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FROM ASH TO ASSET: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS, TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS, AND SUSTAINABLE PATHWAYS FOR AGRICULTURAL WASTE MANAGEMENT IN INDIA: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

Vala. H.D.[1*], Hirani D.D.[2] and Solanki M.K.[3]
[1]Department of Natural Farming, Lokbharati University for Rural Innovation, Sanosara, Sihor, Bhavnagar-364230. Gujarat, India
[2]Department of Agronomy, Lokbharati University for Rural Innovation, Sanosara, Sihor, Bhavnagar-364230, Gujarat, India
[3]Department of Horticulture, Lokbharati University for Rural Innovation, Sanosara, Sihor, Bhavnagar-364230, Gujarat, India
*Corresponding author E-mail: valaharpalsinh2001@gmail.com
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ABSTRACT

Agriculture contributes significantly to India's economy, simultaneously generating approximately 500-585 million tonnes (Mt) of crop residue annually. A substantial portion-nearly 92 Mt-is disposed of through open-field burning, causing severe air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and loss of valuable soil nutrients. This review synthesizes data from seminar reports, research studies, and policy documents to comprehensively analyse the status, environmental impacts, management strategies, and sustainable utilization options for agricultural waste in India. Results indicate that cereals contribute 58% of total residue, with rice (53%) and wheat (33%) dominating among cereal crops. Open burning of one acre of paddy straw destroys approximately 32 kg Nitrogen, 5.5 kg Phosphorus, and 51 kg potash already present in residues. Research evidence demonstrates that crop residue incorporation significantly improves grain yield, soil organic carbon (SOC), and nutrient availability compared to burning or removal. Studies from Haryana found that while awareness of waste utilization was moderate (60-72%), actual utilization rates lagged significantly-wheat waste utilization was only 12.87% against 72.33% awareness. Key constraints included inadequate extension services (mean score 2.64), low awareness of benefits (2.53), and insufficient processing facilities (2.53). Economic analysis demonstrated that vermicomposting yields the highest net returns (INR 27,698/Mt) followed by biogas production (INR 14,688/Mt). The study recommends integrated approaches combining policy, technology dissemination, farmer training, and ICAR innovation platforms to bridge the awareness-utilization gap and convert agricultural waste from an environmental liability into a productive resource.
Keywords **:** Agricultural waste management, Crop residue utilization, Environmental pollution, Vermicomposting, Biogas, ICAR technologies, Farmer awareness, Sustainable agriculture.

Introduction

Agriculture forms the backbone of India's economy, contributing approximately 17-18% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and sustaining the livelihoods of over 58% of the population (Ministry of Agriculture, 2023). As food production has intensified to meet the demands of a growing population-projected to reach 1.5 billion by 2030-the volume of agricultural waste generated has increased proportionally. According to the National Policy for Management of Crop Residues (NPMCR, 2019), India generates approximately 500 Mt of crop residue annually, with Gujarat alone contributing 28.73 Mt, of which 8.90 Mt is burnt.

Agricultural wastes encompass all residues from the growing and processing of raw agricultural products, including crop residues (stalks, stems, leaves, husk), animal waste (dung, urine, slurry), food processing waste, and hazardous agrochemical waste (USDA, 2020). These wastes can be in solid, liquid, or slurry forms. Globally, China leads in agricultural waste generation (716 Mt/year), followed by USA (682 Mt), India (585 Mt), Europe (580 Mt), and Brazil (451 Mt) (FAO, 2022).

The primary reason behind managing agricultural waste is to make economic and environmental sense simultaneously. When mismanaged, agricultural waste leads to water contamination through fertilizer and pesticide runoff, soil degradation, greenhouse gas emissions, and public health crises such as Blue Baby Syndrome caused by nitrate accumulation in water bodies (Sarkar et al., 2020). However, when properly harnessed, these residues can be converted into biochar, vermicompost, biogas, biofuel, animal feed, and high-value industrial products-thereby augmenting farmer income and reducing environmental burden.

