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New Breakthroughs in Botanical Pesticides

*Bidyabharati Samantaray
M.Sc. Scholar, Department of Entomology, College of Agriculture,
OUAT, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India- 751003
*Corresponding Author's email: bidyabharatis77@gmail.com

A pest is defined as any species, strain, or biotype of plant, animal, or pathogenic agent that causes injury to plants, plant products, materials, or environments, including vectors of parasites or pathogens of human and animal diseases. Pests are broadly classified into insect pests, mites, nematodes, rodents, pathogens like fungi or bacteria, and weeds based on their biological nature and mode of damage. Among these, insect pests account for the largest share of yield loss in agricultural systems, making their management a priority concern. Currently, global agriculture faces a severe crisis where plant pests and diseases cause up to 40% loss of global crop production annually, posing a threat to food security and ecosystem stability. In the Indian context, recent estimates suggest that insect pests and other biotic stresses collectively cause crop losses amounting to nearly ₹2 lakh crore annually, severely affecting farmer income

The Crisis of Synthetic Pesticides and the Pesticide Treadmill

The historical reliance on synthetic pesticides has led to significant environmental and health challenges. Studies indicate that only 1–25% of applied pesticides actually reach the target pests, while the remaining portion contaminates soil, water, and non-target organisms. This massive waste has resulted in biodiversity loss, soil fertility decline, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. A major consequence of this chemical overuse is pesticide resistance, especially in polyphagous pests such as *Helicoverpa armigera* and *Bemisia tabaci*, leading to the well-known "pesticide treadmill". In this cycle, increasing doses and more frequent applications become necessary, escalating production costs while endangering beneficial organisms. Consequently, there is a renewed emphasis on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies that incorporate safer alternatives like botanicals.

Policy Push and the Definition of Botanicals

The shift toward botanical pesticides is supported by international policy interventions. The European Union's Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy, for instance, aims for a 50% reduction in the use and risk of chemical pesticides and a 25% increase in organic farmland by 2030. Botanicals are defined as toxicants or bioactive chemicals derived from plant parts such as leaves, stems, roots, seeds, or flowers used for insect pest and disease management. Common examples include neem products, nicotine, pyrethrum, and essential oils. They have gained importance in IPM due to their multiple modes of action—including repellent, antifeedant, and insect growth regulation—as well as their biodegradability and low mammalian toxicity

Historical Evolution of Botanical Pesticides

The use of plants for pest control has an ancient foundation. In India, references in the *Rig Veda* indicate the use of poisonous plants, and the *Charaka Samhita* (600 BCE) described neem as *Panchamrit* for its protective properties. Similarly, ancient China documented botanical seed treatments, and Persia and Rome utilized pyrethrum, known as "Persian dust". During the "Botanical Dominance Era," nicotine from tobacco and pyrethrum from

Chrysanthemum were used extensively. However, the discovery of DDT and organophosphates led to a "Chemical Dark Age" where botanicals were considered unstable and primitive. We are now in a "Modern Revival" era, sparked by global interest in sustainability and research into nano-botanicals and synergistic formulations.

Classification and Modes of Action

Botanicals are classified based on their chemical structures and physiological origins, which determine their specific modes of action and how they interact with target pests. Because these plant-derived compounds often possess diverse physiological mechanisms, they are highly effective at preventing the development of pest resistance, a common failure of single-mode synthetic chemicals.

I. Terpenoids

Terpenoids represent one of the most significant classes of botanicals, further subdivided based on their complex carbon skeletons:

- **Limonoids (e.g., Azadirachtin):** Primarily derived from the Neem tree (*Azadirachta indica*) of the Meliaceae family. Azadirachtin acts as an antagonist of ecdysone receptors, which effectively disrupts the molting and growth process—a mechanism known as Insect Growth Regulation (IGR). It also serves as a potent antifeedant for Lepidoptera larvae, thrips, and whiteflies.
- **Monoterpenes (e.g., Thymol):** Sourced from Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) within the Lamiaceae family. These compounds target GABA-gated chloride channels and Acetylcholinesterase (AChE), causing hyper-excitation, tremors, and rapid "knockdown" effects in aphids, mites, and stored grain beetles.

