

India's Food Power Play: How India is Rewriting the Rules of Global Agriculture

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From superfoods and specialty coffee to global quality standards, Indian agriculture is entering a new era where trust, innovation, and premium branding matter as much as production.

"The world's dinner table is changing, and India is quietly becoming one of its most influential chefs."

Walk through the aisles of a supermarket in London, Dubai, Singapore, Melbourne, or Toronto, and you'll find products that began their journey thousands of kilometres away in the fertile fields of India. Premium Basmati rice from Punjab, fragrant cardamom from Kerala, juicy grapes from Nashik, organic coffee from the Araku Valley, aromatic lemons from Assam, and succulent mangoes from Maharashtra are steadily strengthening India's footprint in global food markets. While these products have travelled overseas for decades, the story behind them has changed dramatically.

Indian agriculture is no longer measured only by how much food it produces. Instead, it is increasingly judged by how well it satisfies global consumers who demand food that is safe, traceable, sustainably produced, and backed by internationally accepted quality standards. In today's marketplace, a farmer in Maharashtra competes not only with another farmer in India but also with producers from Chile, Peru, Vietnam, Australia, Brazil, and the Netherlands.

According to the **Department of Commerce, Government of India**, India's agricultural exports reached a record **USD 52.55 billion**, reaffirming the country's position among the world's leading agricultural exporters. At the same time, imports climbed to **USD 38.5 billion**, driven primarily by increasing domestic demand for edible oils and protein-rich pulses. Consequently, India's agricultural trade surplus narrowed to **USD 12.7 billion**.

At first glance, the shrinking surplus appears worrying. However, agricultural economists offer a different perspective. According to **NITI Aayog**, India's evolving consumption pattern reflects rising household incomes, greater nutritional awareness, and changing food preferences rather than declining agricultural competitiveness. As Indian consumers demand



healthier cooking oils, higher protein intake, and diversified diets, imports naturally rise alongside exports.

More importantly, the composition of India's exports is changing. Instead of relying exclusively on bulk commodities, exporters are increasingly targeting premium markets with high-value fruits, specialty coffee, processed foods, nutraceuticals, and functional foods. This transition aligns closely with the vision promoted by the **Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA)**, which has consistently advocated moving Indian agriculture up the global value chain through branding, quality assurance, and market diversification.

This shift is also consistent with the **OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook**, which predicts that future growth in global food trade will increasingly come from premium, processed, and value-added agricultural products rather than bulk commodities. Consumers across developed economies are now willing to pay significantly higher prices for food that combines nutrition, sustainability, authenticity, and traceability.

For Indian farmers, this changing landscape presents both unprecedented opportunities and formidable challenges.

Table 1. India's Major Agricultural Export Success Stories (2024-2026)

Timeline	Commodity	Destination	Quantity	Estimated Value	Why it Matters
June 2026	Potatoes & Pomegranates	Russia	Initial commercial consignments	Projected USD 45 million opportunity	Expanded market access
June 2026	Value-added Millet Foods	New Zealand	1 MT	USD 12,000	India's first premium millet startup shipment
May 2026	Fresh Grapes	Vietnam	48 MT	USD 110,000	High-value horticultural breakthrough
September 2025	GI-tagged Produce through LuLu Hypermarket	Middle East & Africa	2,500 MT annually	USD 8.5 million annually	Direct retail access for farmers
May 2024	Assam Kaji Nemu Lemon	United Kingdom	1.5 MT	USD 6,500	Northeast India's export breakthrough
2025-26	Coffee	Global Markets	Over 3.5 lakh tonnes	More than USD 2 billion	Record export performance
June 2026	Uttarakhand Litchi	Italy	1 MT	USD 4,800	First-ever export to Italy

One of the most remarkable developments came in June 2026 when **Russia officially opened its market to Indian fresh pomegranates and seed potatoes**. According to APEDA and India's **National Plant Protection Organization (NPPO)**, the breakthrough followed years of technical negotiations, pest-risk assessments, and phytosanitary cooperation between the two countries. Although the first consignments were relatively modest, they unlocked an estimated **USD 45 million** export opportunity and reduced India's dependence on traditional Asian markets.

This achievement demonstrates that agricultural diplomacy has become as important as agricultural productivity. Winning new markets today often requires scientific collaboration, regulatory harmonization, and sustained government engagement long before the first shipment leaves an Indian port.

Another success story emerged from an unlikely hero, the humble millet.

For decades, millets were regarded as coarse grains grown primarily in rain-fed regions and consumed largely in rural households. Today, they have become global superfoods. Following the **International Year of Millets**, promoted by the **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** and strongly championed by India, international demand for these climate-resilient grains has risen sharply. Rich in fibre, protein, minerals, and

antioxidants, millets are increasingly preferred by health-conscious consumers seeking nutritious alternatives to refined cereals.

