

by **Bhuwan Bhaskar** (From Agra)

POTATO FARMERS LEFT HIGH & DRY IN ABSENCE OF PRICE BENCHMARK

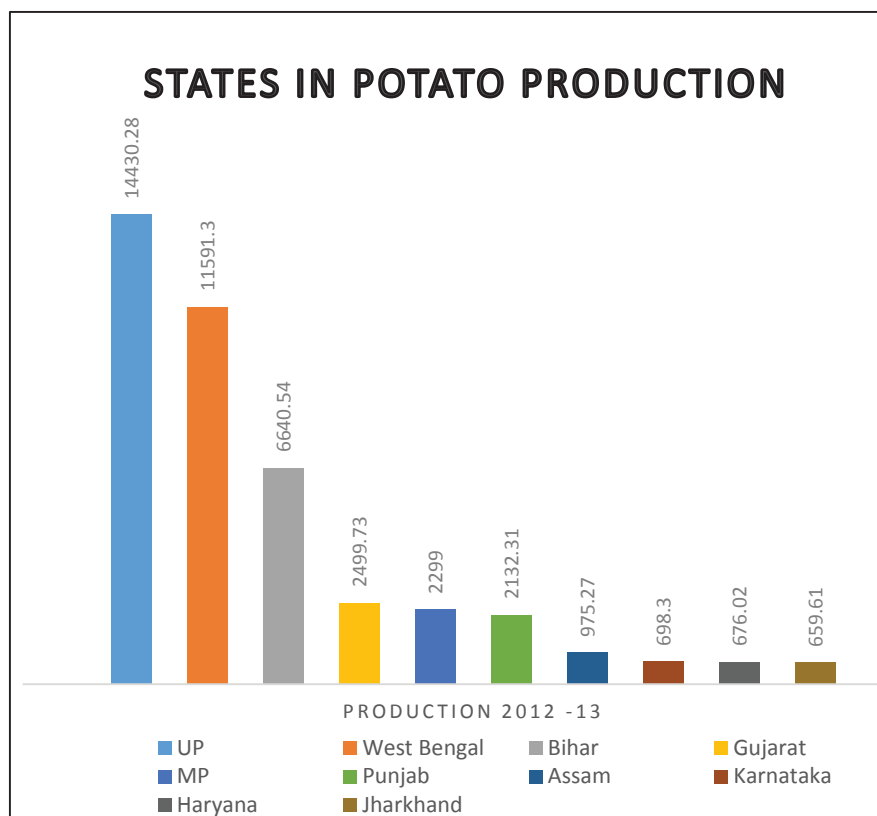


Potato is often crowned as the king of vegetables but the Gods of “the vegetable king” are an anxious lot these days. Credited with the production of around one third of national crop, the farmers across Khandauli, Shadabad, Hathras, Mursand, Iglas, Sirsaganj, Samsabad, Raya in Mathura and Fatehabad in UP are normally busy in this part of the year digging out their sole crop of livelihood. But this year they are stranded in a dilemma. They don’t know how to respond to the buy proposals from the potato traders from all across the country as they have no idea about how the potato prices are going to unroll in coming months.

The situation was completely different in past years. Farmers had to just make a call to any trader in Agra to know the future price of potato for next 3 to 4 months as there were future contracts running in potato for four months of the season. But last year in the run up to general elections, the central government decided to

ban the contract to shrug off the rising political pressure over inflation in primary articles. “This is sheer nonsense to suggest that future contract in potato was responsible for the price rise. You tell me, did the prices come down after the ban?” asked Rustam Singh, a farmer from Gadi Khanda in Agra district who is an owner of

25 acre land. Now the digging of potato has been started in some areas that will go on till April. But the farmers are confused. “Earlier, when there was a future contract in potato, we used to make our sell decisions on the basis of those prices. We would be having an idea of how the prices might turn in future and so we were



Source: National Horticulture Board of India (NHB)

Potato Farmers



Lal Bahadur
Pantkhera



Rustam Singh
Mathura



Satayaveer Singh
Nala Nagaria village



Bhooora Sharma
Gurra Village, Agra



Manoj Dixit
Shadabad



Ranvir Foje Sorai
Khandole



Rajpal Singh Kanjole
Hatharash

in a better position to bargain with traders. But now, we are totally dependent on whatever prices they dictate to us. This is killing small farmers”, said Bhooora Sharma from Gurra village in Hathras district who cultivates around 5 acre of land.

The whole region has a vast network of cold storage facilities. Farmers claim there are more than 500 cold storage in the area with capacities between 1.5 lac to 10 lac bags, each bag containing 50 kg of potato. But till now most of the capacity is lying idle as farmers are hesitant to store in the absence of any price visibility. “Farmers had good times in last three years due to the running

future contracts in potato. But this year we are clueless about our crop”, said Manoj Dixit, a farmer from Shadabad. Another farmer Rajpal Singh from village Kanjole in Hathras echoes same emotions while claiming that it was the low production due to bad weather and demand-supply mismatch which was to be blamed for price rise in potato last year, and not the future contract.

Satyaveer Singh from Nagaria Nala village in Hathras was more straight forward, when he said, “Vayada saude se hi kisan bachega, nahi to marega (only the future contract can save the farmer, otherwise he will die).” Farmers claim that in recent years the water level has

gone down considerably in the region and the water has gradually become salty. They can’t sow any other crop due to this change and so their thousands of acres of land can’t be used for around 6 months. In such a situation, potato is the only bread winner for their family. Be him Shri Krishna from Ganjauli village or Lal Bahadur from Pant Khera village, both in Agra districts or Ranvir Foje Sorai Khandole from Agra, all have pinned their hopes on revival of some mechanism to gauge the price pattern of potato so that they could make an informed decision in the best of their interest ■