by Francis Hamilton in 1798. These trees, which reach heights of up to 18 meters, are most commonly found in Sal and teak forest regions.. *B. lanzan* is native to the Indian sub-continent and is also found in Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Burma, and Yunnan. The tree is almost evergreen and grows naturally in the tropical dry deciduous forests of Northern, Western, and Central India, mainly in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. The tree is found as natural wild in the tropical deciduous forests of North, Western and Central India mostly with a monsoonal climate. The occurrence of *Chironji* in central India is concentrated largely in Sal and teak growing region comprising, Betul, Mandla, Balaghat, Seoni, Amarkantak, Dindori, Annuppur, Bastar, Reewa, Satana, Dantewada, Kanker, Kondagoan, Raipur and Sarguja.

Chiornji kernels

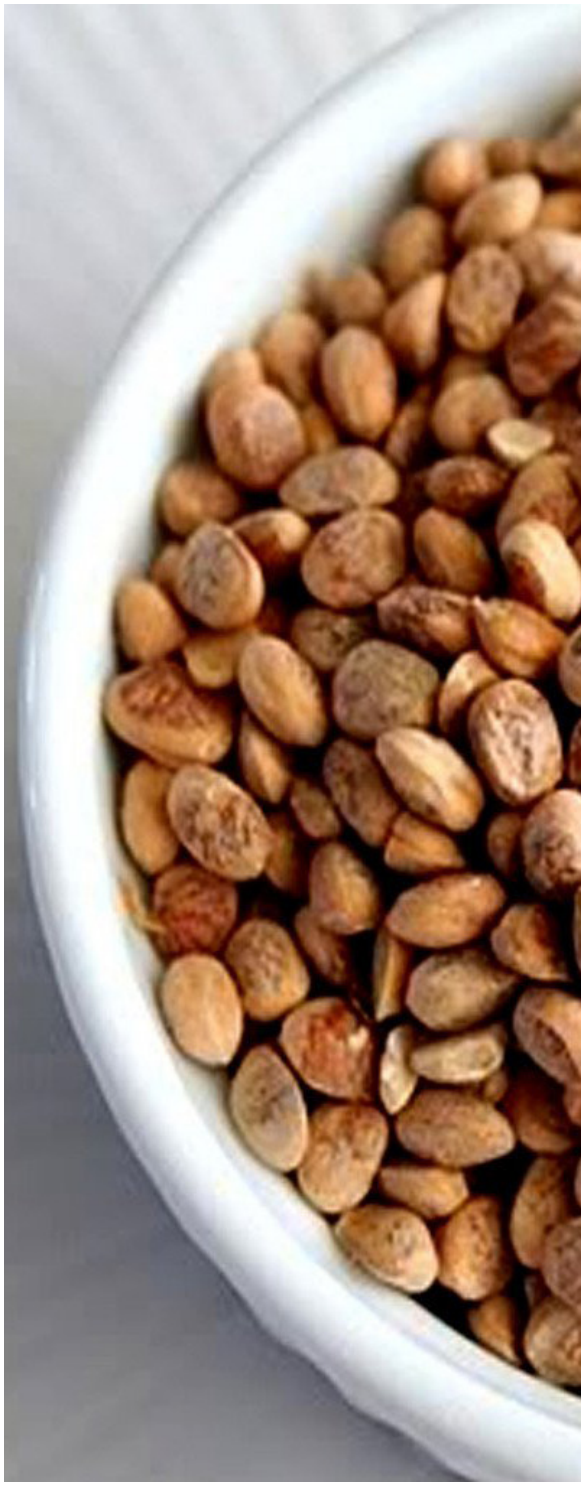
NUTRITIONAL AND MEDICINAL WEALTH

The *Chironji* seed, often referred to as a "wild almond," is a prized ingredient in Indian kitchens. The kernels have a subtle, nutty flavor reminiscent of almonds and pistachios and are used to thicken sauces, enhance desserts, or simply be eaten raw or roasted.

But *Chironji's* value goes far beyond the kitchen. Almost every part of the plant has a medicinal use:

- **Leaves** are used to treat skin diseases and wounds and are believed to have heart-strengthening properties.
- **Fruits** act as a natural remedy for coughs, fevers, and asthma.
- **Kernel oil** is rich in fatty acids and is used to treat glandular swellings and various skin conditions.
- **Gum exudates** are helpful in managing diarrhea and rheumatic pains.
- **Roots** are known to have astringent and anti-inflammatory properties and are used to treat diarrhea and blood disorders.

In tribal traditions, a paste made from the bark of *Chironji* and *Diospyros melanoxylon* is administered to treat snake bites. The bark is also used in tanning and making natural varnishes, and the gum serves textile and medicinal applications.