II. Alkaloids (e.g., Nicotine)

Alkaloids are nitrogen-containing compounds often sourced from the Solanaceae family, specifically Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*). Nicotine mimics the neurotransmitter Acetylcholine (ACh) by binding to Nicotinic Acetylcholine receptors (nAChR). This overstimulation of the nervous system leads to paralysis and rapid death, making it highly effective against piercing-sucking pests like aphids.

III. Furano Flavonoids (e.g., Karanjin)

Karanjin is the major bioactive compound extracted from the Karanja tree (*Millettia pinnata*) of the Fabaceae family. Its primary mode of action involves inhibiting midgut proteases, which severely disrupts the insect's digestion. Beyond its role as a strong antifeedant against mites and nematodes, it is often used as a synergist to enhance the efficacy of neem-based formulations.

IV. Phenolics (e.g., Rotenone)

Rotenone is a phenolic compound traditionally extracted from the roots of *Derris elliptica* (Fabaceae). It is a powerful respiratory inhibitor that blocks mitochondrial complex I (NADH-CoQ), effectively stopping ATP synthesis. This leads to total respiratory failure in target pests such as beetles, thrips, and aphids.

V. Sulphur Compounds (e.g., Allicin)

Allicin is derived from Garlic (*Allium sativum*) in the Amaryllidaceae family. These compounds target thiol-containing enzymes, leading to oxidative stress and enzyme inactivation within the pest. Allicin is widely recognized for its multi-functional properties, acting as an insecticide against root maggots, a nematocide, and a potent fungicide.

VI. Esters (e.g., Pyrethrins)

Pyrethrins (including Pyrethrin I & II, Cinerin, and Jasmoline) are extracted from the flower heads of *Chrysanthemum cinerariifolium*. These esters target voltage-gated sodium channels in the nerve axons. By prolonging the open state of these channels, they cause repetitive nerve firing and an almost instantaneous "knockdown" effect in flying insects like houseflies and mosquitoes.

Research Trends and Global Collaboration

Visualization of Similarities (VOS) viewer analysis highlights global research patterns in this field. China is the leading contributor with 106 documents, reflecting a significant research output and broad international collaborations. India stands out as a growing research hub in South Asia with 60 documents and strong collaborations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Japan. India's long history of using plant-based methods, particularly neem, combined with its diverse flora, provides a solid foundation for biopesticide development