Despite these benefits, studies consistently reveal a wide gap between farmers' awareness of waste utilization options and their actual adoption. This disconnect, driven by lack of extension services, inadequate technical knowledge, and insufficient processing infrastructure, represents a critical challenge for sustainable agriculture in India (Shehrawat *et al.,* 2015).

This review article synthesizes findings from field research, laboratory studies, institutional reports (ICAR, NPMCR), and case studies to present a comprehensive analysis of agricultural waste management in India, focusing on types, environmental impacts, sustainable strategies, economic viability, and policy interventions required to operationalize waste as a resource.

Magnitude and Types of Agricultural Waste in India

Scale of Crop Residue Generation

India's crop residue generation has reached alarming proportions. According to data from the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE, 2018), the cumulative national total stands at 516.3 Mt/year. Uttar Pradesh is the largest producer (109.2 Mt/year), followed by Maharashtra (52.7 Mt), Madhya Pradesh (45 Mt), Punjab (36.9 Mt), Karnataka (36.6 Mt), and Rajasthan (35.1 Mt). At the crop level, cereals contribute the maximum (58%), followed by fibres (23%), oilseeds (7%), Other Crops (8%), Pulses (2%), and sugarcane (2%).

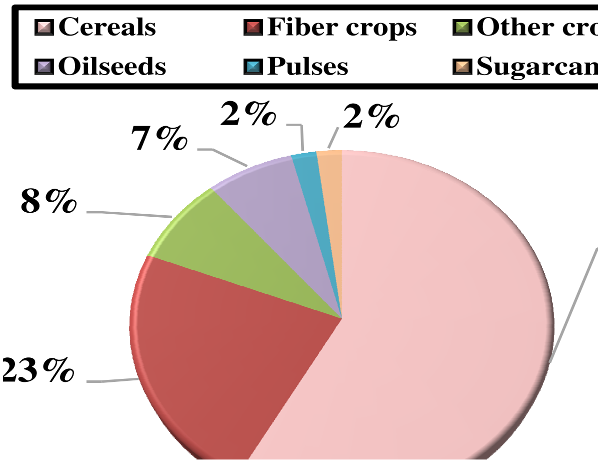

Fig. 1 : Residue generation of different crops

Among cereal crops, rice contributes 53% of residue generation (131 Mt/year), followed by wheat (124 Mt/year; 33%), with millets and maize each contributing 7%. Importantly, 92 Mt of residue is currently burnt annually-representing an enormous loss of soil nutrients and a major source of atmospheric pollutants (NPMCR, 2019).

Table 1: Average yearly crop residue generation in India

Crop	Annual Residue Generation (Mt)	Major Producing States
Rice	131	West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh
Wheat	124	Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana
Sugarcane	147	Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka
Coarse Cereals	81	Rajasthan, Bihar
Oilseeds	43	Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat
Pulses	38	Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka
Cotton	16	Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh
Jute & Mesta	5	West Bengal, Bihar
Total (Yearly Avg)	**585**	**All India**

Source: http://www.mospi.gov.in; MNRE (2018)

At the farm level, waste intensity is substantial: one acre of banana cultivation generates 30 tonnes of waste; one acre of paddy generates 2.5-5.0 tonnes of straw; 100 tonnes of sugarcane produces 30-34 tonnes of waste; and 40% of maize grain is harvested while 60% constitutes waste residue (MNRE, 2018).

Classification and Composition

Agricultural wastes are broadly classified into: (i) Solid waste and Liquid waste; (ii) Hazardous and Non-hazardous types; and (iii) Biodegradable (organic) and Non-biodegradable types. The major categories of agricultural waste include: Animal waste (dung, urine, slurry, poultry droppings, dead animals); Food processing waste (fruit and vegetable peels); Crop residues (rice straw, coconut shells, bagasse, cotton stalks, maize cobs); and Hazardous or toxic waste (pesticide containers, herbicide packaging, insecticide residues).

