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# The Pulse Problem — Why India Cannot Afford to Remain Import-Dependent on Its Own Staple Crop

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# The Pulse Problem — Why India Cannot Afford to Remain Import-Dependent on Its Own Staple Crop

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**INTERVIEW ANGLE**

*"India is the world's largest producer of pulses yet imports significant quantities. What structural factors drive this paradox, and can the Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses resolve it?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

The Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses — with a Rs 11,440 crore outlay targeting 350 lakh tonnes production by 2030-31 — received focused attention for its progress, highlighting India's persistent paradox as both the world's largest pulse producer and a significant importer.

## A PARADOX THAT PUNISHES THE POOR

India's pulse problem has a peculiar character. The country produces approximately 25% of the world's pulses — the single largest share of any nation — yet in 2023-24, it imported 47.38 lakh tonnes of pulses worth thousands of crores of rupees. This is not a marginal shortfall. It represents a structural demand-supply gap large enough to fuel recurrent price spikes that directly impact the dietary protein intake of hundreds of millions of low-income Indians.

Pulses are not a luxury. For a population in which a significant portion is vegetarian and an even larger portion relies on plant protein as the primary and cheapest dietary protein source, Tur (arhar dal) and Urad (black gram) are dietary staples in a way that few other commodities are. When Tur dal prices spike to Rs 200–250 per kilogram — as they have done repeatedly in recent years — it does not merely inconvenience households. It degrades nutritional security. The ICMR recommends 85 grams of pulses per person per day; Indian per capita consumption falls significantly short of this standard.

## THE GREEN REVOLUTION'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The structural roots of the pulse deficit trace directly to the Green Revolution. Between 1950 and the 2000s, the share of pulses in India's total foodgrain output fell from 16% to approximately 8%. This was not accidental. The Green Revolution — celebrated, rightly, for preventing famine — was deliberately focused on wheat and rice. Subsidised irrigation water, high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds, fertiliser subsidies, procurement at MSP, and Cold War food aid were channelled almost exclusively into cereals.

Pulses — which require less water (25–60 cm rainfall), fix atmospheric nitrogen without synthetic fertiliser (through Rhizobium bacteria in root nodules), and can grow in semi-arid dryland conditions — received little of this infrastructure. The result: while wheat production tripled and rice doubled, pulse productivity stagnated. Population grew. Demand grew. Production did not.

The distortion persists. Irrigation policy still favours paddy in states like Punjab and Haryana, where water-intensive rice cultivation contributes to water table collapse. Meanwhile, the dryland areas of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Karnataka — where pulses naturally thrive — have received inadequate investment in storage infrastructure, processing mills, and market connectivity.

## THE MISSION — WHAT IT GETS RIGHT

The Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses represents a qualitative shift in policy seriousness. At Rs 11,440 crore across 2025-26 to 2030-31, it is the largest dedicated pulse support programme India has attempted.

Three design features stand out as particularly well-conceived.

**100% assured MSP procurement for 4 years through NAFED and NCCF under PM-AASHA.** This directly addresses the fundamental reason farmers do not grow more pulses: market risk. Unlike paddy and wheat, where FCI procurement provides a reliable floor price backstop across most major producing states, pulses have historically been left to the mercy of spot market prices. When Tur dal prices are high at retail, farmer realisation has often already been locked in at lower prices. Assured procurement removes this incentive distortion.

**1,000 pulse processing mills at Rs 25 lakh subsidy each.** India's post-harvest losses in pulses are significant, and the processing infrastructure — dal mills — has historically been concentrated in a few trading hubs. By incentivising mills closer to production areas, particularly through Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), the mission aims to reduce post-harvest losses and capture more value for farmers. That 55 mills are planned in Madhya Pradesh alone — the largest pulse-producing state — shows geographic targeting.

**The SATHI Portal (Seed Authentication, Traceability and Holistic Inventory).** Seed quality is an underappreciated constraint on pulse productivity. Sub-standard seeds — sold widely to small farmers who cannot distinguish variety and germination quality — result in yield disappointments that discourage future cultivation. A digital seed life-cycle management system that tracks seed from production to distribution addresses this information asymmetry.

## WHAT THE MISSION MUST GUARD AGAINST

Good policy design can be undermined by poor implementation. The pulse sector's history provides cautionary examples.

**Procurement agency capacity:** NAFED and NCCF have in the past been overwhelmed by procurement mandates — particularly when market prices fall sharply below MSP and large volumes require purchase. The 100% assured procurement promise requires adequate warehousing, working capital, and operational scale. Past experience with oilseed procurement under PM-AASHA shows that "assured" can become "eventual" when logistical capacity is strained.

**Area expansion versus productivity improvement:** The mission targets a 35 lakh hectare area expansion — from ~275 to 310 lakh hectares. But the more sustainable path to 350 lakh tonnes is yield improvement, not just area expansion. India's average pulse yield (~800–900 kg/hectare) is significantly below potential. ICAR research stations have developed varieties with 1,400–1,800 kg/hectare potential. Getting these seeds to small and marginal farmers — who constitute the majority of pulse cultivators — through the SATHI system is more important than bringing new marginal land under pulse cultivation.

