From "Poor Man's Cow" to Profitable Enterprise: Rethinking Goat Production in India

Tanmay Mondal[1]* and Mokshata Gupta[2]

[1]*College of Veterinary Science, Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (GADVASU), Rampura Phul, Punjab–151103, India*
[2]*Uttar Pradesh Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Pashu Chikitsa Vigyan Vishwavidyalaya Evam Go-Anusandhan Sansthan (DUVASU), Mathura, Uttar Pradesh–281001, India*

Corresponding Author
Tanmay Mondal
Email: tanmayvet019@gmail.com

OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Chevon, Climate-smart livestock, Goat farming, Kid mortality, Precision livestock farming

How to cite this article:

Mondal, T. and Gupta, M. 2026. From "Poor Man's Cow" to Profitable Enterprise: Rethinking Goat Production in India. *Vigyan Varta* 7 (09): 112-116.

ABSTRACT

Goats sustain millions of small, marginal and landless households in India, yet farm performance stays well below what the same animals achieve under better management. This article argues that the binding constraint is the production system rather than the goat. It discusses ten field-level bottlenecks (feed scarcity, kid mortality, disease, parasitism, unplanned breeding, poor housing, heat stress, absent records, weak markets and limited value addition) and the affordable, science-based corrections for each, together with the emerging tools of precision goat farming.

INTRODUCTION:

Walk through an Indian village at dusk and the goats usually arrive before the people do: a dozen of them drifting home along the field bunds behind a child with a stick. For millions of households that flock is the entire livestock enterprise. Goats need no land, no shed worth the name and very little cash. They eat what the cow leaves behind, can be sold in an afternoon when school fees fall due, and are very often owned and managed by the women of the house. That mix of low entry cost and quick liquidity earned the goat its familiar title: the poor man's cow.

The phrase is affectionate and accurate about the past, but it is becoming a trap. It quietly suggests that goat rearing is what a family does while waiting for something better, and that modest output is the nature of the animal. It is not. Within the same district, with the same breeds and the same monsoon, some flocks wean far heavier kids and lose far fewer of them than their neighbours do. The problem is not the goat; the problem is the production system.

WHY GOATS MATTER TO INDIA

The numbers justify the attention. The 20th Livestock Census recorded 148.88 million goats, close to 28 per cent of the country's livestock (DAHD, 2019). India produced 10.50 million tonnes of meat in 2024–25, and chevon is the third largest contributor after poultry and buffalo (DAHD, 2025). Behind those figures are small and marginal farmers, landless labourers and pastoralist families for whom goats are a savings account that walks.

Goats also fit the Indian farm rather than compete with it. They browse bunds, wastelands and hedgerows that no crop uses, convert tree leaves and coarse crop residues into meat, milk and manure, and, with a short generation interval and frequent twinning, let a flock rebuild quickly after a drought or a distress sale.

THE PRODUCTIVITY GAP

Yet field performance rarely matches what the same animals achieve on well-run institutional and progressive private farms: growth is slower, does kid later, litters are smaller and too many kids never reach the market. That is a management gap, not a genetic one, and that is encouraging, because management is what a farmer can change this season. Blaming the breed is the costliest mistake in goat farming: an expensive buck will not outrun an empty feed trough or a wet floor.

WHERE THE LOSSES ACTUALLY HAPPEN

Feed is the first and largest leak. Most village flocks depend almost entirely on grazing, which works after the monsoon and fails badly in late summer and late winter. Does lose condition exactly when they are pregnant or in early lactation, and the cost surfaces later as light birth weights, poor milk and weak kids. The corrections are not exotic: a few rows of hybrid napier or a fodder tree on the boundary, stored and chopped crop residues, a little concentrate in late pregnancy and early lactation, an area-specific mineral mixture and clean water within reach. Protein and mineral deficiencies are silent; they appear as repeat breeding and dead kids, not as sick animals.

Kid mortality deserves separate attention, because that is where money quietly disappears. A study across three agro-climatic regions of West Bengal recorded pre-weaning mortality of 12.32 per cent under family-based rearing, concentrated in early life (Roy *et al*., 2022). Most deaths trace back to ordinary failures such as colostrum not taken in the first few hours, a cold damp corner instead of dry bedding, a doe too thin to milk and unhygienic kidding surroundings, followed by diarrhoea and pneumonia. For a farmer with ten does, saving three or four extra kids a year is cheaper and quicker than buying two more does. It calls for attention, not investment.

Disease and parasites take the next share. Peste des petits ruminants can empty a flock in weeks, enterotoxaemia kills the best-grown kids first, pneumonia follows poor ventilation, and worms and coccidia work invisibly, converting feed into parasite instead of meat. Calendar vaccination, quarantine for every purchased or returning animal, dry clean floors and deworming guided by veterinary advice prevent far more loss than treatment afterwards.

Breeding is the constraint farmers notice last. In most villages the buck used is the buck available, not the buck selected, and the fastest-growing males are the first sold for meat, which is selection in reverse. Add uncontrolled mating and does kept long past their useful life, and genetic progress stops. Using a recorded, well-grown buck, replacing him before his daughters enter the flock, keeping replacements from does that raise twins successfully and culling poor performers costs almost nothing.

Housing and climate close the list. A shed need not be expensive; it needs a dry, well-drained floor, an open side for air movement, enough space per animal and a separate corner for kids and sick animals. Heat matters more each year: goats tolerate tropical conditions better than most farm species, but prolonged heat still lowers feed intake, growth, milk yield, immune response and conception (Sejian *et al*., 2021). Shade, ventilation, cool water at all times, grazing shifted to early morning and late evening, sensible stocking density and locally adapted genotypes are the practical answers. Goats are heat-tolerant; they are not heat-proof.