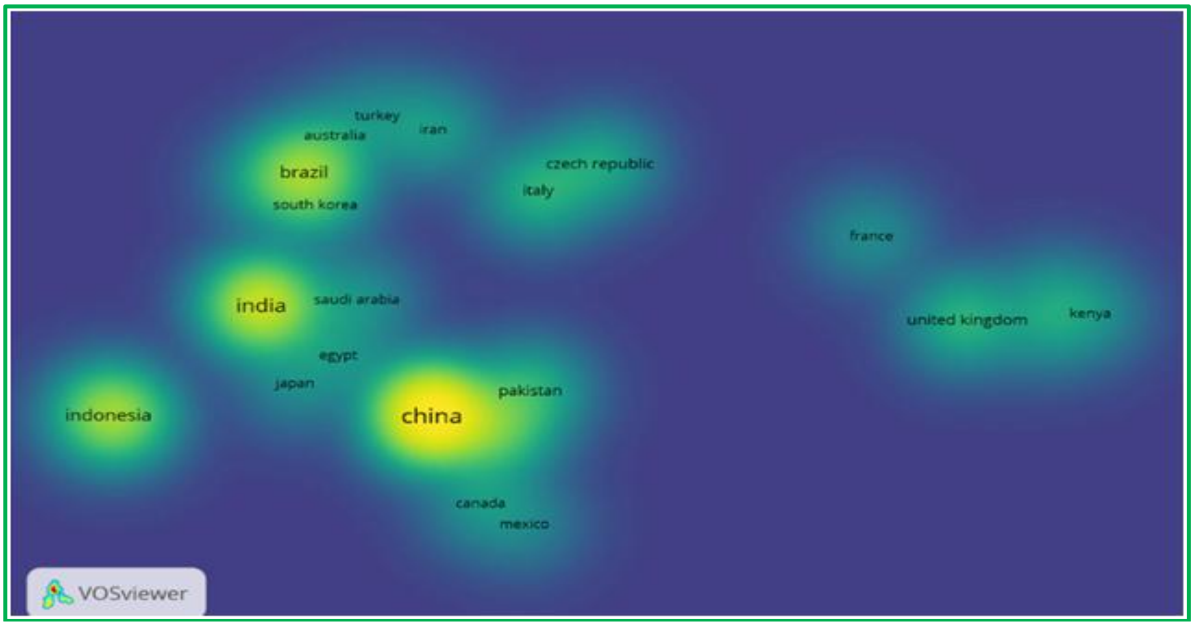

Fig.: Density visualization of global research output and collaboration patterns in botanical pesticide research. The map, generated using VOS viewer

Technological Innovations: Nano-formulations and Biotechnology

Traditional botanicals often suffered from rapid degradation when exposed to sunlight or heat, but modern advances are addressing these hurdles. Nano-formulations reduce active ingredients to a size of 1–100 nm or encapsulate them in nano-carriers. This enhances the penetration of the chemical through the insect cuticle, protects sensitive compounds from UV light (photolysis), and provides a controlled, slow release that reduces the required dose and prevents environmental leaching. Biotechnological techniques like callus and cell suspension cultures allow for the large-scale, consistent production of bioactive metabolites like azadirachtin in laboratory environments. Furthermore, genetic engineering is being used to improve biosynthetic pathways to ensure yield stability

Botanical-Microbial Synergy and Precision Application

Combining plant extracts with microbial agents creates a synergistic effect where the total control is greater than the sum of individual parts. For example, essential oils can disrupt the lipid layer of an insect's outer shell, allowing fungi like *Metarhizium anisopliae* to penetrate more quickly. In a sequential synergy, neem can stop an insect from feeding immediately, while *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) ensures mortality through midgut disruption. Precision agriculture also utilizes drone-based applications for botanical nano-emulsions. Drones can cover 20–30 acres per hour compared to 4–7 acres for manual spraying, reducing water usage by up to 90% and pesticide volume by 20–50%.

Key Actions for Next Generation Preparedness and Conclusion

To prepare for future challenges, extension services must be strengthened to provide farmer training and shift perceptions regarding biopesticides. Regulatory agencies need to develop harmonized guidelines and testing standards, especially for new formulations like nano-pesticides, to ensure safety and consistency. There is also an urgent need for long-term ecological risk assessments to evaluate the persistence of nano-formulations in soil and aquatic ecosystems. Botanical pesticides hold great promise as sustainable alternatives to synthetic chemicals. Their broad-spectrum activity, low environmental impact, and ability to reduce pest resistance make them valuable components of IPM. While challenges in standardization and commercialization remain, future research on synergistic effects and refined formulations will likely improve their commercial viability.

In conclusion, botanical pesticides represent a transformative and sustainable frontier in modern agriculture, offering a viable alternative to the ecological hazards posed by synthetic chemicals. These plant-derived compounds—characterized by their broad-spectrum activity, rapid biodegradability, and diverse physiological modes of action—are essential for breaking the "pesticide treadmill" and managing resistant pest populations. While traditional botanicals often struggled with environmental stability, the integration of cutting-edge technologies like nano-encapsulation, biotechnological metabolite production, and drone-based precision application has significantly enhanced their field efficacy and commercial potential. However, the transition to a botanical-dominant pest management strategy requires overcoming persistent hurdles, including the need for standardized regulatory protocols and comprehensive ecological risk assessments to ensure the safety of non-target organisms. By continuing to explore synergistic combinations between botanicals and microbial agents, and by strengthening farmer extension services, the agricultural community can achieve a resilient, eco-friendly system that secures global food production while preserving human and environmental health.

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