

Who are The Red Farmers in Gherkin Cultivation and Why they are Referred so?

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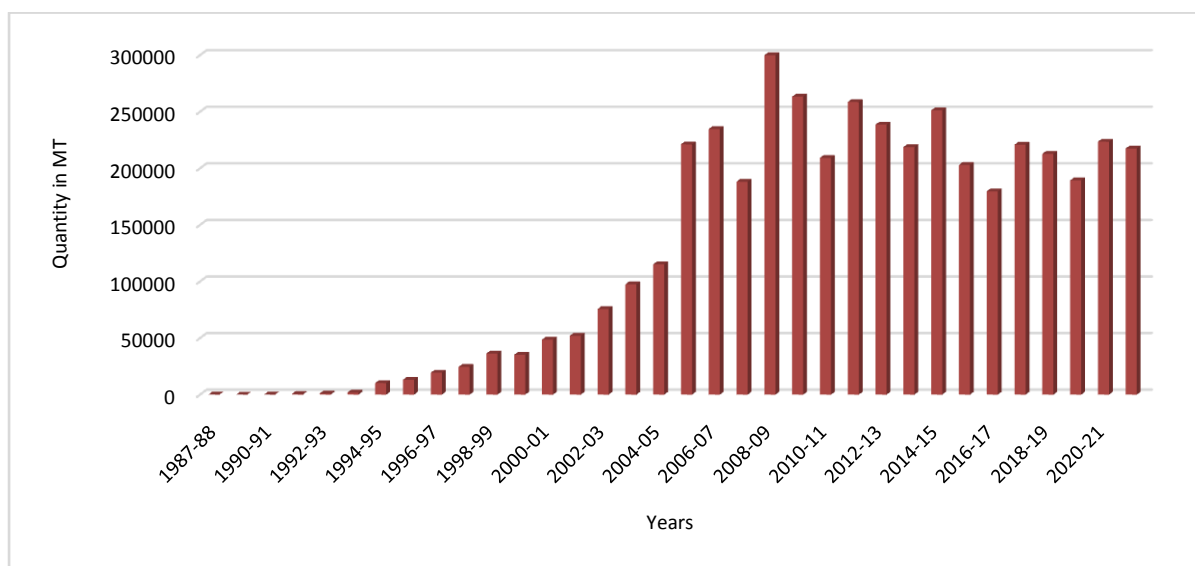
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Introduction:

Gherkin (*Cucumis anguria*) is a vine crop that belongs to the Cucurbitaceae family, which also includes other crops such as cucumber, melon, and pumpkin. Gherkins are small cucumbers, typically harvested when they are about 4-6 cm in length, with slightly bumpy skin and a firm, crunchy texture. Gherkins are native to West Africa and were introduced to India during the colonial era. Today, India is one of the leading producers and exporters of gherkins. Gherkins are primarily grown for the pickling industry, where they are used to make various pickled products such as relishes, sauces, and salads.

Role of contract farming in Gherkin cultivation:

Gherkin cultivation is typically done on a contract farming basis, with farmers entering into agreements with Gherkin processing or exporting companies to grow gherkins under specified conditions and quality standards. This helps ensure a consistent supply of high-quality gherkins for the pickling industry and provides smallholder farmers with a reliable market and income source. Gherkin production is currently carried out by more than 100,000 small and marginal farmers. Early in the 1990s, the southern Indian state of Karnataka saw the commencement of gherkin cultivation, processing, and exports. The entire activities are taken up by the Indian gherkin manufacturers to produce very high-quality gherkins for the world markets. From 39.01MT in 1987-88 to 223,515.51 MT in the year 2020-21 with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 25.5% (graph-1), the country exported cucumber and gherkin to the world, worth Rs. 1,651.83 crores, with major destinations including the United States, Belgium, Spain, France, and Russia (APEDA, 2021).

Graph 1: India's export of Cucumber and Gherkins (Prepared. & Preserved)

Source: DGCIS Annual Export: Qty (MT), Value (crores)

Red farmers in gherkin cultivation:

The companies that engage in the contract provide farmers with time-to-time technical assistance, training, and inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, chemicals, and other items for which the companies deduct these expenses once the produce is received by the farmer and after deducting the expenses, the companies return the balance to the farmers.

