

Greying Fields: The Invisible Crisis of Ageing Farmers in India

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Abstract: India's farming population is steadily ageing. The average age of farmers in the country has risen to around 50 years, a sharp contrast to the national median age of 29, as increasing numbers of rural youth abandon farming in pursuit of other livelihoods. As rural youth increasingly abandon agriculture in search of alternative livelihoods, this demographic shift raises critical concerns. Drawing on data from the Agriculture Census, NSSO, PLFS, Census 2011, and reports by FAO and ICAR, this article examines the structural causes and consequences of the ageing farmer crisis. Field insights from West Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu reveal how outmigration, low returns, health challenges, and changing aspirations drive this trend. We explore its implications for labour, productivity, and food security, while identifying key policy gaps. The article calls for generationally inclusive agricultural reforms, including shared farming models, secure land leasing, youth engagement strategies, and targeted support for elderly farmers.

Keywords: Ageing farmers; Agricultural demographics; Rural youth migration; Food security; Agriculture policy; Generational change; India

Introduction

India's farms are steadily ageing. The average farmer is now over 50 years, compared to the national median age of 29 years, highlighting a widening generational gap in agriculture. While the broader population remains young, over two-thirds of India's landholders are above 45, and in states like Kerala, more than 75% are over 50. Meanwhile, fewer than 15% of farmers are under 40, reflecting a steep decline in youth participation.

This greying of India's agricultural workforce mirrors global trends seen in the U.S., Japan, and Europe, but it poses unique risks for India given its large agrarian base. Rural youth are increasingly disinterested in farming due to poor incomes, social stigma, and better urban opportunities. Farm households earn far less than non-farm jobs, and many elderly farmers continue working out of necessity,

without adequate social security. Despite its significance, this demographic crisis remains under-addressed in policy circles. As this article shows, the future of Indian agriculture hinges on reversing this trend. Through data from national surveys and field cases across four states, we explore the causes, consequences, and policy gaps of farmer ageing and propose inclusive reforms to secure the next generation of cultivators.

Grey by the Numbers: Data on India's Ageing Farmers:

Over the past two decades, India's farming workforce has been steadily ageing. The Census of India 2011 recorded a drop of 8.5 million cultivators from 2001, marking it as a historic decline, with nearly 2,000 farmers quitting daily during that decade. Many who quitted were likely young or marginal farmers, as agricultural labourers increased in parallel.

AGEING FARMERS ACROSS INDIA			
STATE	KEY ISSUES	YOUTH TRENDS	IMPACT ON ELDERLY IN AGRICULTURE
WEST BENGAL	Widespread youth migration to cities, fallow family land	Agriculture abandoned by young generations	Older parents persist on geriatric farms
MAHARASHTRA	Agrarian distress, acute labour shortages	No future seen in farming, migrating to cities	Ageing farmers managing deserted farms
PUNJAB	Declining prestige of farming, migration abroad	Few youth entering agriculture	Farming sustained by elderly or migrant labor
TAMIL NADU	Recurrent droughts, mass youth exodus	Young farmers abandoning agriculture	Greyer communities struggle to adapt

Figure 1: Greying farms, uncertain future

The Agricultural Input Survey 2011-12 placed the average farmer age at 50.1 years, with two-thirds aged between 41 and 60. By 2016-17, Kerala's average farmer age rose to 52.3 years, and over 75% were above 50, with under-30s making up less than 0.7%. Goa showed similar patterns.

While states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh still have rural youth populations, few remain in farming. The ASER 2017 survey found that though 79% of rural working youth helped on farms, only 1.2% aspired to be farmers. Despite its scale, this demographic shift has drawn little policy attention, making it a silent but significant transition in Indian agriculture.

Why Are Farmers Ageing? Causes of the Generational Shift

Several interlocking causes explain why India's farming population is ageing and why the young are turning away from agriculture. We can categorize these causes into economic, social, and structural factors, though in reality they overlap.

1. **Low Economic Returns:** Smallholder farming remains unprofitable. Average farm income (₹10,000/month) is far below wages in other sectors. Most farmers discourage their children from taking up agriculture due to chronic debt, instability, and poverty.
2. **Loss of Social Status:** Farming is increasingly seen as low-status and unrewarding. Rural youth aspire to modern, urban professions. Only 1.2% of youth surveyed in ASER (2017) saw farming as a desirable career.
3. **Education and Skill Diversification:** More educated rural youth prefer non-farm jobs. Only 0.5% of students enrol in agriculture-related courses, and those who do often leave the sector, deepening the generational skills gap.
4. **Land Fragmentation and Inheritance:** Younger generations inherit uneconomical land parcels, which they often lease or abandon. Elders retain land rights longer, delaying youth entry into farming.
5. **Youth Outmigration:** Massive rural-urban and overseas migration drains young labor from agriculture. Regions with high outmigration (e.g., Punjab, Bihar, Tamil Nadu) show faster farm ageing. Even COVID-19's temporary reversal had limited long-term effect.
6. **Health and Physical Limits:** Older farmers struggle with declining health but keep working due to lack of pensions or help. Labour shortages lead to smaller plots, low mechanization, and productivity dips.
7. **Policy Gaps:** India lacks targeted programs for young farmers, succession planning, or land leasing reforms. Without institutional support or retirement benefits, the old remain stuck, and the young stay away.