In South Asia, food and green waste constitutes 57% of total waste composition, followed by paper and cardboard (10%), plastic (8%), other categories (15%), metal (3%), glass (4%), rubber/leather (2%), and wood (1%) (Times of India, 2020). This organic-heavy composition underscores the tremendous potential for composting and biogas generation from agricultural waste streams.

Crop residues retain approximately 25% of nitrogen, 25% of phosphorus, 75% of potassium, and 50% of sulphur uptake by cereal crops (NPMCR, 2020). The nutrient content varies by crop type, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Nutrient content in major crop residues.

Crop Residue	N (%)	P (%)	K (%)
Rice	0.61	0.18	1.38
Wheat	0.48	0.16	1.18
Maize	0.52	0.18	1.35
Pearl Millet	0.45	0.16	1.14
Sugarcane	0.40	0.18	1.28
Groundnut (pods)	1.60	0.23	1.37
Pulses	1.60	0.51	1.75

Source: Reddy *et al.* (2003), Patancheru, Andhra Pradesh

Environmental Impacts of Agricultural Waste

Air Pollution and Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Open-field burning of crop residues is one of the most visible and destructive forms of agricultural waste mismanagement. In October-November 2016, approximately 18,000 crop fires were recorded in Punjab and Haryana combined-the highest since 2002-contributing to Delhi's worst smog episode (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Department of Agriculture, 2017). Rice crop production in Punjab increased at a linear rate of 0.18 million tonnes annually from 2002 to 2016, driving a proportional increase in residue generation and burning.

Burning of crop residues produces CH_4 and N_2O gases in addition to CO_2, collectively contributing significantly to global GHG emissions. Among crops globally, maize contributes the highest emissions through burning, followed by rice, wheat, and sugarcane (FAO, 2022). China leads in GHG emissions from crop residue burning (~4,500 gigagrams CO_2 equivalent), followed by India (~3,500 Gg), USA (~2,800 Gg), and the former USSR (~2,200 Gg). State-wise GHG emission data from India are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: State-wise greenhouse gas emissions (Gigagrams) from crop residue burning in India

State	CO_2 (Gg)	CO (Gg)	NOx (Gg)	$PM_{2.5}$ (Gg)
Haryana	13,907.71	844.56	22.95	35.80
Maharashtra	10,335.70	627.80	17.06	26.62
Karnataka	8,987.46	545.77	14.83	23.14
Andhra Pradesh	8,009.96	486.41	13.22	20.62
Gujarat	6,835.92	415.12	11.28	17.60
Bihar	5,077.03	308.31	8.38	13.07
Madhya Pradesh	3,032.18	184.13	5.00	7.81

Source: (NPMCR, 2020)

The burning of one acre of paddy straw destroys approximately 32 kg of Urea, 5.5 kg of Di-Ammonium Phosphate (DAP), and 51 kg of Potash manure already present in residues. NASA satellite imagery from October 2016 clearly depicted widespread agricultural fires across Punjab and Haryana, illustrating the scale of the problem.

Water and Soil Contamination

Pesticide residues from agricultural waste pose severe risks to animals and aquatic ecosystems. According to the Plant Protection Department (PPD), approximately 1.8% of chemicals remain in pesticide packaging after use, and improper disposal leads to soil and water contamination. A case from Andhra Pradesh reported the death of 56 cattle after consuming pesticide-contaminated residues discarded in a field.

Fertilizer and pesticide residues washed off agricultural lands through irrigation, rainfall, drainage, and leaching enter rivers and streams, seriously disrupting aquatic ecosystems. Phosphate-induced algal growth depletes dissolved oxygen, leading to death of fish and aquatic biota. Nitrate accumulation in water consumed by cattle or humans causes the formation of methaemoglobin, which interferes with oxygen-carrying capacity of blood-producing Blue Baby Syndrome (methaemoglobinaemia), a potentially fatal condition in infants.