**Price stabilisation versus farmer incentive:** If assured procurement suppresses retail price spikes effectively, the very price signal that makes pulse cultivation attractive may be dampened. The policy must carefully balance consumer price stability with adequate farm-gate incentives — a tension that has historically been resolved in favour of consumers at the expense of farmers.

## THE NUTRITIONAL SECURITY DIMENSION

The 2030-31 target of 350 lakh tonnes production against current demand that significantly exceeds 252 lakh tonnes (current production) plus 47 lakh tonnes (current imports) will not achieve self-sufficiency unless demand also grows — which it will, as income-driven dietary diversification continues.

India needs to think about pulse self-sufficiency not merely as import substitution but as a nutritional infrastructure investment. At the ICMR-recommended 85g per person per day, and with a population of 1.4 billion, India's pulse requirement is approximately 43 million tonnes per year — significantly higher than both current production and the 2030-31 target. Self-sufficiency by 2030-31 remains an ambitious but partial solution.

The longer-term answer involves both supply-side investment — through this mission — and demand management: promoting pulse consumption through the PDS (Public Distribution System), school mid-day meals, and PM Poshan, while ensuring that price stability does not translate into affordability that makes the dietary switch from pulses to animal protein the preferred pathway for the emerging middle class, reducing demand and creating a different kind of production incentive problem.

India's Green Revolution saved lives. The Pulse Mission, if implemented with the same institutional seriousness, can protect livelihoods and nutritional security for the next generation.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

*Mission for Aatmanirbharta in Pulses (Rs 11,440 crore, 2025-2031), target crops (Tur/Urad/Masoor), 350 lakh tonnes by 2030-31, current 252.38 lakh tonnes, imports 47.38 lakh tonnes (2023-24), SATHI Portal (Seed Authentication, Traceability and Holistic Inventory), NAFED, NCCF, PM-AASHA, 1,000 mills (Rs 25 lakh/mill), India = world's largest producer (25% global), foodgrain share fell from 16% (1950) to 8% (2022-23), ICMR recommended 85g/day, Leguminosae/Fabaceae family, nitrogen fixation via Rhizobium.*

*Food security; nutritional security; Green Revolution legacy and distortions; pulse price inflation; MSP and procurement systems; agricultural self-sufficiency; soil health and nitrogen fixation; PM-AASHA mechanism.*

## 📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### MISSION FOR AATMANIRBHARTA IN PULSES:

Announced: **Union Budget 2025-26**; launched: **October 2025**

Outlay: **Rs 11,440 crore** (2025-26 to 2030-31)

Target crops: **Tur (Arhar/Pigeon Pea), Urad (Black Gram), Masoor (Red Lentil)**

Area expansion: **+35 lakh hectares** → total **310 lakh hectares**

Production target: **350 lakh tonnes by 2030-31**

Current production (2024-25): **252.38 lakh tonnes** (up from 192.6 MT in 2013-14 — 31% rise)

Imports (2023-24): **47.38 lakh tonnes**

Assured procurement: **100% at MSP for 4 years** via NAFED + NCCF under PM-AASHA

Farmer support: **Rs 10,000/hectare** for model farming + seed kits

Pulse mills: **1,000** (55 in MP alone); subsidy: **Rs 25 lakh/mill**

### SATHI PORTAL:

Full form: **Seed Authentication, Traceability and Holistic Inventory**

Function: Automated seed life-cycle management; prevents sub-standard seed sale

### PULSES — KEY AGRICULTURAL DATA:

India's position: **World's largest producer AND consumer** (~**25%** of global production)

Foodgrain share: fell from **16% (1950)** to **~8% (2022-23)**

Protein contribution: **20–25%** of Indian dietary protein intake

ICMR recommended intake: **85 g/person/day**

Nitrogen fixation: via ***Rhizobium* bacteria** in root nodules

Agroclimatic needs: Temp **20–27°C**, rainfall **25–60 cm**, sandy-loamy soil

Botanical family: **Leguminosae/Fabaceae** (Legumes)

### LEADING PULSE-PRODUCING STATES:

**Madhya Pradesh** (largest), Maharashtra, Rajasthan, UP, Gujarat, Karnataka

### PROCUREMENT AGENCIES UNDER PM-AASHA:

**NAFED** (National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India)

**NCCF** (National Cooperative Exports Limited)

**PM-AASHA** full form: PM Annadata Aay SanraksHan Abhiyan

### RELATED SCHEMES:

NFSM-Pulses (National Food Security Mission — Pulses component, launched 2007)

Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY)

National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA)

### OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

India's average pulse yield: ~800–900 kg/ha (potential: 1,400–1,800 kg/ha with improved varieties)

Green Revolution (1960s–70s): focused on wheat/rice; pulses neglected

FCI procurement: covers wheat and rice; NAFED/NCCF cover oilseeds and pulses under PM-AASHA

Sources: The Hindu, Drishti IAS

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