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## Strong Start, Faster Growth: Feeding Young Lambs and Kids

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Small ruminants, mainly sheep and goats, play a vital role in the livelihood, employment, and food security of small, marginal, and landless farmers in India. They are reared primarily for meat (mutton and chevon), milk, manure, and also serve as an important source of income and financial security during emergencies. India possesses a large small ruminant population, ranking 3rd in sheep population (74.3 million) and 2nd in goat population (148.8 million) according to the 2019 livestock census. West Bengal, Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Karnataka contribute nearly 61% of the country's goat meat production, while Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan account for about 89% of mutton production. Goat and sheep together contribute around 26.3% of India's total meat production of 10.5 million tonnes (BAHS 2025). However, the productivity of sheep and goats remains low mainly because of poor nutrition and inadequate feeding management.

### Intensification of Sheep and Goat Farming

The increasing demand for mutton and chevon, especially in urban and peri-urban areas, has led to the intensification of sheep and goat farming systems. Factors such as rapid urbanization, increased purchasing power, changing food habits, shrinking grazing lands, and better access to technology and markets are driving this change.

Intensive farming systems mainly focus on meat production and require:

- Superior breeds with high growth potential
- Better feeding practices using concentrates, fodders, and legumes
- Improved housing and healthcare management
- Strategic marketing for profitability

Feeding is the major cost component in intensive farming and accounts for nearly 65–70% of the total production cost. Therefore, efficient feeding management is essential to reduce costs while maintaining optimum growth and productivity.

### Breed Selection for Meat Production

Selection of suitable breeds is one of the most important factors for profitable meat production. In Southern India, commonly preferred sheep breeds include: Nellore, Deccani, Bellary, Mecheri, Kenguri, Mandya and Yelaga. Popular goat breeds include: Malabari, Kanni Adu, Kodi Adu, Osmanabadi, Salem Black, Bidri and Nandidurga. These breeds are preferred because of their adaptability, faster growth, and better meat production performance under intensive systems.

### Importance of Nutrition and Birth Weight

Birth weight is a key factor influencing the survivability and growth rate of lambs and kids. It depends on breed, litter size, and especially the nutrition of the dam during late pregnancy and lactation. Proper feeding of pregnant animals during the last trimester improves fetal

growth, milk production, and the health status of newborn lambs and kids. Well-nourished dams generally produce heavier and healthier offspring with better immunity and faster growth performance.

### **Colostrum and Milk Feeding**

Colostrum feeding within the first 4–6 hours after birth is essential for newborn lambs and kids. Colostrum provides: Antibodies for disease resistance, Essential nutrients and energy and Protection against early infections. Weak lambs or kids may require assisted feeding using bottles. During the first few weeks, mother's milk is the primary source of nutrition. Peak milk production generally occurs around the third week after parturition and gradually declines after 5–6 weeks.

### **Pre-Weaning Nutrition and Creep Feeding**

During the pre-weaning phase (birth to 90 days), lambs and kids have limited ability to digest fibrous feeds. Therefore, they require highly digestible, nutrient-rich diets. Initially, they depend mainly on mother's milk, but from the second week onwards they begin consuming small quantities of green fodder and concentrates. Special concentrate mixtures called creep feeds are provided to support rapid growth. Creep feed usually contains:

- Grains such as maize and barley (60–70%)
- Oil cakes such as soybean and groundnut cake (25–30%)
- Mineral mixture (1.5–2%)
- Salt (0.5–1%)

Creep feeding improves growth rate, rumen development, and prepares lambs and kids for early weaning.

### **Milk Replacers in Lambs and Kids**

Milk replacers are specially formulated feeds designed to supplement or replace mother's milk when milk supply is inadequate. They are particularly useful in:

- Orphan lambs/kids
- Twin and triplet births
- Fast-growing meat-purpose animals
- Weak or undernourished young animals

An ideal milk replacer contains balanced levels of fat, protein, lactose, vitamins, minerals, probiotics, and prebiotics. It is usually mixed with lukewarm water and fed through feeding bottles under hygienic conditions. Milk replacers help improve Growth rate, Immunity, Survival rate and Overall health and vigor. They are generally introduced from 5–6 days of age and continued up to 60–75 days along with creep feed and green fodder.

### **Economic Importance of Milk Replacers**

Under current market conditions, supplementation with milk replacers is economically beneficial. Rising prices of mutton in urban markets make intensive feeding systems more profitable. Studies have shown that milk replacer supplementation can significantly improve daily weight gain and reduce mortality in lambs and kids. Field trials conducted reported: Improvement in daily growth rate by up to 45%, Reduction in mortality from 21% to 7% and better benefit-cost ratios compared to conventional feeding practices. Thus, milk replacers are becoming an important technology in commercial sheep and goat farming.

### **Adoption of Milk Replacer Technology**

Milk replacer technology has been successfully adopted across several Indian states including Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. Government farms, universities, KVKs, sheep and wool boards, and commercial farmers have reported positive outcomes such as: Better weight gain, Reduced mortality, Improved health and vigor of newborn lambs and kids and Increased profitability.

## Conclusion

Sheep and goat farming has great potential for improving rural income, employment, and meat production in India. Scientific feeding practices, proper breed selection, colostrum management, creep feeding, and supplementation with milk replacers can significantly improve growth performance and reduce mortality in lambs and kids. Adoption of intensive and scientifically managed production systems can enhance profitability and help meet the increasing demand for mutton and chevon in the country.

## Reference

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