Soil Health Degradation

Improperly managed crop residues harbour pathogens, fungi, and bacteria that cause infectious diseases and reduce soil productivity by inhibiting microbial activity. Livestock waste, when untreated, generates greenhouse gases and negatively impacts soil fertility and water quality. Conversely, research demonstrates that zero-tillage with residue retention (ZT+R) builds soil carbon at 0.493 t/ha/year at 0-15 cm depth, compared to 0.016 t/ha/year under conventional tillage (Singh *et al.,* 2019), highlighting the transformative potential of proper residue management.

Strategies for Crop Residue and Waste Management

Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle (3R Framework)

The Agricultural Waste Management System (AWMS) is a planned framework in which all necessary components are installed and managed to control and utilize by-products of agricultural production in a manner that sustains or enhances the quality of air, water, soil, plant, and animal resources. The waste minimization hierarchy follows the 3R principle in decreasing order of preference: Prevention > Minimization > Reuse > Recycling > Energy Recovery > Disposal.

The six basic functional components of an AWMS are: Production (identification of waste streams), Collection, Storage, Transfer, Treatment, and Utilization. Each stage offers opportunities for intervention to improve waste management efficiency and extract value from agricultural by-products.

Crop Residue-Specific Management Strategies

Paddy and Wheat Straw: Straw can be utilized as animal feed, planting beds for green fodder, briquettes for fuel, poultry litter, mulching material, and animal bedding. Animal dung generated from straw-fed livestock can be used for biogas production, with the spent slurry serving as high-quality manure. Wheat straw can also be used to manufacture particle boards when combined with wood from *Pinus radiata* (Garay, 2004).

Sugarcane Bagasse and Trash: Bagasse serves as a planting medium for vegetables and fruits, feedstock for ethanol and vinegar production, mulching material, and raw material for handmade paper. Sugarcane trash can be used as animal bedding, briquette material, or composted for mushroom cultivation. Sugarcane molasses finds use as animal feed supplement, alcohol substrate, vinegar production, and briquette binding material.

Cotton Sticks: Cotton sticks can be chipped to produce particle board and briquettes, composted for mushroom cultivation, or fed to biogas plants. Anaerobic treatment of cotton waste produces approximately 65-86 ml CH_4 per gram of material in 23 days (Isci and Demirer, 2006).

Mustard Sticks: After chipping, mustard sticks can be used for briquettes, particle board, mulching, animal feed (after ammonia treatment for improved digestibility), and composting for mushroom production.

Crop Residue Incorporation and Conservation Tillage

Research from IARI, New Delhi demonstrates that wheat straw mulch (SM) produced an average wheat grain yield of 2.31 t/ha over five years, compared to 1.34 t/ha in control plots-a 72% increase (Mandal *et al.,* 2004). After 13 years of rice residue management, residue incorporation significantly outperformed burning: wheat yield was 3.57 t/ha vs. 3.11 t/ha under burning, and maize yield was 2.08 t/ha vs. 1.39 t/ha.

A 10-year experiment at Karnal (Singh *et al.,* 2019) showed that zero tillage with residue retention (ZT+R) achieved wheat grain yield of 6.02 t/ha and system productivity of 12.48 t/ha, compared to 5.57 t/ha and 12.27 t/ha under conventional tillage without residue. Rice-wheat systems with residue incorporation showed grain yields of 34 q/ha for rice and 37 q/ha for wheat, with benefit: cost ratios of 3.02 and 3.35 respectively-significantly higher than burning (22 q/ha; B:C = 2.35) or residue removal options.

Mechanization for Residue Management

Appropriate farm machinery plays a crucial role in enabling sustainable residue management. Key implements include: **Straw Reaper** (capacity 0.4 ha/hour; recovers 55-60% of wheat straw for animal feed; provides additional grain recovery of 50-100 kg/ha); **Paddy Straw Chopper** (reduces air pollution and labour costs by chopping and spreading residue uniformly); **Zero-till seed drill** (enables direct wheat seeding into paddy-harvested fields without tillage); **Cotton Stalk Shredder; Mulcher Machine**; and Rotavator for residue incorporation. Adoption of these implements can substantially reduce the economic and practical barriers to residue management.