A SOURCE OF LIVELIHOOD

On average, each *Chironji* tree yields 40–50 kg of fresh fruit annually, translating to around 1–1.5 kg of finished kernels after drying and processing. With market prices ranging from ₹1200–₹1500 per kilogram, *Chironji* offers substantial income for forest-dependent communities. Beyond the seeds, the leaves serve as summer fodder, the wood is used for furniture and fuel, and the oil is marketed as a natural alternative to almond or olive oil. Nutritionally, the seeds are impressive powerhouses—rich in fatty oil (34–37%), proteins (19–21.6%), carbohydrates (12.1%), calcium, thiamin, niacin, and vitamin C. The extracted oil, often dubbed "*Chironji* oil," is used both medicinally and in confectionery, and is a reputed remedy for prickly heat and skin irritation.

FACING THE EDGE OF EXTINCTION

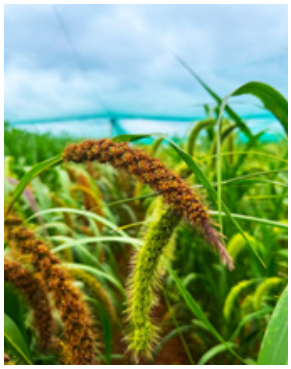
Despite its tremendous value, *Chironji* is now classified as a Vulnerable (VU) species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The causes are deeply concerning—overexploitation, unregulated harvesting, habitat degradation, and the erosion of traditional knowledge. In the absence of scientific harvesting methods and sustainable practices, the future of this forest jewel hangs in the balance.Efforts to conserve and propagate *Chironji* must prioritize both ecological and socio-economic dimensions. Protecting this species not only safeguards biodiversity but also preserves the heritage, health, and income of countless rural and tribal communities. *Chironji,* with its multi-faceted value and endangered status, stands as a reminder of the rich legacy of India's forest wealth—and our responsibility to protect it. If nurtured properly, *Chironji* could continue to serve as a source of nutrition, medicine, and income for generations to come, affirming its place as one of nature's most generous gifts.

SMALL MILLETS, BIG NUTRITION:
FROM FORGOTTEN FIELDS TO FUNCTIONAL FOODS

Yashwanth Vadla
International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics, ICRISAT, Hyderabad.

INTRODUCTION

Finger millet, foxtail millet, little millet, proso millet, barnyard millet and kodo millet were once the lifeline of dryland farmers. Today, their neglect reflects not their worthlessness but our collective loss of dietary wisdom. Changing food habits, urban lifestyles, and dependence on polished cereals have led to hidden hunger, micronutrient deficiencies, and lifestyle diseases. Small millets, once called "coarse grains," are now rightly recognized as nutri-cereals due to their superior nutrient profile and health benefits. They are drought-tolerant, require minimal inputs, and can thrive in marginal lands, but their real strength lies in their nutritional richness and scope for value addition.



NUTRITIONAL IMPORTANCE OF SMALL MILLETS

Small millets such as finger millet, foxtail millet, barnyard millet, little millet, kodo millet, and proso millet contain an impressive balance of macronutrients and micronutrients. These small millets provide key nutritional features, for example, finger millet contains up to 350 mg calcium per 100 g — 10 times higher than rice or wheat, making it ideal for children, women, and the elderly. In terms of iron and micronutrients, foxtail and little millet are rich in iron, zinc, and copper, addressing anemia and malnutrition. Millets contain high dietary fibre, compared to rice/wheat. This improves digestion, prevents constipation, and supports gut health. All these are of low glycemic index, they release glucose slowly, preventing sudden sugar spikes — highly recommended for diabetics. Barnyard millet and kodo millet have quality protein with essential amino acids. Its gluten-free nature is perfect for people with celiac disease or gluten intolerance.

Table 1: Nutrient comparison of small millets with rice & wheat (per 100 g)

Food	Protein (g)	Calcium (mg)	Iron (mg)	Crude fibre (g)
Rice (Brown)	7.9	33	1.8	1.0
Wheat	11.6	30	3.5	2.0
Finger millet	7.7	350	3.9	3.6
Foxtail millet	11.2	31	2.8	6.7
Proso millet	12.5	8	2.9	5.2
Little millet	9.7	17	9.3	7.6
Barnyard millet	11.0	22	18.6	13.6
Kodo millet	9.8	35	1.7	5.2

VALUE-ADDED PRODUCTS OF SMALL MILLETS

Millets are moving from "traditional kitchen foods" to modern supermarket shelves through innovative value addition. Processing not only improves shelf life but also makes it attractive to health-conscious consumers. The traditional foods revived such are Ragi mudde, millet rotis, upma, pongal, idly/dosa mixes. Ready-to-cook flours and mixes are gaining popularity. Modern urban-friendly products and bakery items- Millet biscuits, cookies, bread, cakes, and muffins. Snacks like millet flakes, puffed snacks, murukku, chakli, namkeen. Breakfast cereals, instant porridge mixes, energy bars, millet muesli. Beverages- Ragi malt, probiotic drinks, millet-based smoothies and convenience foods like millet noodles, pasta, extruded products. Startups like "Slurrp Farm" market millet cookies, cereals and porridges for children. Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) in Karnataka and Telangana process foxtail millet into noodles and ragi into cookies, creating rural employment. Government Millet Cafés in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha serve millet-based meals to promote consumption.

