



Saffron Cultivation in Kashmir valley: Production and Challenges

Showkat Hussain Dar

Research Scholar, Department of English Mewar University, Rajasthan India

O saffron flower! sitting in silent meditation

And radiating the fire of youth,

Many a famed beauty swoons

Seeing your amazing, flaming form.

These lines are written by Peerzada Ghulam Ahmad, better known to us as Mahjoor. He is considered one of the greatest poets of Kashmiri language. He was born in the district (Pulwama) where saffron is predominantly grown. He was deeply inspired by the natural objects and saffron is one among them. This he exhibits in most of the poems and the aforementioned lines are testimony to it. The aroma/fragrance and color of saffron entices one and all. It particularly appeals those who are very sensitive towards natural objects like Wordsworth and Keats. Thus, Agha Shahid Ali (Kashmiri diasporic poet) sings:

I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir...

For the Saffron Sun and the Times of Rain.

Crocus Sativus, famously known as saffron is an ancient medicinal plant and the world's most costly spice, has always had a magical, addictive power. Cleopatra, the last ruler of Ancient Egypt, a direct descendant of Alexander the Great, the epitome of ethereal beauty whose legacy survives in numerous works of art such as William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, John Dryden's *All For Love* and G. B. Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* took saffron-infused baths to enhance her allure/beauty. Even, Alexander the Great used it to heal the wounds of battle. While, we have been observing that saffron has found its way into more and more cuisines/dishes in recent past, but its original usage was more as a medicine and beauty aid. Saffron is widely acknowledged as a powerful remedy for improving skin disease, bringing radiance to dull skin, youthfulness to prematurely ageing skin and removing blemishes, brightening up the complexion, and above all known to increase appetite and blood circulation. In China, saffron is used as an antidote for many ailments including cough, asthma, arthritis and for easing menstrual pain, headaches, stress etc. In Iran, which is the largest producer of saffron, people firmly believe that saffron in its purest form works as an antioxidant, an antidepressant and a culinary weapon against Alzheimer's cancer and degeneration of the eyes. From times immemorial, India has been known as a land of spices. One such native spice is "saffron" which is known by many names such as Zafran, Kesar, Kong, Kong Posh etc. Kang Posh is the flower of Kesar that symbolizes freshness and purity. It is found in the valley of flowers and the heaven of earth- Kashmir. "Kong Kahwa" is a simple yet wonderful drink that can beautify us from inside by dealing with your ailments from within. Saffron is being grown in the karewas of Pampore and Bhadarwah since the time immemorial. It is an important cash crop, providing employment to about five per cent of the total workforce in Kashmir. Moderate weather conditions, with light snowing is ideal for saffron cultivation. The crop is extremely expensive to grow. The labor and seeds costs are very high. This is harvested in October and early November. In this period, picking of saffron flowers just after the disappearance of dew is ideal to get pleasant fragrance. Its cultivation was in vogue in Pampore even when Kalidas wrote his *Shakuntala* and *Meghdoot*. In *Rajterangani* it is written that saffron



was under cultivation in Kashmir even before the regime of Lalitadatiya. Abul Fazal in *Ain-i-Akbari* comments that the effect of saffron was such it enchanted even those who were most difficult to please.

There are only few places in the world where saffron grows and Jammu and Kashmir is one among them. In fact, Kashmir is not only India's largest producer of saffron but it is considered largest cultivating place of the world, besides Iran and Spain. According to historians, Saffron was brought to India by the Muslim/Persian rulers during 500.B.C. The Persian rulers transplanted the Persian Saffron corms to the Kashmiri soils after they became the rulers of Kashmir. Nonetheless, the Kashmiris believe vice-versa. According to traditional Kashmiri beliefs, saffron was brought to the state, especially in the region of Pampore, by two renowned Sufi ascetics, Khawja Masood Wali (R.A) and Sheikh Sharifudin Wali (R.A) around twelfth century A.D. History stands testimony to the fact that the shrines and tombs of these two Sufis are revered and visited by people in the Saffron trading town of Pampore. Pampore is a place where saffron is predominantly cultivated in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Of late, other districts of the state such as Kishtiwari, Budgam and some places in Srinagar and Anantnag are found feasible destinations the cultivation of saffron. It became a reality due to National Saffron Mission, the scheme launched by the central government in order to enhance its production in the state. The fundamental purpose of Saffron Mission is to accelerate economy and revive its production. It has been envisaged with the following components:

1. Rejuvenation of existing Saffron area for improving Productivity.
2. Improving soil health by INM, IPM and IDM practices.
3. Standardization of quality corm production in public nurseries,
4. Strengthening the Irrigation System
5. Enhancing product quality through improved post-harvest handling
6. Establishment of Weather Station
7. Enhancement of Research and Extension capabilities
8. Delineation of package of practices for Saffron
19. Dissemination of weather forecasts, market alerts, etc through SMS
10. Market intervention through e-trading and establishment of Electronic auction Centre

Recent, initiative by Agriculture Ministry under Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana: National Mission for Saffron sub-scheme was launched in 2010-11 within an overall budgetary support of rupees 288.06 crore over four years with an objective to bring economic revival of saffron farming in Jammu and Kashmir.