Fig. 2: Different machines for residue management.

ICAR Initiatives and Innovations in Waste Management

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has developed an extensive portfolio of technologies for converting agricultural waste into high-value products. Table 4 summarizes major ICAR innovations across waste categories.

Table 4: ICAR technologies for agricultural waste value addition

Technology Category	Specific Technology/Innovation
Crop/ Crop By-Products	Handmade Paper from Jute Waste; Lac Dye from Sticklac Effluent; Lac Mud as Organic Manure; Fortified Rice Analogues from Broken Rice
Horticultural Crop Wastes	Tamarind Seed Husk for Methane Reduction; Pineapple Residue Silage; Nutraceutical Beverage from Kinnow Peels; Mushroom Production from Oil Palm Waste
Fisheries & Animal Wastes	Chitin & Chitosan from Prawn Shell; Calcium from Fish Bones; Absorbable Suture from Fish Guts
Energy Generation	Biochar via Pyrolysis (ICAR); Biogas from Poultry/Livestock Waste; Biomass Briquetting
Microbial Technologies	PUSA Decomposer Capsules (IARI); Trichoderma-enriched FYM; Vermicomposting with Eisenia fetida

Source: ICAR Technology Catalogue; NPMCR Report (2020)

PUSA Decomposer Capsules (IARI, New Delhi): Seven strains of fungi packed in four capsules (cost ~Rs. 20/packet) can decompose crop residue in approximately 25 days at a cost of less than Rs. 1,000/acre. The technology involves fermenting the capsule solution with 150 g jaggery in 25 litres water, then spraying on stubble fields (The Hindu, 2020).

Biochar Production: Biochar produced from maize stalks, pine needles, and weeds via pyrolysis improves soil pH by 0.26-0.30 units within two months, enhances water retention, improves aeration and soil tilth, increases cation exchange capacity, and reduces nutrient runoff. Agricultural biomass can be converted to biochar within two hours (ICAR-Division of Agricultural Engineering).

Banana Waste Management (CFTRI, Mysuru): CFTRI developed a model to convert banana farm waste (30 tonnes/acre from stem alone) into banana fibre for security/currency paper, packing cloth, ship-towing ropes, and sports beverages from stem juice. The model offers substantial income with minimal capital investment.

UAS Dharwad Initiatives: UAS Dharwad demonstrated vermicomposting of cattle dung at Rs. 8/kg (market price), compost culture technology that decomposes waste in 85 days, and conversion of hostel food waste into biogas through institutional biogas plants.

Economic Analysis of Waste Management Practices

Comparative Profitability of Waste Utilization Techniques

Singh *et al.* (2020), in a case study from Ludhiana District, Punjab, compared the economic returns from three dairy waste management approaches: vermicomposting, traditional composting, and biogas production. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Comparative economic analysis of waste management practices (INR per metric tonne/per cattle)

Cost Component (INR)	Vermi-composting	Composting	Biogas Production
Total Fixed Investment	24,000	500	30,450
Total Fixed Cost	5,200	156	6,156
Total Variable Cost	21,102	8,946	13,072
Total Cost	26,302	9,102	19,227
Total Returns	54,000	11,133	33,916
Net Returns	27,698	2,030	14,688
Profitability Ranking	I (Best)	III	II

Source: Singh et al. (2020), Ludhiana District, Punjab

Vermicomposting achieved the highest net returns (INR 27,698/Mt; USD 366) followed by biogas production (INR 14,688/per cattle; USD 194) and traditional composting (INR 2,030/Mt; USD 27). High profitability from vermicomposting was attributed to premium market prices and the additional value from vermiculture and vermiwash products.

Farm-Level Case Studies

Mushroom Cultivation from Farm Waste (Nagaland): Small and marginal farmers achieved a net income increase of Rs. 27,540 from a 3m × 6m mushroom cropping room with 250 beds (B:C ratio: 1.8) using farm waste as substrate in Nagaland, where rice occupies 70% of cultivated area.