VALUE ADDITION: EMPOWERING FARMERS, ENRICHING CONSUMERS

Value addition in millets creates opportunities at both ends of the chain. For farmers, it transforms raw produce into premium products, ensuring better price realization and steady income. For consumers, it unlocks access to nutrient-dense, climate-smart foods that go beyond the conventional rice–wheat options, presented in modern, convenient forms that suit evolving lifestyles. This dual impact accelerates market demand while advancing nutritional security. The National Year of Millets (2018) and International Year of Millets (2023)—have catalyzed startups and SHGs to venture into millet-based enterprises, with supportive policies reinforcing growth and innovation.

CONCLUSION

Small millets are nature's treasure chest in nutrition, health and sustainability. Their high calcium, iron, fiber and protein content make them essential for combating malnutrition and lifestyle diseases. With rising health awareness and government support, value-added millet products are opening new doors for farmers, entrepreneurs and consumers alike. Promoting them will not only enhance dietary diversity but also ensure better incomes and resilient farming systems. Remember the story of quinoa, a tiny grain from South America that was once little known but became a global superfood through strong campaigning and awareness. The same can happen with small millets. With the right promotion, they can gain space in farms, markets, and kitchens, appreciated by farmers for their income potential and by consumers for their nutrition and sustainability benefits. Their wider adoption is therefore not only a matter of choice but a matter of correction giving due value to crops that are naturally suited to both people and the planet. This prevents minor millets from being overshadowed by bajra and jowar, ensuring their distinct nutritional identity reaches urban markets. Ultimately, the rise of minor millets is not about looking backward, it is about redefining India's food identity and positioning the country as a world leader in health-driven and climate-smart grain economies.

LEADERSHIP FOR THE AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION 4.0: EVERGREEN & EVERGROWING

Chittaranjan Kole[1], BV Ramana Rao[2], Surender Singh[3] and N Manikanda Boopathi[4]

[1]Chairman, Prof. Chittaranjan Kole Foundation for Science and Society; Chief Mentor, Indian National Farmers' Academy; President, Genome India International; President, International Climate Resilient Crop Genomics Consortium; President; International Phytomedomics & Nutriomics Consortium
[2]Fellow-Association of Agrometeorologists (FAAM); Founder Project Coordinator – AICRP on Agrometeorology, ICAR-CRIDA, Hyderabad, Telangana, India
[3]Fellow-Association of Agrometeorologists (FAAM); Senior Professor of Agricultural Meteorology, CCS Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar, India
[4]Professor, Department of Biotechnology, Center for Plant Molecular Biology and Biotechnology, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore, India

INTRODUCTION:

The history of the implementation of the 3rd Agricultural Revolution – the so-called Green Revolution - in India is a compelling narrative of a nation's journey from chronic food scarcity to self-sufficiency. In the mid-20th century, a rapidly growing population coupled with frequent droughts and an agrarian system based on traditional, low-yield farming practices created a perilous food crisis. The specter of famine, most notably the Bengal famine of 1943, loomed large, compelling policymakers and scientists to seek a radical solution. Further, the failure of southwest monsoon during the two consecutive years, 1965 and 1966, compelled India for large scale import of food grains. This urgent need for increased food production became the impetus for a monumental shift in agricultural policy, which came to be known as the "Green Revolution in India". The movement, spearheaded in India by the agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan and C. Subramaniam, the food and agriculture minister, was fundamentally a package of modern farming technologies designed to dramatically boost crop yields, particularly for wheat and rice. Key to this transformation was the introduction of high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, which were cross-bred to be more responsive to fertilizers and irrigation, alongside the widespread adoption of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and modern machinery.

While the Green Revolution's primary objective was to avert a national food crisis, its consequences were far-reaching and multifaceted. On the one hand, its success was remarkable and immediate. India's food grain production soared, transforming the country from a net importer to a food-surplus nation and securing its food security. This newfound abundance led to greater national self-reliance and improved rural incomes in regions where the revolution was most successful, particularly in Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh. The increased demand for labor in these areas also stimulated rural employment, and the surplus food production helped to curb inflation. However, the revolution was not without its substantial limitations and huge negative consequences.