To summarise, India's ageing farming population reflects rural transformation and agrarian stagnation. Low incomes and poor prospects drive youth away, leaving behind an ageing workforce. Structural barriers like limited land and credit deter the few interested youth. As a result, farming communities now have a shrinking youth base supporting an ageing majority, an unsustainable trend with serious implications for productivity, sustainability, and food security.

Implications: Why an Ageing Farm Population Matters

1. **Labour Shortages:** Youth exodus creates seasonal labour gaps, raising cultivation costs and forcing dependence on migrant workers – often unreliable during crises like COVID-19.
2. **Stagnant Productivity:** Older farmers are less likely to adopt innovations or new practices, widening the yield gap and slowing agricultural growth.
3. **Loss of Knowledge Transfer:** With no youth successors, traditional farming knowledge risks disappearing, weakening local resilience and institutional continuity.
4. **Threat to Food Security:** Fewer, older farmers may be unable to meet future food demand. If trends continue, India could face rising import dependency and idle farmland.



Fig. 2: Ageing farmers, rising risks

5. **Shifting Crop Patterns:** Ageing farmers tend to avoid labour-intensive or risky crops, reducing crop diversity. Some mechanization and land leasing improve efficiency but reduce rural employment.
6. **Rural Social Strain:** Elderly-dominated villages face depopulation, declining services, and growing healthcare needs—creating “geriatric rural communities” with higher emotional and economic stress.

An ageing farmer base threatens the future of Indian agriculture. It risks labour shortages, reduced innovation, and declining output—posing serious challenges to food security. As Mahapatra (2020) warns, India could soon be a major food-consuming nation with too few farmers. Urgent, generationally inclusive action is needed before this silent crisis becomes irreversible.

Policy Gaps: Are We Neglecting Our Ageing Farmers?

- Despite clear signs, ageing farmers remain a largely unaddressed policy issue in India. Key frameworks like the National Policy for Farmers (2007) and recent government initiatives have focused on income and productivity, but not on generational renewal.
- Programs like ICAR’s ARYA and Agri-Clinics aim to engage rural youth but operate on a limited scale. There's no major incentive like land grants or stipends to attract young farmers. On the other side, elderly farmers lack meaningful social security. PM-Kisan and PM-Kisan Maandhan Yojana offer modest support, but coverage and uptake are poor, leaving most unable to retire.
- Crucial land reforms remain slow. The Model Land Leasing Act (2016) has only partial adoption, keeping older farmers tied to their land out of fear of losing ownership. Extension systems also fail to differentiate by age—neglecting both young entrants and elderly support needs.

Overall, the ageing crisis is treated as incidental, not structural. Without a focused, generationally inclusive strategy, farming risks further decline, both demographically and economically.

Toward a Generationally Inclusive Agri-Policy: Recommendations



Fig. 3: Save farms, support farmers

1. **Make Farming Profitable and Aspirational:** Improve incomes through MSPs, better market access, and crop insurance. Rebrand farming via education, media, and youth-focused campaigns to make it a respected, tech-savvy profession.
2. **Scale Up Youth Engagement Programs:** Expand initiatives like ARYA and STRY to all districts. Provide grants, training, and mentorship for rural youth to start agri-enterprises across the value chain.
3. **Enable Land Leasing and Consolidation:** Implement the Model Land Leasing Act across states. Create land pooling and rental models to ease elderly retirement and youth entry into farming.
4. **Support Age-Friendly Mechanization:** Expand Custom Hiring Centers and develop small, ergonomic tools for older farmers. Promote youth-led farm service models to assist elderly cultivators.
5. **Ensure Pensions and Social Security:** Strengthen PM-KMY and introduce universal farmer pensions. Provide outpatient healthcare and “farm freedom” packages for voluntary retirement.

6. **Promote FPOs and Cooperatives:** Use FPOs to bridge youth and elders—combining tech-driven management by youth with traditional knowledge from seniors. Encourage shared farming and mentorship.
7. **Leverage Agri-Tech and Digital Inclusion:** Promote rural agri-tech startups, digital advisory centers, and local-language agri-apps. Ease land-use for tech-based farming (e.g., hydroponics, agritourism) to attract young talent.
8. **Adopt Global Best Practices:** Learn from Japan, Korea, and EU: succession bonuses, startup grants for young farmers, and land transfer incentives. Align with FAO and ICAR models for youth incubation.
9. **Track and Integrate Metrics:** Monitor average farmer age and youth participation in agriculture as official indicators. Cross-

ministry coordination is essential for effective implementation.

Conclusion

India's ageing farmer crisis is no longer silent. It threatens the future of agriculture and food security. With fewer youth entering farming and older generations struggling on, the sector risks stagnation and collapse. But this trajectory is not irreversible. A generationally inclusive agri-policy, one that improves farm viability for youth and ensures dignity for elders is essential. Solutions lie in land reforms, youth incentives, mechanization support, and social security. The goal is not just to preserve farming, but to transform it into a dynamic, multi-generational enterprise. If we act now, we can ensure that tomorrow's farmers will inherit not just land, but opportunity, respect, and resilience. If we don't, we may soon face empty fields where once stood greying ones.
