

Lab-Grown Meat: The Future of Food?

*Aditya Adgaonkar and Jaydip Rokade

ICAR-Central Avian Research Institute, Izzatnagar, Bareilly, U.P., India

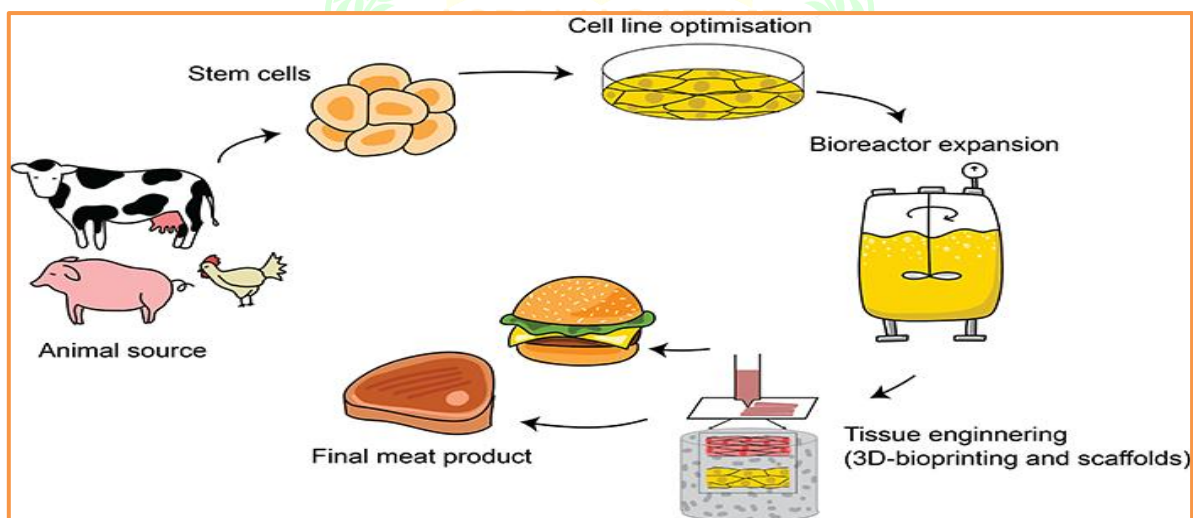
*Corresponding Author's email: adagaonkaraditya@gmail.com

The livestock sector is a cornerstone of India's agricultural economy, contributing 31% of agricultural income and 5.5% of the national GDP. India proudly leads the world in animal agriculture, ranking 1st in milk production (247.87 million tonnes), 2nd in egg production (149.11 billion eggs), and 4th globally in total meat production at 10.50 million tonnes. Despite these production milestones, the nation continues to struggle with hunger, ranking 102nd out of 123 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2025. With India's population projected to swell to 1.7 billion by 2050, rising incomes are driving a massive dietary shift from simple cereals to resource-heavy, protein-rich foods. However, traditional livestock farming requires vast amounts of land and water while heavily generating greenhouse gas emissions. To overcome these severe environmental bottlenecks and secure affordable nutrition for all, India must actively explore sustainable alternative proteins-such as plant-based options, insects, and cultured (lab-grown) meat.

Lab-Grown Meat (Cultured Meat): -

Lab-grown meat also known as cultured, in vitro, or synthetic meat is real animal meat produced by cultivating stem cells in a bioreactor without slaughtering animals. The concept traces back to 1931 when Winston Churchill predicted growing specific animal parts instead of rearing whole livestock. Practical milestones began with NASA's space research in 2001, followed by the world's first lab-grown burger developed by Dr. Mark Post in 2013. Today, rapid biotechnological advancements continue to slash production costs, while pioneering nations like Singapore have approved these products for commercial consumption.

