

From Farm to Feed: Harnessing Microbes for Nutrition and Productivity

Khushboo Kumari¹ *Arti Kumari² and Ayushi Kashyap³

¹Department of Food Science and Technology, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, Assam, India

²Tirhut College of Agriculture, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Pusa, Samastipur, Bihar, India

³College of Horticulture and Farming System Research, Assam Agricultural University, Nagaon, Assam, India

*Corresponding Email: artikumari257@rpcau.ac.in

Abstract

The agri-producers are facing growing threats of post-harvest losses, increasing production costs, and some restrictive use of antibiotic markers in cattle rearing. It is under such circumstances that procedures based on fermentation and probiotics act as promising and cost-effective alternatives that are also environmentally sustainable. Even though it has been found that probiotic research and markets are dominated by fermented dairy products, fermented non-dairy products made from cereals, millets, fruits, and vegetables, and probiotics in cattle rearing and fish farming have yet to reach their full potential in agriculture.

Keywords: Fermentation, non-dairy probiotics, Agro-processing, Sustainable agriculture.

Introduction

The modern farming scenario is gradually shifting from just raw material production to addition of value, sustainability, and enhancing earnings of farming communities. In this new scenario, fermentation has reinvented itself and once again emerged as an efficient method of agro-processing that makes way for utilizing cereals, millets, fruits, and vegetables to produce healthful and high-value products. Concurrently, while probiotics had remained for the most part of their existence in dairy products such as curd and yogurt, new applications of these products in farming, such as animal rearing, and poultry and fish farming, have been ventured and initiated.

Recent interest in sustainable animal production, welfare, and decreased antibiotic usage has propelled probiotics to the vantage point of new technology in the field of agricultural systems. Probiotics, or beneficial microorganisms, are extremely effective at gut maintenance, immunostimulation, or overall productivity enhancement in farm, poultry, aquatic, or companion farm animals. Probiotic technology has seen resurgence, expanding beyond usage as dairy probiotics to encompass fermented, dairy-free protein sources, silages, or specifically developed farm microbiology. At the farm level, probiotics help enhance feeding efficiencies, increased nutrient uptake, or gut maintenance as effective substitutes for antibiotic growth promoters. Probiotics are also effective at making ecological systems more sustainable, mainly enhancing rumen functions, gut integrity, decreased methane emissions, or improved aquatic system water quality for aquacultures. With escalating worries about antibiotic resistance or ecological threats associated with microbes within the human foods industry, probiotics for uses outside

the dairy industry are very effective, farmer-friendly solutions for making agricultural systems more sustainable (Márza *et al.*, 2025).

Fermentation as a Tool for Agro-Processing

Fermentation, therefore, represents one of the conventional biotechnological approaches in agro-processing, whereby agricultural raw materials are transformed into stable, value-added, nutritionally enhanced products through the action of bacteria, yeasts, and molds under controlled conditions. The microbial metabolism, combining complex substrates, results in organic acids, alcohols, enzymes, and bioactive compounds, thereby contributing to preservation, nutritional development, sensory improvement, and by-product utilization. Fermentation in agro-industrial applications enhances the efficiency of various plant-based substrates such as cereals, legumes, oilseeds, tubers, fruits, and vegetables through the degradation of anti-nutritional factors and complex macromolecules. This results in enhanced protein digestibility, increased mineral bioavailability, and improved levels of essential amino acids, vitamins, and short-chain fatty acids (Aydar *et al.*, 2020).

Fermentation also serves as a natural means of preservation by reducing pH and generating antimicrobial metabolites that include lactic acid, acetic acid, ethanol, and bacteriocins, which impede the development of spoilage and pathogenic microorganisms and extend shelf life in the absence of synthetic preservatives. Besides, the secondary metabolites formed will contribute to flavor, aroma, and texture features, increasing consumer acceptability of plant-based food products. Moreover, it encourages sustainable agro-processing by making it possible to use agricultural waste sources like bran, husks, peels, pomace, and molasses to produce valuable products through microbial fermentation, including microbial biomass, organic acids, enzymes, and bioactive molecules. This not only reduces waste production but also increases resource use efficiency and makes it more closed-loop through a circular bio-economy approach (Abbaspour, 2024).