On **3 June 2026**, Karnataka exported India's first commercial shipment of **botanical-infused ready-to-cook millet functional foods** to New Zealand. The shipment weighed just **one metric tonne**, but generated approximately **USD 12,000** in export value. According to APEDA, the consignment showcased how innovation and value addition can generate substantially higher returns than exporting raw agricultural commodities.

The future of Indian agriculture clearly lies not only in producing more, but also in producing smarter.

India's horticultural sector also scored a significant victory when **Vietnam granted market access to Indian table grapes**. According to APEDA and the **National Horticulture Board (NHB)**, the inaugural refrigerated shipment of **48 metric tonnes** from Nashik successfully met Vietnam's stringent phytosanitary requirements and carried an estimated value of **USD 110,000**. Beyond immediate commercial gains, the new market offers grape growers greater diversification and reduces excessive dependence on European buyers.

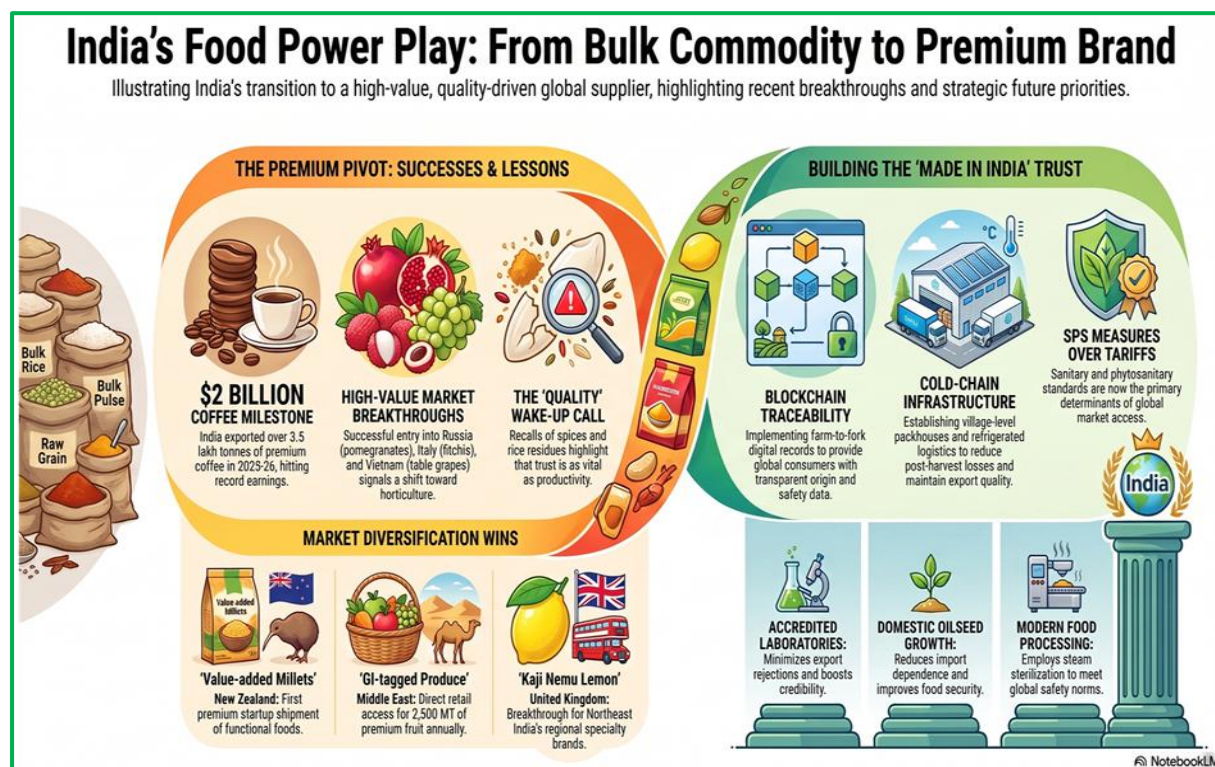
Perhaps the most commercially transformative development occurred in September 2025, when APEDA signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding with **LuLu Hypermarket LLC**, one of the largest retail chains in the Middle East and Africa. The agreement established a direct supply chain for premium Indian produce, including Bihar's famous Shahi Litchi and Jardalu Mango, enabling farmers to access international supermarket shelves without passing through multiple intermediaries.

The partnership covers more than **2,500 metric tonnes** of premium fruits annually and is valued at over **USD 8.5 million**. Industry experts believe such retail partnerships are reshaping agricultural exports by allowing farmers to capture a greater share of the final consumer price while ensuring better quality control throughout the supply chain.