The benefits of the Green Revolution were not evenly distributed, creating stark regional and social disparities. The technology package—which required significant capital for irrigation, fertilizers, and machinery—was largely accessible only to wealthy farmers in well-irrigated regions. This left small and marginal farmers, particularly in rain-fed areas, behind, leading to a widening gap between the rich and poor in rural India. Furthermore, the intensive use of

chemical inputs and groundwater has had severe environmental repercussions and irreparable loss to these natural resources. Decades of monoculture farming and the indiscriminate application of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides have led to soil degradation, reduced biodiversity, and the contamination of water bodies. The over-extraction of groundwater for irrigation has also caused a dramatic decline in water tables, posing a long-term threat to agricultural sustainability. These adverse effects highlight the critical need for a more sustainable and equitable approach to agriculture, a concept that led to the much hyped “Second Green Revolution” or "Evergreen Revolution" that prioritizes ecological preservation alongside food production. The Green Revolution, therefore, stands as a complex historical event, a necessary intervention that solved an immediate problem but also created a new set of challenges that continue to shape India's agricultural landscape. The craze for growing only the HYVs of wheat and rice by the farmers and absence of prudent advisory to conserve indigenous varieties side-by-side led to enormous genetic erosion of biodiversity.

The revolution's singular focus on the two staple food grains inadvertently created a significant disparity in the production of other essential agricultural commodities, particularly minor cereals, millets, pulses and oilseeds besides vegetables and fruits. These crops were largely left out of the technological and infrastructural advancements, leading to stagnant yields and a growing gap between domestic production and consumer demand. This neglect has resulted in India's persistent reliance on imports for these crucial dietary components, compromising the nation's nutritional security and economic stability. Therefore, the imperative for a "Green Revolution 2.0" has emerged, one that aims for a more comprehensive and inclusive agricultural transformation. This second wave of reform seeks to leverage new technologies and sustainable practices to boost the production of all agricultural commodities, thereby achieving true self-reliance and relieving the country's dependence on importing any agricultural produce. The 4th Agricultural Revolution (AR v4.0), projected in India by some people as “The Green Revolution 2.0” is not just about producing more food; it's about producing it sustainably, equitably, and resiliently. The leadership required for this paradigm shift must be able to innovate while preserving the environment, a concept that can be expressed by the equation:

AR v4.0 Leadership = Technological Expertise + Ecological Wisdom + Social Consciousness

Evergreen leadership can only be generated through a critical analysis of the present education system and the evolution of a new strategy. The current system, largely a product of the industrial revolution, often prioritizes rote memorization, standardized testing, and a one-size-fits-all approach. This model, while efficient for producing a workforce for a more mechanical age, stifles the very qualities essential for modern leadership: adaptability, creativity, critical thinking, and empathy. Leaders today operate in a complex, fast-paced world that requires them to not only solve problems but also to anticipate them and innovate effective and simple solutions. The traditional education system, by valuing conformity over curiosity, fails to cultivate these vital skills.

THE PERCEPTION PROBLEM

The perception problem in agricultural education is a significant barrier to attracting talented students. The core issue lies in the widespread belief that agriculture is a low-paying, low-prestige field with limited career advancement, causing many students, both urban and rural, to pursue more "lucrative" professions like medicine and engineering.

URBAN VS. RURAL STUDENT MINDSETS

The perception problem manifests differently between urban and rural students.

- Urban students often have a disconnected, romanticized, or uninformed view of agriculture. They may not see its modern, tech-driven aspects (e.g., Agrotech, data science, 'omics-driven genetics) and instead associate it with slow-paced, manual labor. This lack of a clear mindset and understanding of rural issues prevents them from recognizing the potential for impactful and innovative effort.
- Rural students may view agriculture as the field they are trying to escape. They see the struggles of their communities firsthand—the financial instability, the hard work, and the limited opportunities—and aspire to careers that promise greater economic security and social mobility. They seek to move away from, rather than improve, the very systems they grew up with.

This dual challenge creates a cycle where the agricultural sector loses out on a crucial pool of talent.

UNPLANNED GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

Expansion of agricultural education without the right infrastructure and professional faculty creates significant challenges that undermine the very purpose of these institutions. The establishment of new agricultural universities and educational institutions often lacks essential resources, including model classrooms, modern laboratory facilities, and dedicated research farms.

This absence of a proper learning environment leads to a failure in producing graduates who are well-equipped for the demands of modern agriculture.

A modern agricultural education requires a hands-on, practical approach that cannot be delivered in a theoretical vacuum. Without model classrooms that integrate smart technology and collaborative learning spaces, students are confined to outdated teaching methods. The lack of modern laboratory facilities prevents them from gaining practical experience with cutting-edge tools in biotechnology, nanotechnology, soil science, and food processing. Similarly, the absence of functional research farms means students can't engage in crucial fieldwork, such as crop trials, livestock management, and the application of precision agriculture techniques. This lack of a complete learning ecosystem leaves students with theoretical knowledge but no practical skills, making them uncompetitive in the job market.

