

[Bharat's Blossoming Business](#)

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AGRICULTURE

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How is it that you can travel far and wide in India and never see a field of flowers? Where do all those billions of blossoms come from that adorn every temple and home shrine--not to mention the massive decorations at weddings and festivals? The answer is simple: the flowers are picked the morning they bloom. Hence you don't see fields of blooming flowers, except in Bollywood films-- "Duh, " as the kids say. But that reality check didn't stop us from sending our intrepid reporter, Rajiv Malik, to the farms and flower markets of India for the full story of what turns out to be one of India's promising industries.

Rajiv Malik, Delhi, India

India's history as a great spiritual power is known to all, as is her emergent status as a great economic power. But few know that India could soon become a superpower in the field of flower production as well. Industry experts estimate the annual flower trade here at quarter billion dollars US, but India presently claims only a fraction of a percent of the 11-billion-dollar global export market. The federal and state governments, business people and ordinary farmers are fast becoming aware of the opportunity. From 1993 to 2002 the area under flower cultivation in India nearly doubled, from 131,000 acres to 254,000.

China is also cashing in on flowers, more than quadrupling her flower acreage to 1.7 million during the same time frame and achieving a total flower trade of us\$5.4 billion in 2004. Chinese farmers earn twice the per-acre income from flowers as from vegetables.

Flowers are a business of beauty and fragrance. Each bloom is relished for its power to please. But this is a tough business: flowers are highly perishable, and those left unsold by day's end are often worthless. Furthermore, the market is also subject to wide variations according to the festival and wedding seasons. The absolute peak time of year--despite the vocal opposition of some to this imported holiday--is Valentine's Day, when an \$0.11 rose sells for \$0.55.

I set out early one morning with photographer Phal S. Girota to meet with Gopi Chand, who manages a rose farm along the Yamuna River on the outskirts of Delhi. The farm was peaceful this August morning. An old man plucked roses, carefully and with total concentration. Other men piled the picked blossoms onto pieces of brown burlap about five feet square. When folded up and tied at the corners, such a bundle is called a gathri in Hindi; along with wicker baskets, these are the containers of choice for the wholesale market. We watched a young man speed by on a motorcycle, carrying a gathri of roses for the local market.

Gopi Chand outlined for us the basics of the trade: "We are mainly growing desi gulab (*Rosa damascena*), a local variety of rose. Very fragrant and reasonably priced, it is popular with devotees as offerings to the Gods and Goddesses in the temples." Chand told us he sells his desi gulab roses at the Fateh Puri flower market in Old Delhi. Phal and I bid adieu to Chand and head for the market, our heads reeling from the intense perfume of the roses.

Fateh Puri is famous for its wholesale rates, especially for marigolds and roses, India's two most popular flowers. When we arrive at 7:00 am, hundreds of farmers are positioned all over the area's broad pavement area, seated beside their opened gathris. Our eyes feast upon a huge variety of flowers. Alongside the roses and marigolds are lovely lotuses, lilies, rajnigandhas (*Polianthes tuberosa*, like a lily but powerfully fragrant) and chamelis (*Jasminum grandiflorum*). Shouted prices mingle in the air with the heady fragrance of the flowers as each vendor strives to attract buyers. The flower market functions at a hectic pace from 4:00 am to 9:00 am and then the flower vendors pack up and leave, yielding the space to food wholesalers.

Samanyu Das, a dealer from Kolkata, points out some significant commercial advantages of marigolds over other flowers: they grow all year round and stay fresh for a full week after picking. We are shown the West Bengal variety, which have a different look and finer finish than others here from North India. According to Khagesh Yadav, a wholesaler who trucks these from Kolkata, "Nowhere but in West

Bengal can a marigold of this type be grown." Marigolds sell for \$0.68 to \$0.91 per kilo, going up to \$2.27 during festivals and in the wedding season. Roses bring about twice as much.

Shri Shyam Singh Saini, one of the market's leading commission agents, informs us that originally the Saini caste controlled the flower trade. Now everyone is in the business. Flowers are sold in three ways: 1) directly from farmer to consumer, 2) via a reseller who buys from the farmer and sells again in the same market or 3) through a licensed commission agent such as Saini. All three types of transactions occur simultaneously. A commission agent receives eight percent of the sale and can be held accountable for the overall transaction, whereas a customer who buys flowers directly from a farmer or reseller will have no recourse if the results are unsatisfactory

Saini estimates the market's daily sales to be about 5,000 kilos. "A large number of farmers from neighboring states come here to sell their goods. This market employs thousands of people." The flowers' perishability puts pressure on both growers and agents, and the prices drop hourly as the morning progresses. "There is a saying, " Saini ruefully relates to us, "that when a dead body comes to the cremation ground, it has to be cremated and not taken back. Similarly, once the flowers come here, they have to be sold at whatever price prevails in the market at that particular time. All the flowers you see here were picked yesterday morning and, even with ice storage, will be fresh for only one more day. When there is no demand, they are dumped in the garbage bin at the end of the day."