India's Northeast also celebrated an important milestone when **Assam's GI-tagged Kaji Nemu lemon** entered the United Kingdom through an initial shipment of **1.5 metric tonnes**, valued at approximately **USD 6,500**. Although modest in volume, the export demonstrated that India's regional specialties possess enormous global potential when supported by scientific packaging, efficient cold-chain logistics, and internationally accepted quality standards. According to the **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)**, Geographical Indication products provide India with a unique opportunity to differentiate itself in premium international markets through authenticity and regional identity.

Coffee has become another shining example of India's growing competitiveness. According to the **Coffee Board of India** and the **International Coffee Organization (ICO)**, adverse weather conditions in Brazil and Vietnam significantly tightened global coffee supplies during 2025-26. India seized the opportunity by exporting more than **3.5 lakh tonnes** of premium Arabica and Robusta coffee, crossing **USD 2 billion** in export earnings for the first time. Sustainable cultivation practices and increasing international demand for specialty coffee also helped tribal growers from regions such as Araku Valley secure better returns. The success story continued in June 2026 when fresh **Uttarakhand litchis** reached Italy for the first time. Litchis are among the world's most delicate fruits, often deteriorating rapidly if temperatures fluctuate during transit. Through meticulous cold-chain management and temperature-controlled logistics, India successfully exported a one-metric-tonne trial consignment valued at **USD 4,800**. According to APEDA, Himalayan farmers earned nearly **25 percent higher returns** than those available in domestic wholesale markets.

These achievements clearly demonstrate that Indian agriculture is steadily transitioning from a supplier of bulk commodities to a producer of premium, high-value food products. Yet global agricultural trade is rarely a smooth journey. Success in one season offers no guarantee for the next. In today's highly regulated food markets, even a single quality lapse can erase years of hard-earned credibility.



One rejected shipment can damage an entire nation's reputation, and India has learned that lesson through some painful experiences.

One of the biggest wake-up calls came in April 2024 when two of India's most iconic spice brands, **MDH** and **Everest**, found themselves at the centre of an international food safety controversy. Food safety authorities in **Hong Kong** and the **Singapore Food Agency (SFA)** ordered the recall of selected spice products after detecting traces of **Ethylene Oxide (ETO)**, a chemical used for sterilization but considered unacceptable under several international food safety regulations. Although the issue was limited to specific consignments, the headlines travelled much faster than the facts. Within days, the incident had sparked global concern about the quality and safety of Indian spice exports.

For a country that proudly calls itself the "Land of Spices," the episode was a sobering reminder that reputation is one of the most valuable commodities in international trade. Buyers became more cautious, retailers demanded additional certifications, and importers began scrutinizing Indian consignments more closely than ever before. It reinforced an important lesson: in today's food business, trust takes years to build but can be shaken by a single quality lapse.

The consequences extended far beyond Southeast Asia. According to the **United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA)**, surveillance of Indian spice imports into the United States was intensified following the recalls. Containers that once cleared customs routinely were subjected to additional laboratory testing, documentation reviews, and inspection procedures. While these measures were intended to safeguard consumers, they also increased logistics costs, delayed deliveries, and disrupted cash flows for exporters. Even companies with strong compliance records found themselves navigating longer waiting periods and higher operating expenses.

The spice controversy was not an isolated case. Indian Basmati rice, one of the country's flagship agricultural exports, also faced significant challenges in European markets. According to the **European Commission** and the **European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)**, several consignments were rejected because residues of the fungicide **Tricyclazole** exceeded the European Union's Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs). Exporters expecting premium returns in Europe were forced to divert shipments to alternative destinations, often at considerably lower prices.

The setback highlighted a growing reality of modern agriculture. Decisions made on the farm regarding pesticide selection, dosage, and harvesting schedules now directly influence whether produce reaches premium international shelves or is rejected at the border. The gap between an Indian paddy field and a European testing laboratory has effectively disappeared. Japan delivered another important lesson when it temporarily suspended imports of India's premium **Alphonso** and **Kesar** mangoes. According to **Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)**, procedural shortcomings related to vapor heat treatment and phytosanitary compliance raised concerns over fruit fly infestation. Ironically, although tariffs had already been reduced under the India-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), technical and sanitary regulations became the real barriers to trade.

These episodes underline a fundamental shift in global commerce. According to the **World Trade Organization (WTO)**, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures have become some of the most influential determinants of international agricultural trade. Tariffs are no longer the primary hurdle. Instead, laboratory testing, pesticide residues, traceability, sustainability certifications, packaging quality, and consumer confidence increasingly determine whether products gain market access.