OBSOLETE CURRICULUM

- The primary curriculum for agricultural education has become obsolete, failing to keep pace with the rapid integration of technology into modern agriculture. Today's agriculture is a highly sophisticated, data-driven, and interdisciplinary field, a reality that the traditional education model, with its focus on basic crop and soil science, largely ignores. This disconnect creates a significant skills gap, producing graduates who are unprepared to work in a technology-driven industry, further fueling the perception problem and discouraging talented students. A traditional curriculum often emphasizes manual farming practices and basic agronomy, neglecting to incorporate the essential skills needed for modern farming. Students are not being taught how to:
- Analyze Big Data: Modern farms generate vast amounts of data from sensors, drones, and satellites. An obsolete curriculum does not prepare students to interpret this data for precision farming decisions regarding irrigation, fertilization, and pest control.
- Insufficient Focus on Sustainability and Climate Change: Traditional curriculums rarely address climate-smart agriculture, environmental stewardship, or sustainable resource management, which are increasingly critical under current global challenges.
- Fragmented and Uncoordinated Programs: There is limited integration across research, teaching, and extension functions, resulting in knowledge gaps and poor practical adoption of new innovations among farmers and students.

- Operate and Maintain Modern Technology: Today's agriculture relies on automation and robotics, from autonomous tractors to robotic harvesters. Students need to be trained in the operation and maintenance of these systems, as well as the underlying principles of AI and machine learning that power them.
- Utilize Biotechnology and Genomics: The future of food security is tied to advanced genetic modification, gene editing, and bioinformatics to create more resilient and nutritious crops. A traditional curriculum may not even touch upon these topics.
- Manage Supply Chains with Blockchain: The modern food system requires transparency and traceability. Without an understanding of technologies like blockchain, graduates cannot manage or innovate within complex global food supply chains.

EVOLVING THE CURRICULUM FOR A TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN FUTURE

To address this, Indian Agricultural Universities Association (IAUA) should oversee that agricultural education must undergo a fundamental transformation in consultation with the state chapters of the Indian National Farmers' Academy (infa.org.in) The new curriculum must be interdisciplinary and flexible, integrating technology into every aspect of learning. This includes:

- Core Technology Modules: All students should be required to take foundational courses in data science, GIS, AI, and robotics, specifically tailored to agricultural applications.
- Hands-on Experiential Learning: Learning must move beyond the classroom. Students should have access to research farms and labs equipped with the latest Agrotech tools. This includes hands-on experience with drones, sensors, and automated irrigation systems.
- Emphasis on Problem-Solving and Innovation: The curriculum should be project-based, challenging students to use technology to solve real-world agricultural problems, from increasing crop yields in a specific region to developing sustainable farming practices.

By modernizing the curriculum, agricultural education can shift from teaching "how to farm" to teaching "how to innovate and lead in the agricultural sector." This change is crucial to attract a new generation of students who see agriculture not as a traditional profession, but as a dynamic and vital field at the intersection of technology, sustainability, and global food security.

POOR INDUSTRY LINKAGES

Poor industry linkages with agricultural education create a significant gap between the skills taught in academia and the skills demanded by the modern agricultural sector. This disconnection leads to graduates who lack practical experience and industry-specific knowledge, making them less employable and perpetuating the perception of agriculture as a low-tech field. The lack of strong connections between agricultural universities and agribusinesses has several negative consequences:

- Outdated Academic Programs: Without regular input from industry, academic curricula can become stagnant, focusing on traditional, obsolete farming methods while ignoring advancements in Agrotech, data analytics, and sustainable practices. This means students are learning about yesterday's agriculture in a field that's moving at a rapid pace.
- Lack of Practical Skills: Industry jobs require hands-on experience with modern equipment, software, and real-world problem-solving. Without structured internship programs, joint research projects, and guest lectures from industry professionals, graduates are left with theoretical knowledge but no practical skills.
- Limited Research Relevance: Academic research can become detached from the immediate needs of the industry. Without collaboration, universities may focus on theoretical or niche topics that have little commercial application, failing to address the pressing challenges faced by farmers and agribusinesses, such as optimizing yields or developing new crop varieties.
- Poor Job Placement: The disconnect makes it difficult for universities to place their graduates in high-paying, high-impact jobs. Employers, in turn, may be hesitant to hire agriculture graduates, preferring to train individuals from other fields who have more relevant technical skills. To bridge this gap, a collaborative, proactive approach is necessary, involving both academia and industry.
- Joint Curriculum Development: State Agricultural Universities (SAUs) in consultation with State Chapters of the Indian national Farmers' Academy should form advisory boards with industry leaders to regularly review and update the curriculum. This ensures that course content is aligned with industry needs and includes emerging technologies and business practices.
- Mandatory Internships and Co-op Programs: All agricultural education programs should require students to complete mandatory internships or co-op placements. This provides students with hands-on experience, allows them to apply their knowledge, and gives them valuable networking opportunities.
- Collaborative Research and Development: Universities and companies should partner on joint research projects that address real-world industry problems. This can lead to the development of new technologies, products, or practices

while also providing students and faculty with research funding and practical experience.

