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# SEED STRENGTH

Uttam Beej – Samriddh Kisan

*tête-à-tête with Anjana*

# BUILDING SUSTAINABLE FOOD VALUE CHAINS

Bayer, a global enterprise with core competencies in the life science fields of agriculture and healthcare organized a National seminar, “India Horticulture Future Forum 2023” on 26th April 2023 at The Leela Palace, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, to deliberate upon the future of Indian Horticulture and nutrition security concerns that can be alleviated through the Fruits and Vegetables segment. The spotlight was kept on the challenges, opportunities, and advancements of the segment from the lens of empowering the smallholders for better economic prospects. Along the sidelines Mr. Simon Thorsten Wiebusch, Executive Director, Bayer CropScience Ltd and Country Divisional Head, Crop Science Business of Bayer in India, Bangladesh & Sri Lanka discussed with Ms. Anjana Nair, Group Editor, Agriculture Today about the relevance of horticulture and how important the sector will be for the country.

## How has horticulture been integrated into the sustainability initiatives of Bayer?

I think the sustainability initiatives of Bayer are not necessarily just focused on horticulture. Sustainability also includes the aspect of income of farmers, resource needs, and horticulture offers a lot of advantages to diversify agriculture in India. When you take the simple fact that there is 44 million hectares of rice in India and if you were to change the rice cropping system to ideally a direct seeded system, you would have a lot more space available for horticulture, which from a sustainability perspective, especially if you look at methane emissions and other inputs, would improve the footprint of agriculture in India significantly. Now, in horticulture itself, there are a lot of opportunities as well. Today there are opportunities for a farmer to more diverse crops. When you look at the need for horticultural products in the country, this is a huge opportunity to get new acres into horticulture agriculture.

## How significant is India as a market for Bayer in the horticulture segment or otherwise?

India is currently the second biggest producer of horticulture goods in terms of volume. According to me, India will be the biggest consumer of horticulture goods in the world by 2030 as India still has a reasonably low per capita usage and for a company like Bayer, which says horticulture is one of our major pillars, this is a huge market. Presently, we are the fifth largest business in the world, and I assume India will catch up to become the third largest after the big protein producers, US, and Brazil, within a foreseeable timeframe.

## Over the years, Bayer has had a strong leadership in seed segment. What are the new trends that you observe in the seed segment?

*tête-à-tête with Anjana*



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In the seed segment, there is a move towards more certified seeds if you look at the open-pollinated seeds, but there is clearly also a drive towards hybridization, when you look at horticulture. As soon as you look for more processing varieties and really trying to build that value chain, the move towards hybrid vegetable seeds and specific hybrid vegetable seeds, which are for specific usages, as whatever it is processed tomatoes, for example, will definitely grow as a segment itself. Additionally, what you see is a lot of thoughts around gene editing that will allow you in horticulture to hopefully manage pests and diseases primarily with the strength of the plant and less need for chemical interventions.

## More hybrids mean more inputs as well?

Not necessarily. If you have hybrids which are intrinsically resistant to certain diseases or either avoids insect damage, being somewhat propellant to insects, that gives an opportunity to reduce and the thing is, insects usually go for where it's most juicy and that's a little bit where you do see a correlation between potentially pest pressure and hybridization. But if you look at it on a per plant or per output basis, actually, you're going to be finding that usually hybrids are more efficient than non-hybrids.

## How have seeds influenced the expansion of horticulture?

It is the basis for everything, and when you look at the horticultural seed or the vegetable seed variety, India is almost the center of the world. Everybody will





tell you it's Holland, but that is really when you look at a very limited number of commercial crops. When you look at India, the number of vegetable seed companies we have here, the number of varieties, the specific crops like okra, lady finger, etc., where India is almost the only source and the exports to the Middle East to the Indian fraternity but increasingly the palette also in the West moves a little bit towards Indian foods, this all comes from India. India for us is the biggest production and research side for vegetable seeds in the world at this point, at least when you look at variety. We might have more tomato research in Holland or so, but again, if you look at the breadth of the portfolio, India is actually the motherland of horticulture.

### **So, how is Bayer, through partnerships contributing to the horticulture ecosystem?**

For me, the ecosystem is the most important. Bayer, while being an input provider which is on the seeds and pesticide side, is very much interested in saying how can we build sustainable food value chains, because one thing is to produce more, the other is to also to ensure that what is produced fits the requirements. We're back at processing, but we're also looking at quality. We are 1.4 billion people, and we will have, within a short period of time, potentially become the larg-

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est middle class in the world. And you see already, I would say sometimes a little bit also catalyzed by COVID-19 how the requirements of the Indian consumer, especially the urban one, has increased. People are much pickier as to what their produce looks like. They don't like the squishy tomatoes and that is important to cater to, that is where Bayer is trying to build, if you want to call it an ecosystem where you say, where is the best place to produce, which is the best hybrid, how do you manage the pests, how do you ensure that what comes out is actually also procured. The colleague from Grant Thornton was telling me yesterday, he's dealing with Indian vegetable traders, which are in the Middle East, and they actually import their vegetables from everywhere but India, because the Indian production system today does not have the output quality that even an Indian trader would buy for the Middle East. So, that gives you a sense that while for India itself, we still need to produce a lot more, the aspect of quality is becoming

equally important, and when you want to deal in an international export value chain, a lot of topics come around, be it simple quality aspects, be it simple look and feel aspects, but also topics around residues, around how things have been managed, around traceability and even water usage.

### **Which are the most important interventions that have happened in the horticulture world that have changed the course of the sector?**

I mean, I'm not the absolute specialist here, but if I were to say, it's definitely hybridization, it's definitely water management, so specifically on drip irrigation, and it is increasingly also covered crops and a managed environment to really grow the crops.

### **What are future plans of Bayer in the horticulture segment in the world and for India?**

Yeah. I am fundamentally of the opinion that India has a shot at being the supplier for fruits and vegetables for the world. Now, that doesn't mean 100% trade domination, definitely not. But from where we are today at 1% of the global fruit and vegetable food chain, India has a huge opportunity to become a significant player.