Table 2. Major Export Challenges Faced by Indian Agriculture

Timeline	Commodity	Regulatory Action	Impact
April 2024	MDH & Everest Spice Mixes	Product recalls by Hong Kong and Singapore	Reputational damage and stricter global scrutiny
May 2024	Indian Spice Exports	Enhanced inspections by USDA	Shipment delays and increased compliance costs
Late 2023	Basmati Rice	EU border rejections over Tricyclazole residues	Diversion to lower-value export markets
Mid-2023	Alphonso & Kesar Mangoes	Temporary suspension by Japan	Disruption of premium fruit exports

Fortunately, every challenge has also presented an opportunity for reform. Rather than discouraging exporters, these incidents have accelerated conversations around building a stronger, smarter, and more resilient agricultural export ecosystem. According to **NITI Aayog**, India's next agricultural transformation must focus on value addition, quality assurance, digital agriculture, and integrated supply chains rather than production alone.

One of the most promising solutions is **farm-to-fork digital traceability**. The **World Economic Forum (WEF)** identifies blockchain technology as one of the most powerful tools for improving transparency across global food supply chains. Imagine purchasing a packet of Indian turmeric in Germany or Canada and scanning a QR code to instantly view the farm where it was grown, irrigation records, laboratory reports, harvesting dates, transportation conditions, and export certifications. Such transparency would significantly strengthen consumer confidence while making it easier to identify and isolate any food safety issues.

Equally important is investment in cold-chain infrastructure. According to the **National Centre for Cold-chain Development (NCCD)**, inadequate storage and transportation facilities remain one of the biggest causes of post-harvest losses in India. The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** estimates that nearly one-third of food produced globally is lost or wasted before reaching consumers. Establishing village-level packhouses, solar-powered cold storage facilities, and refrigerated logistics networks would not only reduce waste but also improve export quality and farmers' incomes.

Food processing practices also require continuous modernization. Following the spice controversy, experts recommended wider adoption of internationally accepted sterilization technologies such as steam sterilization and food irradiation. According to the **Export Inspection Council (EIC) of India**, strengthening pre-export testing through internationally accredited laboratories can significantly reduce the likelihood of border rejections while enhancing India's credibility in overseas markets.

Another important priority is reducing dependence on imported edible oils. According to the **Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare**, the **National Mission on Edible**

Oils seeks to expand domestic production of oil palm, mustard, soybean, and sunflower. Strengthening domestic oilseed production will not only improve India's agricultural trade balance but also create additional income opportunities for farmers while enhancing national food security.

Table 3. Five Strategic Priorities for India's Agricultural Future

Strategic Priority	Expected Outcome
Blockchain-based Farm-to-Fork Traceability	Enhances transparency and buyer confidence
Village-Level Cold Chain Infrastructure	Reduces post-harvest losses and improves export quality
Modern Food Processing Technologies	Strengthens food safety and global compliance
Expansion of Domestic Oilseed Production	Reduces edible oil imports and strengthens food security
Internationally Accredited Testing Laboratories	Minimizes export rejections and improves market credibility

Beyond technology and infrastructure, India's greatest strength lies in its extraordinary agricultural diversity. According to the **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)**, India has one of the world's richest portfolios of **Geographical Indication (GI)** products. From Araku Valley Coffee and Assam Kaji Nemu to Bihar's Shahi Litchi, Kalanamak Rice, Kandhamal Turmeric, and Naga Mircha, these products represent far more than agricultural commodities. They embody regional heritage, traditional knowledge, biodiversity, and unique climatic conditions that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

Consumer preferences are evolving rapidly. According to the **OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook**, rising incomes, urbanization, and greater health awareness are increasing demand for nutritious, sustainably produced, and ethically sourced food. Modern consumers are not simply buying rice, coffee, spices, or fruit. They are buying authenticity, quality, and a story they can trust. This changing landscape provides India with an extraordinary opportunity to move beyond commodity exports and establish itself as a global supplier of premium agricultural products.

The journey has already begun. The export milestones achieved between 2024 and 2026 demonstrate that Indian farmers, scientists, exporters, agritech entrepreneurs, and policymakers are capable of competing with the very best in the world. At the same time, recent regulatory setbacks serve as timely reminders that excellence must be accompanied by consistency.

As the **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** has consistently emphasized, the future of agriculture belongs not only to nations that produce more food but to those that produce food that is safe, sustainable, traceable, and trusted. India possesses the scientific capability, entrepreneurial spirit, agro-climatic diversity, and policy support required to lead this transformation. If these strengths continue to converge, the next agricultural revolution will not simply be measured in export earnings or production records. It will be measured by the confidence that consumers around the world place in the "**Made in India**" label.

India has long been known as one of the world's largest food producers. The next milestone is even more ambitious and far more rewarding: becoming the world's **most trusted food brand**.