- Faculty and Student Exchanges: Encourage faculty to spend time working in industry and invite industry professionals to teach or mentor students. This two-way exchange of knowledge keeps faculty informed of industry trends and provides students with practical insights.
- By strengthening these linkages, agricultural education can move from being a source of generic knowledge to a dynamic pipeline of highly skilled, adaptable, and innovative professionals ready to lead the future of the agricultural sector.

GOVERNMENTS' APATHY AND POLICY GAPS

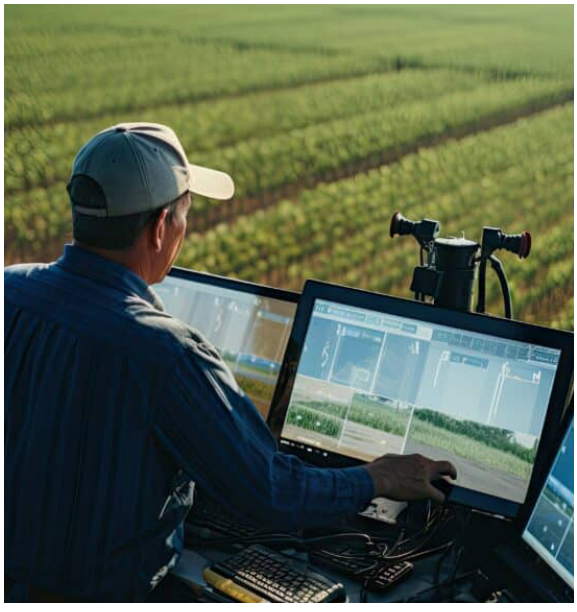
State Governments' apathy and significant policy gaps are major contributors to the poor state of agricultural education. A lack of strategic vision and sustained investment has left the system unable to meet the needs of a modern, technology-driven agricultural sector. This neglect manifests in several key areas, from funding to policy implementation. Despite agriculture's critical role, government funding for agricultural education and research is often inadequate. This translates directly to a shortage of resources, preventing institutions from acquiring modern laboratory facilities, model classrooms, and developing functional research farms. Instead of being a priority for investment, agricultural education is frequently left to function on outdated budgets, which perpetuates the cycle of poor infrastructure and attracts neither a professional faculty nor ambitious students. This lack of financial commitment reflects a broader policy gap where the government's focus is on short-term food production targets rather than on long-term capacity building through education.

The direct result of governments' apathy and policy gaps is a system that fails to produce innovative and skilled graduates. The lack of strategic investment means agricultural graduates are not trained in the latest technologies, making them less competitive in the job market. This feeds into the negative perception of agricultural careers, which further discourages students from enrolling. Ultimately, the governments' failure to prioritize agricultural education is a major barrier to the growth and modernization of the agricultural sector, impacting not only food security but also rural development and the nation's economic potential.

FACULTY SHORTAGE AND SKILL GAPS

Addressing the faculty shortage and skill gaps requires a more holistic approach. A great agricultural educator needs a blend of communication skills, academic excellence, and the qualities of a mentor to truly impact students and the future of the sector. The current system often over-prioritizes academic degrees, like a Ph.D., as the sole criterion for faculty recruitment. While academic qualifications are important, this narrow focus leads to a number of problems:

- Poor Communication Skills: Many highly qualified academics may lack the ability to effectively communicate complex concepts to students. This results in a disconnect, where knowledge is not transferred efficiently, and students struggle to grasp the material.
- Lack of Practical Knowledge: Faculty recruited solely for their research or academic background may have limited or no practical experience in modern agribusiness. They can teach theory but may not be able to provide students with a real-world perspective on challenges and opportunities in the field. This perpetuates a curriculum that is out of sync with industry demands.
- Absence of Mentorship: A good educator does more than just lecture. They guide, inspire, and mentor students. Without the qualities of a mentor, faculty fail to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and professional development in their students. This stunts the growth of future leaders who need more than just textbook knowledge.
- Lead-from-the-front Administration: SAUs should recruit Vice-Chancellors with proven record of educational excellence and academic experience.
- Communication Skills: During the hiring process, faculty members should be evaluated on their ability to present complex topics clearly and engage an audience. This can be done through teaching demonstrations or presentations on their research.
- Farm/Industry Experience: Institutions should prioritize candidates who have practical experience in the agricultural sector. This could include working in agribusiness, managing a farm, or conducting applied research with industry partners. This experience ensures that the curriculum is relevant and up-to-date. IAUA should



recommend mandatory internships of substantial period for agricultural degrees.