When a farmer fails to supply the required quantity of gherkin produce which would cover the costs incurred by the company, the company will suffer a loss, and those farmers are referred to as "**red farmers**" in the gherkin cultivation industry.

Reasons associated with becoming a red farmer:

- **Weather conditions:** Extreme weather conditions such as droughts, floods, and heatwaves can damage crops and cause a reduction in yield or total crop failure.
- **Pest and disease infestation:** Pests such as insects, rodents, and birds can destroy crops, while diseases such as fungi, viruses, and bacteria can infect plants and cause them to wilt or die.
- **Soil fertility:** The fertility of the soil plays a critical role in crop growth and yield. Soil that lacks essential nutrients or has an excess of salts or toxins can lead to stunted growth or crop failure.
- **Human error:** Mismanagement practices such as improper irrigation, overuse of pesticides, or improper use of fertilizers can cause crop failure.

- **Non-availability of labour:** Manual harvesting of gherkin is labour intensive and unavailability at the time of harvest may lead to the harvesting of poor-quality grades which fetches lower prices for the produce.
- **Non-availability of inputs:** When companies fail to deliver inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, or pesticides in time, which can lead to crop yield losses or crop failures.
- **Climate change:** Climate change has altered weather patterns and made extreme weather events more frequent, leading to crop failures.
- **Wilful defaulters:** A lack of interest and negligence by the farmers can cause farmers to suffer losses and abandon their crops, leading to crop failures.
- **Inadequate training:** When field officers and/or farmers lack the necessary knowledge or training on the best farming practices and may fail to identify potential risks.
- **Lack of supervision:** When field officers and/or farmers fail to supervise and monitor the progress of the crops, leading to delays in addressing issues such as pest infestation, disease outbreaks, or weather-related problems.
- **Inaccurate record-keeping:** When field officers and/or farmers fail to maintain accurate records of the farming activities, leading to disputes over the quality and quantity of the produce and payments.
- **Mismanagement of funds:** When field officers and/or farmers may misuse or mismanage the funds meant for farming activities, leading to financial losses and lack of investment in critical inputs.

To overcome the problem of increasing number of red farmers in contract farming, the following measures can be taken:

- **Proper planning and risk assessment:** Companies engaging in contract farming should work with farmers to develop a well-defined plan that includes risk assessment and management strategies. This can involve identifying potential risks such as weather patterns, pests, and diseases, and developing plans to mitigate these risks.
- **Use of quality inputs:** Providing high-quality inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides can help farmers to achieve optimal crop growth and yield. Companies can work with reputable suppliers to ensure that these inputs meet the necessary standards and are delivered in a timely manner.



- **Training and capacity building:** Field officers can be trained on best practices for crop management and risk mitigation, including early identification of problems and appropriate solutions. Additionally, companies can provide training on financial management and record-keeping to help farmers manage their resources more effectively.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Companies should conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of farming activities to ensure that the farming practices are being followed correctly and to identify any potential issues that may arise.
- **Diversification of crops:** Encouraging farmers to diversify their crops can help to reduce the risk of total crop failure. By growing multiple crops, farmers can spread their risk and avoid significant losses from a single crop failure.
- **Insurance:** Providing crop insurance to farmers can help to protect them against losses due to crop failure. Companies can work with insurance providers to offer affordable and effective crop insurance to their farmers.

Conclusion

It is important for companies to ensure that their contracts with farmers are fair and transparent and that farmers are provided with the necessary support to meet the requirements of the contract. This can include providing training and technical assistance, as well as ensuring that inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and chemicals are of good quality and appropriate for the local conditions. By implementing these measures, companies engaging in contract farming can help farmers to overcome crop failures and achieve greater success in their farming activities. Additionally, this can lead to improved livelihoods for farmers and a more sustainable agricultural system. It is also important for governments to play a role in regulating these contracts and ensuring that farmers are protected from exploitation. This can include setting minimum standards for contracts, providing legal support to farmers who are experiencing difficulties, and promoting alternative models of agricultural production that prioritize the needs of small-scale farmers.

Overall, it is essential to recognize the important role that small-scale farmers play in global food production and to work towards creating more equitable and sustainable systems that support their livelihoods and contribute to food security for all.