Pig Farming using Kitchen and Agricultural Waste (Sikkim): Sri Mandip Rai, Sikkim, utilized locally available feed resources-maize, paddy husk, rice bran, kitchen waste, and vegetable waste-to rear Large White Yorkshire pigs. At first farrowing (12 months), gross income was Rs. 44,800 against expenditure of Rs. 18,300-a profit of Rs. 26,500 with B:C ratio of 2.45.

Vermicompost Production (Banka, Bihar): Sri Dinesh Prasad Singh constructed 96 vermicompost pits (20 ft × 4 ft × 3.5 ft), producing 7,500 quintals of enriched vermicompost per season. Annual family income reached Rs. 10 lakh, making him the leading vermicompost producer in Banka district.

Electricity Generation from Agricultural Waste

The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) has implemented a biomass power/co-generation programme since the mid-1990s. Over 800 biomass power and bagasse co-generation projects aggregating to 10,170 MW capacity have been installed in India. Leading states for bagasse co-generation include Maharashtra, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, while biomass power projects are concentrated in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu. A biomass project in Karnataka provides electricity to the grid, creates over 400 direct jobs, and provides additional income to farmers for supplying agricultural waste as feedstock (MNRE, 2022).

Farmer Awareness and Utilization: A Gap Analysis

Awareness vs. Utilization Across Waste Types

Shehrawat *et al.* (2015) conducted a study across Hisar and Sonipat districts of Haryana (n=120, purposive random sampling) examining farmer awareness and actual utilization of agricultural waste. Table 6 presents the striking gap between awareness and practice across waste types.

Table 6: Awareness versus utilization of agricultural waste among farmers in Haryana

Waste Type	Awareness (%)	Utilization (%)	Gap (%)
Wheat Straw	72.33	12.87	59.46
Paddy Waste	63.94	16.90	47.04
Sugarcane Waste	62.73	9.88	52.85
Cotton Sticks	61.33	20.00	41.33
Mustard Sticks	70.08	38.04	32.04
Horticultural Waste	70.54	28.78	41.76
Livestock Waste	68.33	55.66	12.67
Mushroom Waste	80.76	75.00	5.76
Biogas Waste	98.75	89.08	9.67
Poultry Waste	58.75	50.00	8.75

Source: Shehrawat et al. (2015), Hisar and Sonipat, Haryana

The data reveals a critical pattern: while biogas waste had the highest utilization rate (89.08%), crops like wheat and sugarcane showed utilization rates of only 12.87% and 9.88% respectively, despite awareness levels of 72.33% and 62.73%. This gap, ranging from 9.67 to 52.85 percentage points, represents a massive missed opportunity for both environmental protection and farmer income augmentation.

Residue Generation Potential by State

Figure 1: Crop Residue Generation Potential by Major States in India (Mt/year)

Residue Generation by State (Mt/year)		
Category	**Value (Mt)**	**Relative Scale**
Uttar Pradesh	109	109
Maharashtra	53	53
Madhya Pradesh	45	45
Punjab	37	37
Karnataka	37	37
Rajasthan	35	35
Haryana	25	25
West Bengal	25	25
Tamil Nadu	24	24
Bihar	23	23

Source: Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE), 2018

Discussion

The analysis of agricultural waste management in India reveals a paradox: the country generates one of the world's largest volumes of residue with enormous utilization potential, yet millions of tonnes are either burnt or discarded, causing environmental harm and economic loss simultaneously. The key findings from this review converge on several critical themes.

First, the nutrient value locked in crop residues is economically significant. Burning one acre of paddy straw destroys nutrients worth approximately Rs. 2,500-3,000 at current fertilizer prices-a direct economic loss to farmers who subsequently purchase these nutrients as expensive inputs. The PUSA decomposer capsule technology offers a low-cost (Rs. 1,000/acre) alternative that not only avoids this loss but enhances soil health within 25 days.