- Mentoring Qualities: Recruiters should look for candidates who demonstrate an interest in student success beyond the classroom. This could be seen in a history of supervising student projects, advising student clubs, or participating in outreach programs. These qualities are essential for building a supportive learning environment.

By focusing on these three key areas, institutions can build a faculty that not only possesses deep academic knowledge but also the communication and mentoring skills necessary to train the next generation of innovative and effective agricultural leaders.

LOW OR IRRELEVANT RESEARCH

The issue of low or irrelevant research output in agricultural education is a direct result of the academic reward system. When faculty career advancement, promotions, and tenure are tied almost exclusively to publications in prestigious, high-impact journals, it incentivizes a kind of research that often has little to no relevance to real-world agricultural problems. This system creates a significant disconnect. High-impact journals often favor highly theoretical, niche, or esoteric research that is scientifically complex but has limited practical application. Faculty are pressured to pursue topics that satisfy academic reviewers rather than addressing the pressing needs of farmers, agribusinesses, or rural communities. For example, a professor might publish a complex genetic study on a rare plant species, which may earn them a top-tier publication, while a more practical study on how to improve crop yields for a common local crop goes unwritten. This focus on academic prestige over practical relevance has several consequences:

- Stagnant Local Innovation: Research that could solve local problems—like pest outbreaks, soil degradation, or water management issues—is not prioritized, leading to a lack of innovation at the regional level.
- Loss of Public Trust: When the public, especially farmers and industry leaders, sees academic research as irrelevant and detached, it erodes trust

in agricultural institutions and their ability to provide solutions.

- Lack of Practical Student Training: Students are often involved in this type of theoretical research, which doesn't prepare them for the applied, problem-solving demands of the modern agricultural industry. They may learn how to conduct a complex genetic experiment but not how to use data to optimize fertilizer application on a farm.

To fix this, agricultural education institutions need to realign their research incentives. Faculty should be rewarded not just for the prestige of their publications but also for the impact and relevance of their research. This can be achieved by:

- Expanding Evaluation Criteria: Career advancement should consider a wider range of metrics, including patents, successful technology transfers, extension work, community engagement, and publications in journals or reports that are widely read by industry professionals and farmers.
- Promoting Interdisciplinary and Collaborative Research: Institutions should encourage and reward faculty who collaborate with agribusinesses, government agencies, and farmers on problem-oriented research. This ensures that the research addresses real-world needs.
- Establishing an Applied Research Culture: The culture of the institution itself should value and promote applied research as highly as theoretical work. This can be done through dedicated funding for applied projects and by showcasing the real-world impact of faculty research.

LANGUAGE AND ACCESSIBILITY BARRIERS:

Language and accessibility barriers in agricultural education create significant challenges, hindering the dissemination of knowledge and excluding a large portion of the rural population. The primary issue is the reliance on English as the medium of instruction and research, which alienates students and farmers who primarily speak regional or local languages.

- English as a Barrier: While English is a global language of science and business, its dominance in agricultural curricula and research publications creates a major hurdle. Many students from rural backgrounds, who often attend government schools where regional languages are the primary medium, struggle to grasp complex scientific concepts when taught in English. This not only impacts their academic performance but also makes them less confident in their abilities. SAUs may introduce education through the language of the state.
- Exclusion of Farmers: The lack of accessible content in local languages directly impacts the ability of extension services to effectively communicate

new agricultural technologies and practices to farmers. Research findings published in English-only journals remain inaccessible to the very people who could benefit most from them. This knowledge gap contributes to lower productivity and perpetuates traditional, less efficient farming methods.

- Urban-Rural Divide: The language barrier reinforces the urban-rural divide. Urban students, who are often more proficient in English, are at an advantage, while rural students, who have firsthand experience with agricultural challenges, are at a disadvantage. This leads to a brain drain, where talented rural students are unable to pursue higher education in agriculture, and those who do, often struggle to succeed.

To address these challenges, a multi-pronged strategy is required to make agricultural education more inclusive and accessible.

- Multilingual Content: Educational institutions and government agencies must develop and disseminate research and educational materials in multiple regional languages. This includes translating textbooks, creating video tutorials, and publishing research summaries in local dialects.
- Bilingual Instruction: Implement bilingual teaching methods where complex scientific terms are introduced in English but explained using local language analogies and examples. This can help students bridge the language gap gradually.
- Leverage Technology: Utilize technology to create a network of agricultural information that is accessible in various languages. Apps, websites, and radio programs can be developed to provide real-time information on crop diseases, weather forecasts, and market prices in local languages.
- Empower Local Experts: Train and empower local community leaders and agricultural extension workers to serve as a bridge between researchers and farmers. These individuals, fluent in local languages, can effectively translate and demonstrate new practices.

By breaking down these language and accessibility barriers, agricultural education can become a powerful tool for empowering rural communities, fostering innovation, and ensuring that the knowledge and research generated actually reach those who need it most.

