Virtual Farming Reimagining Agriculture through Digital Twins AI and Real-Time Data

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OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Virtual Farming, Digital Twins, Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things, Precision Agriculture, Smart Farming, Real-Time Data, Digital Agriculture, Climate-Smart Agriculture, Sustainability.

How to cite this article:

Kumar, S. and Gaurav, S. 2026. Virtual Farming Reimagining Agriculture through Digital Twins AI and Real-Time Data. *Vigyan Varta* 7 (08): 130-135.

ABSTRACT

Virtual farming is transforming modern agriculture by integrating Digital Twins, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), and real-time data analytics to enable smarter, more sustainable farming systems. A digital twin is a dynamic virtual replica of a physical farm that continuously receives data from sensors, drones, satellites, weather stations, and farm machinery. This digital ecosystem allows farmers to monitor crop growth, soil health, irrigation, nutrient status, and environmental conditions in real time while simulating different management scenarios before implementing them in the field. AI-powered predictive analytics further enhance decision-making by forecasting pest and disease outbreaks, estimating crop yields, optimizing irrigation schedules and improving fertilizer recommendations. Virtual farming reduces production costs by promoting precision resource management, minimizes environmental impacts through efficient input use and strengthens climate resilience by supporting proactive responses to weather variability and extreme events. In India the Digital Agriculture Mission and increasing adoption of smart farming technologies are accelerating the transition toward data-driven agriculture. However, challenges such as limited digital infrastructure, high implementation costs, inadequate technical skills and concerns regarding data security continue to hinder widespread adoption, particularly among smallholder farmers. Addressing these constraints through policy support, digital literacy programs, affordable technologies and public-private

partnerships will be essential for realizing the full potential of virtual farming. As technologies such as machine learning, robotics, block-chain and autonomous farm machinery continue to evolve, virtual farming is expected to redefine agricultural production by improving productivity, sustainability and profitability. Ultimately, the convergence of Digital Twins, AI, and real-time data represents a transformative pathway toward resilient, intelligent and future-ready agriculture capable of ensuring long-term food security and environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION:

Agriculture stands at an inflection point. The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that feeding a growing global population under increasing climatic uncertainty will require producing more food with fewer natural resources. Traditional farming, guided largely by experience and periodic field visits, is increasingly being supplemented and in some operations replaced by continuous, data-driven decision-making. This shift is broadly described as digital agriculture or Agriculture 4.0 and its most advanced expression is virtual farming, in which sensors, satellites, drones and AI models work together to build and continuously refine a living, virtual counterpart of the physical farm.

Virtual farming refers to the practice of monitoring, modelling and managing agricultural operations through a continuously updated digital representation of the physical farm, rather than relying solely on periodic in-person observation. It integrates data streams from soil probes, weather stations, drones, satellites and farm machinery into a unified virtual model often called a digital twin that simulates crop growth, resource use and risk under different scenarios before decisions are executed in the real world.

As one recent scientific review summarises, digital twins have emerged as an outstanding opportunity for precision farming, digitally replicating in real time the functionalities of crops and farm objects, so that a virtual replica covering irrigation, fertilisation and pest management can support decision-making and drive gains in sustainability and resource savings (Pylianidis *et al*., 2024).

Virtual farming is therefore broader than simple data logging: it is an active, predictive and increasingly automated management layer sitting above the physical farm, allowing farmers and agronomists to ask "what-if" questions such as the effect of delaying irrigation by two days and see simulated outcomes before committing real water, fertiliser or labour.

1. Core Technologies Behind Virtual Farming

Virtual farming is built on a stack of complementary technologies rather than any single tool:

- IoT sensors soil-moisture, weather and livestock-wearable devices that capture continuous field data
- Remote sensing drones and satellites providing multispectral views of crop health across large areas
- Cloud & edge computing infrastructure that preprocesses and aggregates data to build the digital twin
- AI & machine learning algorithms that forecast yield, detect pest/disease risk and recommend inputs

- Digital twin modelling the simulation layer kept synchronised with real-world conditions
- GIS/GPS geospatial tools enabling variable-rate, sub-field precision
- Robotics & automation actuators that convert digital recommendations into field action
- Blockchain & big-data analytics supply-chain traceability and large-scale data handling

Figure 1. Core Technologies Underpinning Virtual Farming

2. How Virtual Farming Works

i. Most systems follow a common operational cycle linking physical sensing to virtual modelling and back to physical action: -

ii. Data collection from field sensors and imagery

iii. Transmission to cloud/edge servers

iv. Construction and continuous update of the digital twin

v. Ai-based simulation and prediction

vi. Decision support delivered to the farmer via dashboard or apps

vii. Automated actuation, with outcomes fed back to refine the model

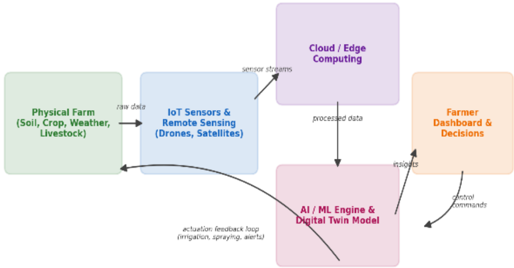

Figure 2. Conceptual Architecture of a Virtual Farming System

3. Key Features

- Real-time monitoring continuous visibility into soil, weather and crop health, replacing periodic manual checks
- Predictive analytics forecasting yield, pest outbreaks and weather risk before they affect the crop
- Scenario simulation testing management decisions virtually before committing real resources
- Site-specific precision variable-rate application of water, fertilizer and pesticide by sub-field zone
- Automation integration direct linkage between recommendations and irrigation/spraying actuators
- Remote accessibility farm status and controls available via mobile or web dashboards
- Continuous learning models improve as more field data is fed back into the system