Steps in Cultivated Meat Production

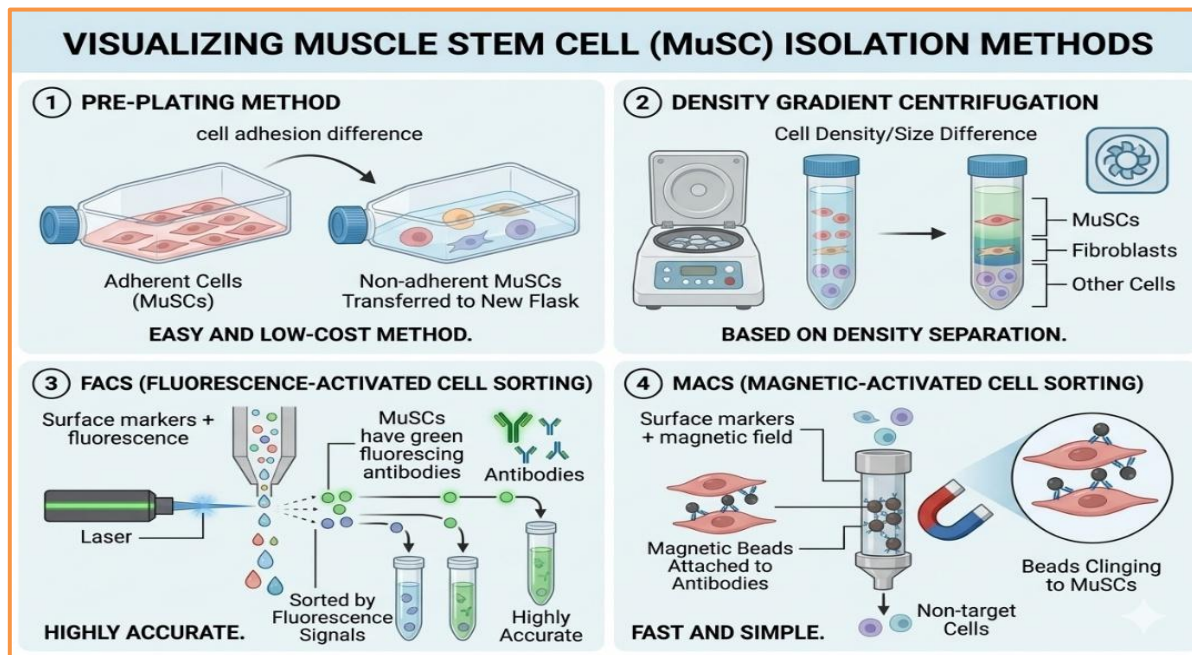


1. Extraction, Isolation and Identification of Seed Cells

To build cultivated meat, scientists require cells that can both infinitely self-renew and differentiate into muscle, fat, and connective tissues. Stem cells are the ideal candidate for this process, categorized into two main types:

- **Adult Stem Cells:** These multipotent cells (like muscle satellite cells) are the industry standard, harvested via tissue biopsies. They are highly efficient at transforming into specific muscle and fat lineages.
- **Pluripotent Stem Cells:** These cells possess an indefinite capacity to multiply and turn into *any* tissue type. However, they remain technically difficult to cultivate and far more expensive to maintain in the lab.

Different methods are used to isolate muscle stem cells (MuSCs) based on their physical and biological properties. These methods help in selecting pure and suitable cells for cultivated meat production.

