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The White Gold Reboot: Restoring the Fibre of Rural India

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Cotton is known as "white gold" in India due to its economic importance. It is one of the most important commercial crops in Indian agriculture, mainly cultivated in northern, central, and southern agro-ecological zones. India is the largest producer, accounting for 20% of global production, and the second-largest consumer of cotton. Cotton is the basic raw material for clothing and textile industries. The export of cotton products yields a significant contribution in increasing of foreign reserve. Export value of Indian cotton has reached 11 billion USD, where major global destinations are the USA, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the UK. India is the leading exporter of cotton yarn in the global market. Though, India is the largest producer of cotton, it has imported approximately 3.5 to 4 million bales in the financial year 2025-26. To meet specific global textile standard, some export-oriented cotton mills are still depending on the import of the cotton. The West Asia conflict increased the shipping cost and energy shortage which directly affected India textile industries. Recently, Government of India has provided temporary exemption in cotton import customs duty of 11% for the period of June 1, 2026 to October 31, 2026. This measure will help to maintain the cotton off-season price stability and to strengthen the competitiveness of Indian textile product in the global market. The depreciation of Indian rupee against Chinese yuan has opened up new export market potential for textile product in China. The yarn rate has skyrocketed which encourages the Indian spinning mill production.

Mission for Cotton Productivity

To address the declining growth of the Indian cotton sector, the Government of India proposed the "Mission for Cotton Productivity" to achieve self-sufficiency in cotton with a financial outlay of Rs 5,659.22 crore. The primary focus of the mission is to boost the cotton productivity through the development of high-yielding crop varieties. This approach also promotes the use of climate-resilient farming, disease-resistant seeds, and other novel technologies. This mission includes state government, state agricultural universities, and Krishi Vigyan Kendras for the promotion of novel technologies to yield high-quality cotton for exports. The major aspects of the mission are capacity building, modernisation of ginning factories, strengthening of cotton testing infrastructure, digital integration of mandis, increasing transparency and market access through e-platforms, branding of cotton under Kasturi Cotton Bharat, and promotion of high-density plantations, closer spacing and extra-stable cotton. The mission focus to develop climate resilient and pink bollworm resistant seed varieties across 140 districts in 14 states. For infrastructure development, the plan focus to modernize 2000 ginning industries and establishing 50 new testing facilities for cotton.

Kasturi Cotton Bharat Initiative

This is another cotton development initiative, branding Indian cotton for the global market with benchmarked specifications. The use of blockchain technology ensures end-to-end traceability of cotton products. Quick Response (QR) technology certifies cotton at each stage of processing. Increasing traceability and certification of cotton paves the way for creating premium quality cotton suitable for a globalized competitive market. The Ministry of Textiles made a pioneering effort to implement the Kasturi Cotton Bharat Initiative at the national level, collaborating with trade bodies and industries.

Kapas Kisan App

It is a new digital initiative for the seamless procurement of cotton at Minimum Support Price (MSP). This digital initiative was developed by the Cotton Corporation of India to ensure fairness and transparency in the procurement of cotton. The Kapas Kisan App is a farmer-centric approach that empowers farmers to easily sell cotton at MSP. It is a self-registered app where farmers can register themselves, book slots at their convenient timing, and track payments. This digital initiative accelerates the cotton procurement process with greater transparency. This app will help farmers avoid distress sales of cotton by providing assured MSP.

Akola Cotton Model

It is a high-density plantation model followed in Akola, Maharashtra. Reducing plant spacing, increasing plant density, and shortening the crop cycle boost cotton yield. Generally, the cotton crop has a 180-day life cycle, but in the Akola Model, cotton crops mature in 120 to 130 days. This reduces the risk of late-season ringworm attacks. The yield increases threefold. The Government of India is promoting this model nationally to boost the productivity of cotton and reduce the dependency on cotton imports.

Conclusion

Cotton is always seen as the cultural and economic fabric of India. Technological intervention, policy support, and sustainable farming practices can transform the traditional vulnerable cotton sector into a pillar of resilience. In addition to producing a worldwide commodity, enabling the rural workforce to sustainably cultivate this valuable resource improves the land, protects livelihoods, and creates a more promising future for millions of agricultural families.