Second, long-term field experiments consistently demonstrate that crop residue incorporation improves both productivity and soil health. A 13-year study showed that residue incorporation increased wheat yield by 15% and maize yield by 50% compared to burning, while a 10-year Karnal study showed soil carbon build-up of 0.493 t/ha/year under zero-tillage with residue retention. These are not marginal gains-they represent transformative improvements in farm sustainability.

Third, the economic case for waste valorization through vermicomposting and biogas is compelling. With net returns of INR 27,698/Mt from vermicomposting compared to INR 2,030/Mt from traditional composting, the 13-fold difference in profitability makes a powerful argument for investment in vermicomposting infrastructure. The success of Sri Dinesh Prasad Singh in Bihar (Rs. 10 lakh annual income from vermicompost) and mushroom farmers in Nagaland (B:C = 1.8) demonstrate real-world replicability of these approaches.

Fourth, the awareness-utilization gap identified by Shehrawat *et al.* (2015) is the defining challenge for policy intervention. With overall awareness levels of 60-80% but utilization rates of 10-40% for most waste types, the bottleneck is clearly not knowledge per se but the translation of knowledge into practice. Barriers of limited access to extension services, inadequate processing facilities, and transportation costs must be systematically addressed.

Recommendations

Policy Interventions

The government should strengthen and enforce the National Policy for Management of Crop Residues (NPMCR) by providing direct financial incentives to farmers who adopt in-situ residue management practices. Penalties for open burning should be enforced alongside the provision of affordable alternatives. The biomass power programme should be expanded, ensuring that farmers receive fair compensation for supplying agricultural waste as feedstock.

Technology Dissemination

ICAR technologies-particularly PUSA Decomposer capsules, biochar production units, and vermiculture kits-should be made available at the village level through Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS). The IVRI Waste Management Guide App, which provides comprehensive information on composting, vermicomposting, biogas production, and crop residue technologies, should be promoted through agricultural extension networks. Zero-tillage seed drills, straw reapers, and paddy straw choppers should be made available through Custom Hiring Centres (CHCs) at subsidized rates.

Strengthening Extension Services

Given that inadequate access to extension services is the primary constraint, significant investment is needed in the quantity, quality, and reach of agricultural extension. This should include farmer field schools focusing on waste management, demonstrations of vermicomposting and biogas at the farm level, and linkages between farmers and markets for agricultural waste products. Motivating rural and urban youth to engage in waste-based enterprises can create employment opportunities while addressing the waste management challenge.

Research Priorities

Future research should focus on optimizing nutrient release patterns from bio-resources to time and calibrate applications to different crops and soil types. Regional crop residue databases need strengthening to enable location-specific policy and planning. Studies on the economic viability of residue collection, transportation, and processing infrastructure at the village cluster level would help design scalable business models for waste-to-wealth transformation.

Conclusion

Agricultural waste management represents one of India's most significant environmental and economic opportunities. With 500-585 Mt of crop residues generated annually, of which 92 Mt is burnt-destroying nutrients, polluting air, and degrading soil-the scale of both the problem and the opportunity is immense. Long-term agronomic research consistently demonstrates that crop residue incorporation enhances grain yield by 15-72%, builds soil organic carbon, improves nutrient availability, and sustains system productivity over time.

Economic analysis confirms that waste-based enterprises-vermicomposting, biogas, mushroom cultivation, and biomass power generation-are not only environmentally beneficial but highly profitable, with benefit: cost ratios of 2-3.5 and net returns exceeding INR 25,000/Mt in the best cases. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has developed an impressive portfolio of waste-to-value technologies, from PUSA Decomposer capsules to biochar production, banana fibre extraction, and fish waste foliar sprays.

However, a substantial awareness-utilization gap persists, particularly for crop residues (wheat waste: 72.33% awareness vs 12.87% utilization), driven by inadequate extension services, limited processing infrastructure, and economic barriers. Bridging this gap through integrated policy support, technology dissemination, mechanization, farmer training, and market linkages is essential to converting agricultural waste from an environmental liability into a productive asset. Motivating rural youth as agricultural waste entrepreneurs can simultaneously address the waste problem and create sustainable rural livelihoods.

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