Probiotics Beyond Dairy: Expanding Agricultural Applications

Non-dairy probiotics represent a new frontier in agriculture and industry, due to their potential for exploitation of a wide variety of agro-derivatives while overcoming many hindrances usually faced with the use of dairy-based carriers. Their formulation encourages adding value to excess crops, post-harvest by-products, and underutilized crops.

Fermentative processing improves shelf life, reduces post-harvest losses, enhances nutritional and functional properties, and contributes toward sustainable agriculture and food security.

Cereals like wheat, rice, maize, oats, barley, and millets act as good carriers of probiotics, representing β -glucans and non-digestible oligosaccharides, and fermentation enhances the mineral bioavailability by degrading phytic acid. Fruits and vegetables can also be used as suitable matrices due to the presence of fermentable sugars, antioxidants, and phytochemicals. The viability of probiotics is enhanced by strain selection and microencapsulation. Fermented meat products, especially dry fermented sausages, provide a protecting role for the probiotics through their lipids. Non-dairy matrices presented various problems regarding the stability of these probiotics; however, with developments in encapsulation, using alginate, chitosan, maltodextrin, and inulin, the conservation of probiotics improved (Aspri *et al.*, 2020).

Role of Probiotics in Reducing Antibiotic Dependence

Probiotics can abrogate antibiotic resistance by promoting gut microbial homeostasis, inhibiting opportunistic pathogens, and reducing antibiotic side effects. The use of antibiotics often results in gut dysbiosis, thereby giving rise to complications such as antibiotic-associated diarrhea (AAD), an increase in antibiotic use, and a higher risk of resistant pathogenesis. The probiotic species *Lactobacillus*, *Bifidobacterium*, *Bacillus*, and *Saccharomyces boulardii* work against antibiotic resistance by inhibition, production of antimicrobial peptides, and repopulation of beneficial microbes.

Probiotics exert a profound effect in reducing AAD by stimulating the production of short chain fatty acids, improving bile acid processing, and improving the absorption of fluids, hence improving patient compliance with treatments and eliminating the need for second-line antibiotics. Probiotics also influence the immune system and mucosal protection against infections. Their use in animal breeding is an effective substitute for antibiotics used as growth promoters. They aid in improving animal health and resistance to antibiotics (Mekonnen *et al.*, 2020).

Sustainability and Environmental Benefits

Probiotics play a vital role in promoting sustainability by supporting environmentally responsible practices in agriculture, aquaculture, and food production systems. They promote sustainable production because they enhance animal and nutrient utilization, thus reducing resource utilization, waste production, and the use of antibiotics. Probiotics are known to promote enhanced water quality by breaking down organics and reducing the levels of undesirable water metabolites such as ammonia and nitrites. Since they are involved in the promotion of resistance to diseases, they can

therefore be considered environmentally safe alternatives to using antibiotics. This therefore promotes the control of antimicrobial resistance for sustainability (Hancz, 2022).

Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite the many benefits that fermentation agro-processing offers, challenges do exist in terms of control and microbial safety. Advances being made in starter culture research and development, microbial ecology and genomics, and improvements in processing continue to enhance its ease of application and microbial safety. Fermentation is thus a highly multifunctional, sustainable, and economically practical strategy that combines traditional and innovative agro-industrial practices that build on a healthy and resilient food system (Mârza *et al.*, 2025).

Conclusion

Fermentation is a sustainable and efficient agro-processing technique, which improves food safety, nutritional content, storage life, as well as resource utilization. The emerging trend of non-dairy probiotics increases the added-value of agro-products, functionality of food, as well as food security. Additionally, the utilization of probiotics increases independence from antibiotics through the preservation of microbial balance in the body, boosting of immunity, as well as their use as antimicrobial growth factors. Fermentation, along with probiotics, promotes sustainability in the environment, as well as the control of antimicrobial resistance. Fermentation and probiotics serve to further fortify resilient and sustainable food systems through advancements in starter culture technology.

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