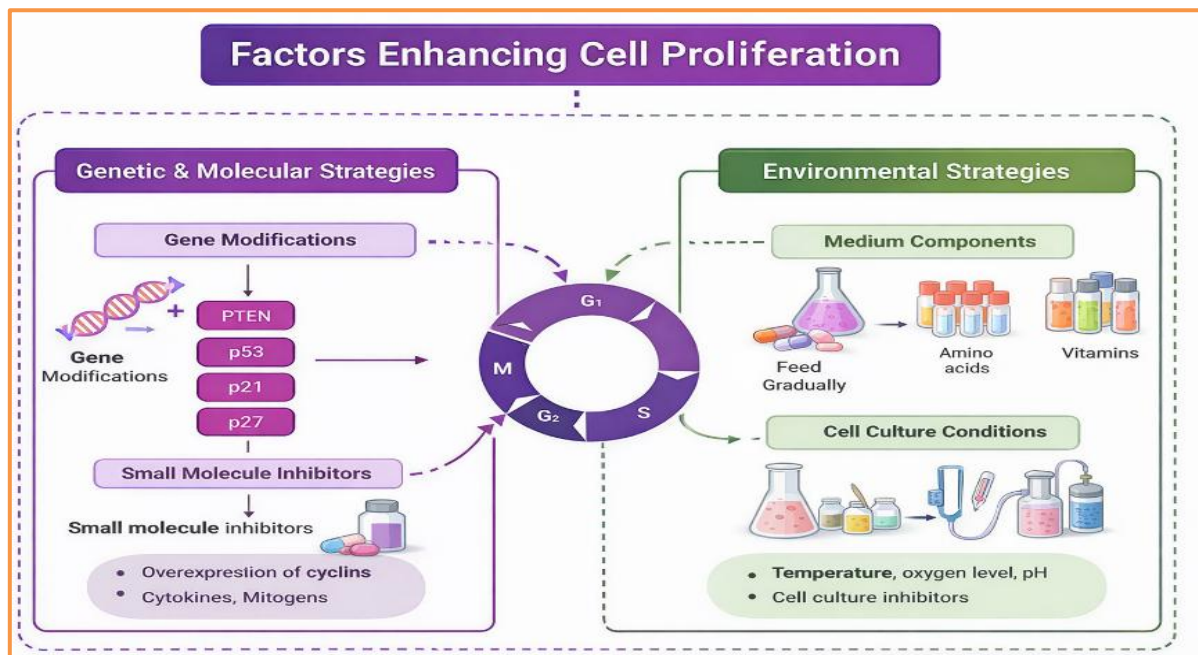


2. Cell Culture Media & Bioreactor

Cell culture media is the nutrient-rich fluid used to nourish and sustain cells in laboratory conditions. It represents the industry's heaviest financial burden, accounting for 55% to 95% of total production costs. An ideal formula must be completely food-grade, low-cost, and highly scalable. At its core, this liquid contains glucose for energy, amino acids for protein formation, vitamins, and pH buffers. Crucially, it relies on specialized growth factors (like FGF-2 and EGF). These biological triggers signal the cells to multiply efficiently and develop into real muscle tissue. Bioreactors serve as the industrial engine for cultivated meat, providing the precise environmental control such as temperature, oxygen, nutrients, and pH needed to efficiently scale up cell numbers. Depending on how the nutrient medium is introduced, production relies on three primary systems: batch, fed-batch, or continuous bioreactors.

3. Cell Proliferation

Cell proliferation is the process by which cells multiply and increase in number. In cultivated meat production, a small number of cells (around 10^5 – 10^6 cells) are grown into a very large number (more than 10^{13} cells), so this process must be highly efficient and cost-effective. Improving cell proliferation reduces the need for expensive growth factors and culture media, which helps in lowering production cost and makes large-scale production possible. Cell proliferation is the critical phase where a small cluster of initial cells expands into a massive biological harvest. To drive this cell multiplication efficiently and lower production costs, scientists deploy two distinct methodologies: genetic and molecular strategies (which modify cell growth genes like PTEN or p53 and introduce cyclins and cytokines) and environmental strategies (which optimize external parameters like culture medium composition, temperature, oxygen level, and pH).



4. Cell Differentiation

Cell differentiation is the structural phase where multiplied stem cells mature into specific muscle, fat, and connective tissues to form real meat. To achieve a realistic texture, this transformation relies on two key factors: biochemical signals (such as hormones, small molecules, or cost-effective plant compounds that trigger specific tissue pathways) and biomaterial scaffolding (edible structures whose structural stiffness and surface chemistry guide how the cells physically align and mature). Scaffolds are 3D structural frameworks that guide cells to anchor, multiply, and form realistic meat textures while acting as nutrient channels to sustain tissue growth. These matrices are built using consumer-safe materials, including natural plant polymers like alginate, muscle-mimicking proteins such as collagen, and fungal mycelia networks. Depending on the target product, production teams deploy these materials either as microscopic floating microcarriers for high-density, large-scale cell multiplication or via advanced 3D bioprinting using computer designs (CAD) and custom bioink to construct complex items like whole-cut steaks.