Finally, records and markets. Few smallholders write down birth dates, weights, kiddings, deaths, vaccinations or sale prices, and without them nobody can say which doe is worth keeping or whether the flock made money last year. At sale the same blindness costs again: animals are judged by eye and sold through a middleman when everyone else is also selling. Weighing before sale, group marketing through cooperatives and producer organisations, spreading sales across the year and, where demand and food-safety infrastructure exist, moving into hygienic dressed meat, manure or breeding-stock sales change the price received without changing the animal.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

There is no single fix. Genetics, nutrition, health, reproduction, housing, climate management, records and market access behave like links in one chain, and strengthening a single link while ignoring the rest gives disappointing returns. An improved buck cannot rescue underfed does, and heavy healthy animals still fetch a poor price when sold by guesswork. For most farms the sensible sequence is to fix the cheap things first, namely colostrum, dry floors, vaccination, drinking water and a notebook, and then invest in breeding and marketing.

FROM GOAT KEEPING TO PRECISION GOAT FARMING

Technology is reaching this sector too. Mobile applications let a farmer carry the flock register in his pocket; ear tags and electronic identification make animals traceable; weighing bands and image-based weight estimation give a fair figure at sale time; and low-cost sensors are being tested to flag heat stress or an animal that has stopped ruminating. Genomic selection, reproductive technologies and digital disease surveillance are already in use in institutional programmes, and mobile advisory services can put a warning in a farmer's hand within a day. None of this replaces husbandry, since a sensor cannot substitute for colostrum, but for a farmer with the basics right these tools turn scattered observation into evidence, and evidence is what separates an enterprise from a habit.

CONCLUSION

The goat earned the name "poor man's cow" honestly: it asked for little and gave much when little else could. The name is worth keeping if we read it differently, not as the animal of poverty but as the animal that makes a small holding viable. With better feeding in the lean months, fewer kids lost in the first

fortnight, timely vaccination, a selected buck, a dry floor, shade and water in a warming climate, honest records and a fairer sale, the same flock can support higher rural income, better household nutrition, steady employment and a climate-resilient livestock system. The goat has already done its part; the rest depends on the system we build around it.

Table 1. Major constraints in Indian goat production and practical solutions

Major constraint	Effect on production	Practical solution
Low overall productivity	Slow growth, late first kidding, poor body condition	Fix feeding, health cover and selection before changing the breed
Seasonal feed and fodder shortage	Weight loss in summer and late winter; poor conception	Fodder cultivation, fodder trees, stored crop residues, lean-season reserves
Protein and mineral deficiency	Low milk, weak kids, poor immunity, repeat breeding	Concentrate in late pregnancy and early lactation; mineral mixture; clean water
High kid mortality	Largest single economic loss on most farms	Colostrum early, dry bedding, hygiene at kidding, prompt veterinary help
Infectious diseases (PPR, enterotoxaemia, pneumonia)	Sudden deaths, flock-level losses, treatment cost	Calendar vaccination, quarantine of purchases, biosecurity, diagnosis
Parasites and coccidiosis	Anaemia, poor growth, feed wasted on parasites	Deworming on veterinary advice, grazing rotation, dry clean floors
Unplanned breeding, poor buck selection	Inbreeding, small litters, no genetic progress	Recorded buck, timely replacement, selected replacement does, culling
Inadequate housing	Pneumonia, foot problems, higher kid losses	Dry floor, open sides, adequate space, separate kid and sick pens
Heat stress and climate variability	Lower feed intake, slower growth, poor conception	Shade, ventilation, cool water, early and late grazing, adapted genotypes
No records, weak markets, little value addition	Best animals unidentified; sale by guesswork	Simple register or mobile app, weighing before sale, group marketing via FPOs

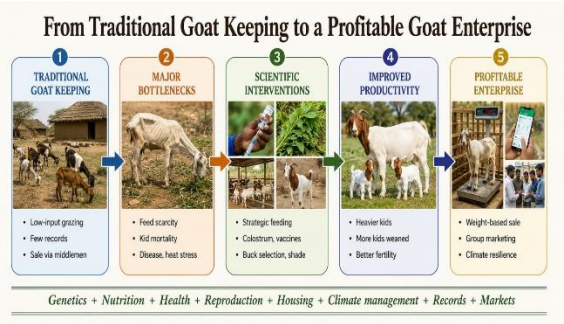

Fig. 1. From traditional goat keeping to a profitable, climate-resilient goat enterprise: the bottlenecks that limit village flocks and the interventions that overcome them.

REFERENCES

DAHD, 2019. 20th Livestock Census–2019: All India Report. Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Government of India, New Delhi.

DAHD, 2025. Basic Animal Husbandry Statistics 2025. Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Ministry of

Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, Government of India, New Delhi.

Roy, R., Tiwari, R., Dutt, T., Pal, P.K. and Majumder, D., 2022. Pre-weaning kid mortality under family-based farming system: patterns and economic losses in different agro-climatic regions of West Bengal, India. Indian Journal of Animal Sciences 92(3).

Sejian, V., Silpa, M.V., Reshma Nair, M.R., Devaraj, C., Krishnan, G., Bagath, M., Chauhan, S.S., Suganthi, R.U., Fonseca, V.F.C., König, S., Gaughan, J.B., Dunshea, F.R. and Bhatta, R., 2021. Heat stress and goat welfare: adaptation and production considerations. Animals 11(4): 1021.