

When SKUAST Kashmir came to Babanagri: Tribal Farmers Receive Plant Health Kits and Training for the First Time

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For generations, the tribal farmers of Babanagri had one complaint that no one answered: "No one ever comes here." The road is narrow. The mobile signal is weak. The village is not on any extension worker's regular route. So the Gujjar and Bakarwal families who tend small orchards on these upper slopes of Ganderbal did what they could bought whatever chemicals the town shopkeeper recommended, sprayed when neighbours sprayed, and prayed when the leaves turned black. Then, on a recent morning, someone finally came. Directorate of Extension, SKUAST Kashmir conducted a one-day training program on "Empowering Tribal Farmers Through On-Farm Diagnosis and Plant Health Advisory" at Babanagri funded by ICAR New Delhi. 100 tribal farmers 56 men and 44 women attended. For most, it was their first formal training of any kind. For all, it was the first time someone had asked them to show their diseased leaves.



The Training: Learning to See What Was Always There

The program was designed not as a lecture, but as a **diagnostic workshop**. Farmers were asked to bring infected plant samples from their own orchard's leaves with spots, twigs with cankers, roots with rot. Using hand lenses provided in the kits, farmers learned to distinguish:

- Apple Scab (dark olive-black spots)
- Marssonina Blotch (brown lesions with yellow halos)
- Powdery Mildew (white powdery coating on young leaves)
- Canker (sunken, discolored bark on branches)

The afternoon session focused on **plant health advisory**; simple, practical steps:

Step	Action
1	Walk the orchard every morning
2	Inspect the underside of leaves
3	Identify using the laminated chart
4	Apply the right remedy (chemical or bio)
5	Monitor for three days before repeating

The Kits: Tools That Recognize the Farmer

The highlight of the day was the distribution of **plant protection kits** one for each of the 100 families. Each kit contained:

Item	Purpose
Knapsack sprayer (16 litre)	For efficient, even application of pesticides and bio-products
Protective goggles	To safeguard eyes during mixing and spraying

Item	Purpose
Protective suit	To prevent chemical exposure to skin and clothing
Glass beaker (500 ml)	For accurate measurement of liquid formulations
Soil pH meter	To test soil acidity before planting or treatment
Pruning shears	For clean removal of infected branches
Pruning saw	For thicker branches and canker removal
Hand lens (10x)	To see mites, eggs, and fungal spores
Laminated disease identification chart	For quick field reference



One farmer, **Mohd. Ashraf Bijard**, 58, held the knapsack sprayer like it was a gift. "I have been borrowing a broken pump from my cousin for fifteen years," he said. "Now I have my own. This is not just a tool. This is respect." **Jameeda Begum**, 45, a mother of six, carefully opened her protective suit. "We never wore anything," she admitted. "My hands are stained blue from years of mixing without gloves. Now I know better."

The Moment That Mattered

Halfway through the distribution, **Gulzara Begum** (a different woman from earlier stories) asked a question that stopped the session. "Why now?" she said quietly. "We have been here for forty years. Why did SKUAST come today and not ten years ago?" The room fell silent. We put down the kit he was handing out. "That is a fair question," we said. "we don't have an answer. But we can tell you this you are not forgotten anymore. And these tools are yours to keep. What you do with them tomorrow is up to you. But today, we are here." **Gulzara Begum**. Then she picked up her kit, walked to a corner of the school ground, and began practicing with the sprayer. Within an hour, she had taught seven other women how to assemble and calibrate it.

What Farmers Said

"I have never seen a soil pH meter in my life. I didn't even know soil had a number. Today I learned that my soil is too acidic. Now I can fix it." **Showkat Hassan Bijard**, Babanagri
"The goggles are not for show. Last year, I got pesticide in my eye. I could not see for three days. My family was terrified. Now I will never spray without them."

Farooq Ahmad Kasana, Babanagri

"The pruning saw — I used to cut branches with a kitchen knife. The wounds never healed properly. Now I have the right tool. My trees will thank me." **Shakeela Bano**, Babanagri



What Happens Next

No results are available yet the training was conducted recently. But the foundation has been laid.

Each farmer has committed to:

- Using their hand lens daily during morning walks
- Testing their soil pH within the next two weeks
- Applying the diagnostic steps before any spray
- Sharing their new knowledge with at least one neighbor

The SKUAST team has promised:

- A follow-up visit in 60 days
- A WhatsApp group for remote plant health advice
- Linking interested farmers to nearby bio-input production units

The Bottom Line

The Babanagri training was not about miracles. It was about **tools, knowledge, and dignity** delivered to a community that had been waiting for decades. No results to report yet. But as **Razia Begum** said while adjusting her new goggles:

"Give us these tools and one good day of training. Then wait. We will show you what tribal farmers can do."