



DR. M.J. KHAN

URGENTLY NEEDED: BETTER AIR CARGO FACILITIES FOR AGRI PRODUCE

Agriculture export crossed the 50 billion dollar mark this year. While this is good news, we can do better. We should be eyeing 100 billion dollar agri-export by 2025. This is not impossible. We produce a number of high-value, low-volume crops. India ranks second in fruits and vegetable production globally. But our contribution to the world market is negligible.

What happens to our high production? Shockingly, one-third is lost. Our logistics are poor, and post-harvest management continues to lag. A few years ago, a report suggested that our post-harvest losses are to the tune of Rs 2 lakh crore per year! A focused improvement in the post-harvest management sector can make India achieve wonders in the global market, and also improve domestic supply.

The demand for quality agri-produce is far from the centers of production. Better transportation shall ensure that farmers earn well. Indian agriculture urgently needs the support of the air cargo sector. Such perishable cargo with limited shelf-life is susceptible to deterioration or uselessness if not delivered on time. Fruit, vegetables, chilled meat, flowers – all these need refrigerated warehousing and transportation to extend their commercial life.

The transportation of perishable produce requires specific care regarding packing, labeling and transport equipment maintenance. Logistical operations must protect products from mishandling during loading and unloading; compression due to excess weight, impact, vibration and shifts in cargo in transit; possible damage from surrounding air; temperature and humidity above or below recommended levels, and odor contamination from other produce or residues. The sector needs specific protocol for each category of produce to maximize the benefits of air transportation. Most agricultural products are seasonal. They are harvested only in certain times of the year. A schedule adjusting the same is important.

The main obstacle to the export of agricultural perishable by air cargo is the high freight cost, added to fuel costs. This significantly increases the total

cost of the logistics. This needs to be addressed. New commercial and logistical incentive schemes can be implemented for farmers. Many sectors of agribusiness shall flourish with better air cargo for agri produce. The perishable produce market must identify new opportunities for air transportation. It shall be a win-win for the complete value chain.