5. Improving Taste and Texture

Cultivated meat must flawlessly replicate conventional meat's color, flavor, and tenderness to displace traditional livestock. Unrefined lab-grown cells are naturally yellowish in appearance. Therefore, scientists add iron-rich myoglobin to achieve a realistic red hue. Flavor is deeply complex. Cultivated fat tissue is integrated to provide essential juiciness and taste. Furthermore, structural tenderness relies on aligned scaffolding. This guides growing muscle fibers into natural, realistic tissue patterns. Finally, advanced cell engineering can enhance overall nutritional value. This process introduces vital vitamins and healthy fatty acids into the final product.

Cultivated Meat Products for Market Sale

Cultivated meat products are heavily concentrated in Western nations and Singapore, while the Indian market remains minimal. Commercially, the industry is dominated by processed formats like burgers, which hold a 38% global market share, with beef contributing the largest species share worldwide. Niche innovations like Vow's lab-grown kangaroo meat are emerging alongside an expanding sustainable pet food segment led by Western brands like Wild Earth. While these applications are virtually non-existent in India today, rising international demand for ethical nutrition points toward strong future growth.

Market Analysis of Cultivated Meat

The economics of cultivated meat have shifted dramatically, with initial costs of \$300,000 per pound in 2013 projected to plummet to \$5.66 per kg by 2030. Backed by food giants like

Cargill and Tyson, the global market is expanding toward \$593 million by 2032, propelled by state funding like the Netherlands' \$60 million and Israel's \$18 million infrastructure investments. Meanwhile, India is carving out its own milestones through Hyderabad's "Ahimsa meat" project, CMFRI's lab-grown fish research, and homegrown startups like Clear Meat.

Environmental Impact Comparison

This table compares the environmental impact of cultivated meat (CM) with traditional meat like chicken, pork, and beef. It shows that cultivated meat is much more environment-friendly. For carbon footprint, cultivated meat reduces emissions by about 17% compared to chicken, 52% compared to pork, and up to 92% compared to beef, which means it produces much less greenhouse gases. In terms of land use, cultivated meat requires far less land, with reductions of 63% (chicken), 72% (pork), and 95% (beef). This shows that it can help save land and reduce pressure on natural resources. For air pollution, cultivated meat also performs better, reducing pollution by 29% compared to chicken, 49% compared to pork, and 93% compared to beef.

Challenges

The global adoption of cultivated meat faces severe socio-economic and psychological hurdles from both consumer and agricultural perspectives. On the consumer side, high market prices, sensory mismatches, perceptions of "unnaturalness," and fear of unfamiliar technology drive deep public skepticism, while tight regulations limit market access. On the production side, traditional farmers fear that massive corporate monopolies will overtake animal agriculture. This shift threatens widespread rural unemployment, income loss for farming families, and economic collapse. Furthermore, the industry itself faces severe scalability bottlenecks caused by high energy demands and steep manufacturing costs.

Conclusion

While cultivated meat offers an innovative alternative to animal slaughter, it cannot currently replace traditional livestock farming or meet surging global demand. The industry faces an ethical paradox by still relying on live-animal muscle sampling, alongside major gaps in pricing, sensory properties, and manufacturing scalability. Furthermore, a stark geographic divide leaves markets like India virtually untouched, as local consumers heavily favour traditional meat. This is especially true for poultry farming, which already provides a cheap, low-risk, and sustainable protein source. Until production costs plummet, lab-grown meat will remain restricted to high-income demographics and niche consumer groups.