LACK OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING

The lack of entrepreneurship training in agricultural education is a significant missed opportunity. It prevents agricultural graduates from seeing themselves not just as job seekers, but as job creators. Instead of equipping them to be innovative business owners, the current curriculum often prepares them for traditional, salaried roles, leaving a void in crucial areas like input supplies,

food processing, and rural services. The traditional agricultural education system often overlooks the importance of business acumen. Graduates are taught the science of agriculture but lack the skills to monetize that knowledge. This leads to a number of issues:

- Limited Self-Employment: Graduates are often unprepared to launch their own ventures, such as providing custom hire services (e.g., modern farm equipment rental), setting up input supply businesses (e.g., selling seeds or fertilizers), or becoming an agricultural practitioner offering expert advice to farmers.
- Brain Drain: Without viable self-employment opportunities, talented graduates from rural areas are compelled to move to urban centers in search of jobs, contributing to rural decay and a loss of local expertise.
- Missed Opportunities in Food Processing: The curriculum often lacks the business training needed to create small-scale food processing industries that could add value to local produce, reduce waste, and generate income within the community.
- Failure to Capitalize on Rural Administration: Graduates could play a key role in rural administration by using their expertise to advise local governments on agricultural policy and development projects, but they often lack the entrepreneurial drive to create these roles for themselves.

To address this, agricultural education must shift its focus to include a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship. This new approach should include:

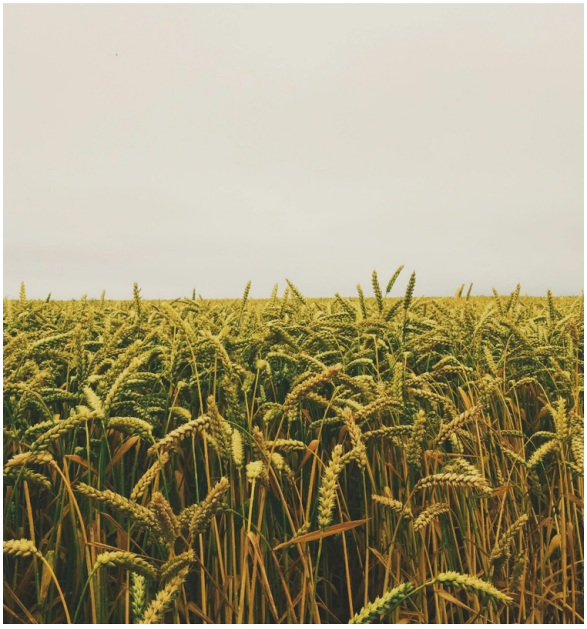
- Practical Business Skills: Courses should be introduced on market analysis, business plan development, financial management, and marketing specifically for the agricultural sector.
- Mentorship and Incubation Centers: Universities should partner with agribusinesses and successful entrepreneurs to create mentorship programs and business incubators. These centers would provide graduates with a supportive environment to develop and launch their ventures.
- Project-Based Learning: Students should be challenged to create and present business plans based on real-world opportunities, like setting up a local food processing unit or a farm-to-table delivery service. This hands-on experience is crucial for building confidence and practical skills.

By integrating this entrepreneurial training, agricultural education can transform its role from simply producing employees to empowering a new generation of innovative business leaders who can revitalize rural economies and create a more sustainable and prosperous agricultural sector.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NON-PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

Manning agricultural leadership roles with non-experts is like trying to fly a plane without a trained pilot: it is directionless, dangerous, and eventually disastrous. This is because these positions require a deep understanding of complex systems, from soil science and genetics to global supply chains and climate trends. When these roles are filled by individuals without the necessary expertise, it leads to:

- Ineffective Decision-Making: Non-professionals lack the foundational knowledge to make sound decisions on critical issues like pest management, resource allocation, and market strategy. This can lead to significant economic losses for farmers and the country.
- Stagnant Innovation: Without leaders who understand the latest advancements in Agrotech, biotechnology, and sustainable practices, the sector fails to innovate. Research becomes irrelevant, and the adoption of new technologies slows down, leaving the country's agricultural output behind global competitors.
- Erosion of Trust: When professionals see that leadership roles are not based on merit or expertise, it demotivates them and can lead to a "brain drain," where the most talented individuals leave the sector. This also erodes public and industry trust in agricultural institutions.



A CALL FOR STRATEGIC PROFESSIONALISM

To ensure the future of agriculture, leadership positions must be filled by qualified professionals who possess a blend of academic expertise and practical experience. This requires a strategic shift in government policy and institutional hiring practices. By prioritizing merit and professional qualifications, we can ensure that the agricultural sector is guided by capable hands, capable of steering it toward a prosperous, sustainable, and innovative future.

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Graphic Designer: Sharan Maan

Website Handler: Harman Saini