4. Benefits

A 2025 review of digital-twin deployments reported crop yield increases of 15–20%, water-use reductions of 30–40%, and operating-cost reductions of 25–30% (Zhao &

E-ISSN: 2582-9467
Popular Article
Kumar and Gaurav (2026)

Li, 2025), alongside gains in nutrient-use efficiency and reduced post-harvest losses.

- Resource efficiency reduced water, fertilizer and pesticide use through precision application
- Higher, more stable yields earlier detection of stress, pests and disease enables timely intervention
- Cost savings lower input costs and reduced crop loss improve profitability
- Risk reduction predictive weather and pest alerts lower exposure to catastrophic loss
- Environmental sustainability reduced chemical runoff and water withdrawal

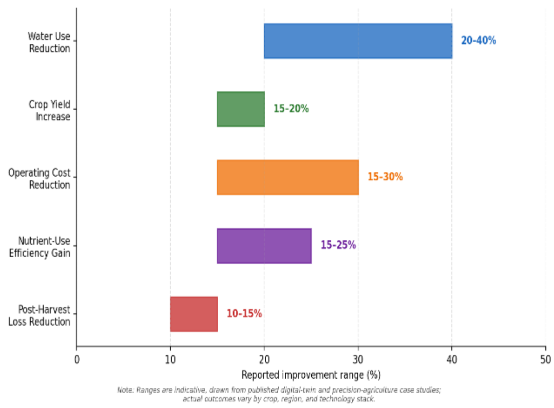

Figure 3. Reported Benefit Ranges of Virtual/Digital-Twin Farming

5. Applications

- Precision irrigation zone-specific, automated scheduling based on soil-moisture models
- Crop health & disease monitoring AI classification of drone/satellite imagery
- Yield forecasting machine-learning prediction of harvest volumes for planning
- Livestock management wearable sensors and virtual herd models
- Greenhouse control digital twins optimizing temperature, humidity, light and CO2
- Supply-chain & post-harvest management optimized harvest timing and cold-chain logistics
- Financial & risk planning digital records supporting credit, insurance and subsidy access

6. Role of AI & Digital Twins in Climate-Smart Agriculture

AI is the analytical engine and the digital twin the structural framework: sensor data builds a cloud-based model that is continuously validated against new data, enabling both immediate action and longer-term optimisation (Pylianidis *et al.*, 2024). The sense-model-predict-act loop lets farmers anticipate drought, frost or pest outbreaks in advance, while precision input application lowers emissions from over-fertilisation and unnecessary field passes making virtual farming a practical tool for climate resilience.

7. Adoption Challenges

- High upfront cost of sensors, connectivity and software subscriptions
- Unreliable rural broadband and cellular coverage
- Sparse or inconsistent regional soil and climate datasets
- Low digital literacy among farmers
- Poor interoperability between proprietary vendor platforms
- Data-ownership and privacy concerns
- Farmer trust in automated recommendations over experiential knowledge

8. Virtual Farming in India

With around 86% of Indian cultivators being small and marginal farmers (KPI AS Academy, 2026), the Government approved the Digital Agriculture Mission on 2 September 2024 with a ₹2,817 crore outlay, covering AgriStack digital farmer IDs, the Krishi Decision Support System, nationwide soil-profile mapping and digital crop surveys. Yet fewer than 20% of Indian farmers currently use digital technologies, reflecting a persistent last-mile adoption gap driven by connectivity and cost constraints.

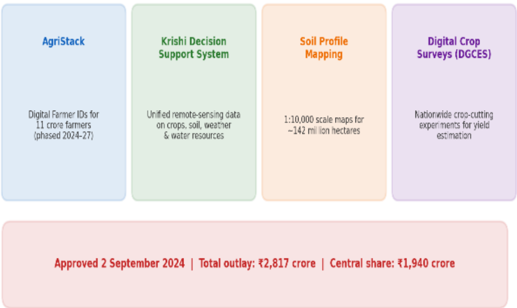

Figure 4. India's Digital Agriculture Mission — Key Components

9. Future Scope & Conclusion

The future of virtual farming lies in generative-AI advisory tools, low-power edge AI/TinyML for poorly connected regions, federated learning across farms, autonomous robotics, and climate-risk-linked insurance built on digital-twin data. Overall, virtual farming marks a shift from experience-based to continuous, data-driven farm management, delivering measurable gains in water, yield and cost efficiency. Realising its full potential especially for smallholders will require sustained investment in connectivity, affordability and digital literacy alongside continued policy support such as India's Digital Agriculture Mission.

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