It was expected that under the mission the increase per hectare of land would be five kilograms instead of two kilograms. Consequently, the enterprise was allotted 400 crore rupees way back in 2010. Six years down the line, we find that the Mission has made no headway whatsoever. Not to speak of increase per hectare, according to recent reports, during the past few years the production of the stuff has fallen by 60 per cent. This is very alarming. For the saffron growers it spells disaster. There are reports that owing to downslide in the production many farmers have sold their lands so that they would invest money in other items of business.

A number of reasons are attributed to the downfall in production. Local farmers say that owing to urbanization, lands under saffron cultivation are shrinking which has led to the decrease in the production. But the real reason for the decrease in the production is the lack of water to irrigate the plants. Under the National Mission for Saffron, it was decided that 109 wells would be bored with the project support. Out of proposed number of 109



bore wells only 90 have been dug and only 6 of these are functional. This is a sordid story of inefficiency of the State Government in implementing the plan called National Saffron Mission. We are unable to understand why this scheme could not take off. Did not the expert understand that water level in the bore wells would not be that satisfactory as to provide sufficient water needed for plantation? If they knew, why did they go ahead?

One important point needs to be touched upon. It has always been found that tampering with the nature is seldom a success. Experience with tampering of Kashmir apple is an example. Scab disease could hardly be eradicated from apple crop. The scab could not be controlled easily and huge expenditure on preventive measures had to be incurred which was beyond the capacity of ordinary farmers. In the same way tampering with the age old tradition of saffron cultivation has become counterproductive. In these circumstances it becomes difficult to make any suggestion what the Government and especially the Agriculture Department should do to save saffron from extinction. Now the question is not of increasing the production but of protecting what remains. Some of the steps which may go a long way are making saffron cultivation more remunerative are as under:

- A. The main investment in the cultivation of saffron is the purchase of seed. The saffron corms are quite expensive. The government should try to provide good quality seed to the growers at a reasonable rate.
- B. The obsolete technology is one of the main causes of soil depletion. Diffusion of innovations and adoption of scientific rotation may help in making saffron cultivation economically more viable and ecologically more sustainable.
- C. Plantation of social forestry in the vicinity of saffron fields and along the roads should be discouraged as the planted trees of poplar and willow reduce the moisture of saffron fields. Consequently, the growth of crops is adversely affected.
- D. The saffron growers feel shortage of labor at the peak labor demand. The digging and hoeing operations are quite arduous. A suitable technology needs to be developed to replace manual digging and hoeing by machine.

Taking into account its high market potential, medicinal importance, and its employment opportunities, the cultivation of saffron should be acknowledged by the Government, its related department (Agricultural Department) and scientists of the related subject across Jammu and Kashmir particularly in the areas where staple food crops are not cultivated. In the conclusion, one would like to recall the glorious words of Mahjoor:

You (saffron) were the last to arrive,

But proved the lord of all.

All lovers of flowers have arrived

To pay their homage to you.

WORKS CITED

- [1.] Dalby, A. (2002), *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (1st ed.), University of California Press.
- [2.] Grigg, D. B. (1974), *The Agricultural Systems of the World* (1st ed.), Cambridge University Press.
- [3.] Humphries, J. (1998), *The Essential Saffron Companion*, Ten Speed Press.
- [4.] Hill, T. (2004), *The Contemporary Encyclopedia of Herbs and Spices: Seasonings for the Global Kitchen* (1st ed.), Wiley.



- [5.] Kafi, M.; Koocheki, A.; Rashed, M. H.; Nassiri, M., eds. (2006), *Saffron (Crocus sativus) Production and Processing* (1st ed.), Science Publishers.
- [6.] Negbi, M., ed. (1999), *Saffron: Crocus sativus L.*, CRC Press.
- [7.] Rau, S. R. (1969), *The Cooking of India, Foods of the World*, Time-Life Books.
- [8.] Willard, P. (2002), *Secrets of Saffron: The Vagabond Life of the World's Most Seductive Spice*, Beacon Press.

Websites

www.https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saffron

www.greaterkashmir.com/news/gk-magazine/saffron-mission-facts.../127389.html

www.thehindu.com/news/national/...national-saffron-mission.../article7825001.ece

www.saffronbulbs.com/culture.htm

www.yourarticlelibrary.com/essay/cultivation-of-saffron-in-jammu-and.../41594/