Adjacent to the open-air Fateh Puri market, independent commission agents are doing a brisk business from their own properties. They charge ten percent--two percent more than the agents attached to the market--but also offer more services to the farmer. For example, they can receive shipments 24 hours a day, which is a great advantage to farmers.

After our visit to the Fateh Puri market, Phal and I made our way to Delhi's Connaught Place flower market, located just opposite the ancient Hanuman Temple in the heart of the city. While Fateh Puri deals mainly in loose flowers, the Connaught Place market sells fancy and decorative cut flowers of all types. As we draw near, the fragrance of roses, chrysanthemums and lilies overwhelms us. Gladioluses, orchids and choice imports abound. This is probably India's biggest wholesale flower market, with some 600 traders. Most of the buyers come from

within a 400-kilometer radius around Delhi. As at Fateh Puri, the working hours are from 4:00 am to 9:00 am.

Our first contact here is Shri Brij Mohan Khanagwal, a founding member of Connaught Place market who started out decades ago selling flowers from his bicycle. Khanagwal is a seasoned veteran of this business, having witnessed at first hand the growth of the industry over the years. He reveals, "The trade has touched the sky since this market was started in 1995, with everyone from the farmer up getting better value." Delhi's September 2006 Flower Expo, opened by the President of India, gave a big boost to the trade, Mohan tells us. Although fewer than ten percent of India's farmers currently grow flowers commercially, more and more are waking up to the potential of this business. India has a natural advantage in the flower trade, he says: "Every few hundred kilometers there is a climatic change in our country. Therefore, all round the year we can grow any flower in one part or the other of the country. If a flower needs a cold climate to grow, then we grow it in Himanchal Pradesh and Kashmir. If a flower needs hot climate, we grow it in arid places like Rajasthan."

The Mumbai markets

In August I explored two of Mumbai's most popular markets: Meena Tai Thackrey Flower Market in Dadar and the huge retail market in Matunga. The Thackrey market contains hundreds of flower shops, with bargain prices compared to the retail market. For instance, a decorative rose that retails for \$0.18 to \$0.23 is available here for \$0.45 per dozen--less than \$0.04 per flower. In addition to the crowds of merchants picking up goods for their retail outlets for resale purposes, many women come here to take advantage of the wonderful prices.

At the busy Matunga Market I count sixty to seventy small retail shops, mostly makeshift structures along a wide, long road. There is a mind-boggling variety of cut flowers, bouquets and garlands of all hues. But this is not just a flower market. Taking a cue from the formidable banyan tree, these merchants have put down roots into new, fertile soil: most of the florists here have branched out most naturally into lucrative, value-added side businesses, offering flower arrangements and decoration services. Several vendors display photograph albums showing how marvelously they have decorated autos, chairs, stages, archways, temple Deities, and more. This bustling market now provides employment to thousands of skilled and unskilled people of all ages not only agricultural and sales work but freelance

designing opportunities as well.

Here too, traders lament the perishable nature of flowers and the wide fluctuations in prices, though their sayings are not as morbid as Saina's. Here they say, "In the morning a flower is a flower, but by evening it is just a particle of dust, " and "If you do not sell a flower in the morning, then the flower will sell you in the evening " (i.e., you will lose money because of the unsold flower).

Back to the fields

After leaving Mumbai, I visited some intriguing small-scale operations. Ulhas D. Ghewade and his family, for example, grow 12,000 carnations a year on a tiny but prolific 1/8-acre plot in Ambegaon. Depending on the season, he receives four to eighteen cents per flower, earning an annual income of about \$6,800--decent money for a small nursery. And on a one-acre farm in the Vasai area, Vikas Patil and his family make \$7,000 a year, working from 3:00 am to 10:00 pm growing three main flowers: roses, sevanti (chrysanthemum) and sonataka (Hedychium coronarium, the white ginger flower). Patil has made sound decisions and is content with his life and business. "We are able to make ends meet. The business is all cash. There is no credit involved. We are much better off than the farmers of some Indian states who are committing suicide because their crops are not good and they are under huge debts."

Throughout my journey of blossoms I was told time and again about the immense growth potential for this industry in India. This is a labor-intensive industry, providing employment for up to 16 workers per acre. In India, most of these workers are women.

It's a proven fact that switching to flower production from vegetable crops can increase a farmer's income. But there are definite health risks in this industry. For the 100,000 flower workers in Columbia, South America which recently became the world's second largest flower exporter pesticide exposure has become a major issue. As a result of their action, there has developed in the United States a market for organic flowers grown without chemicals.

Flowers as a raw agricultural product are profitable but highly perishable. Value-added industries can increase the profit margin, as has designing in the Matunga Market. There is also much room for growth on the national level. Distribution methods could be improved, and exports to the profitable European market could be increased. If all goes well, India's future will soon be coming up roses.