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Plant Protection in India: A Double-Edged Sword for Agricultural Exports

*Chetna Pathak[1], Abhijeet Kuderiya[1] and Surya Dev Verma[2]
[1]PhD Research Scholar, Department of Extension Education, Jawaharlal Nehru Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Jabalpur-482004 (M.P.), India
[2]MSc. Agricultural Extension, Jawaharlal Nehru Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Jabalpur-482004 (M.P.), India
*Corresponding Author's email: csapathak@gmail.com

India, a global agricultural powerhouse, has long relied on its vast and diverse crop production to fuel both domestic consumption and international trade. However, the issue of plant protection—while essential for safeguarding crops against pests and diseases—has emerged as a complex challenge that hampers India's export potential.

How Plant Protection Hampers Exports

India's crop protection industry is the fourth largest globally and plays a vital role in enhancing yields and ensuring food security. Yet, the use of chemical pesticides and fungicides often leads to residues that exceed internationally accepted limits. Many importing countries, especially in the European Union and North America, enforce stringent phytosanitary standards under the WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement. These standards are designed to prevent the entry of exotic pests and ensure food safety, but they also act as trade barriers when Indian produce fails to meet them. Consignments of Indian fruits, vegetables, and spices, for example, have been refused because they do not meet Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs). Such occurrences damage India's standing in international markets in addition to causing financial losses. Furthermore, the issue is made worse by the inconsistent use of phytosanitary certification and the insufficient infrastructure for residue testing.

Impact on Farmers: Case Studies and Consequences

1. Grape Farmers in Maharashtra

Maharashtra is a major grape-producing state, with exports primarily to the European Union. In 2020, several consignments were rejected due to pesticide residues exceeding EU limits. Despite following local guidelines, farmers were unaware of stricter international standards.

Losses: According to the All-India Grape Growers Association, farmers lost over ₹150 crore in a single season due to rejected shipments and falling domestic prices

2. Exporters of Basmati Rice in Punjab and Haryana

A premium export good is basmati rice. Tricyclazole residues, a fungicide that is prohibited in the EU, have caused shipments to be rejected in recent years.

Losses: As a result of this problem, the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) projected that Basmati exports will decline by ₹1,000 crore in 2018.

3. Tamil Nadu Vegetable Farmers.

Gulf nations import vegetables like bitter gourd and okra. A number of shipments were refused in 2021 because they did not adhere to phytosanitary regulations.

Losses: Some farmers were compelled to sell produce at local marketplaces at throwaway prices after reporting a 30–40% decline in income.

Root Causes: International residue limitations and phytosanitary regulations are not well known to many farms.

Fragmented Certification: When plant quarantine and certification procedures are applied inconsistently.

Limited Infrastructure: Inadequate cold chain facilities and a dearth of accredited residue testing labs.

Path Forward

To mitigate these losses and empower farmers:

- **Training Programs:** Educate farmers on safe pesticide use and export standards.
- **Subsidized Testing:** Provide affordable access to residue testing labs.
- **Policy Alignment:** Harmonize domestic pesticide regulations with international norms.
- **Promotion of IPM and Organic Farming:** Reduce chemical dependency and improve compliance.

Finding the Midway: Balancing Protection and Compliance

The challenge lies in striking a balance between effective plant protection and meeting international standards. A midway approach involves:

- **Integrated Pest Management (IPM):** Promoting IPM practices that combine biological, cultural, and mechanical methods with minimal chemical use can reduce residue levels while maintaining crop health.
- **Farmer Education:** Training farmers on safe pesticide application, pre-harvest intervals, and residue management is crucial. Awareness campaigns can help bridge the knowledge gap.
- **Strengthening Certification Systems:** Ensuring that phytosanitary certificates are issued by qualified personnel under the national plant protection organization, as mandated by the IPPC, can enhance credibility.
- **Investing in Infrastructure:** Establishing more accredited labs for residue testing and improving cold chain logistics can help maintain quality and compliance.

Long-Term Benefits through Sustainable Solutions

To stay competitive in the future, India needs to shift its focus to sustainable agriculture. A viable substitute is natural farming, which depends on ecological balance and does not use artificial inputs. In addition to lowering the possibility of residue breaches, it also supports worldwide trends that promote eco-friendly and organic goods. Government regulations ought to encourage the creation and uptake of safer crop protection technology, such as precision farming instruments and biopesticides. The foundation of India's agricultural economy, smallholder farmers, can benefit from public-private partnerships that can speed up innovation and guarantee that solutions reach them.

Conclusion

Plant protection is indispensable for crop productivity, but its mismanagement can derail India’s export ambitions. By embracing sustainable practices, enhancing regulatory frameworks, and empowering farmers, India can transform this challenge into an opportunity—ensuring both agricultural prosperity and global market access.

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