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ANIMAL WELFARE IN THE AGE OF BIOTECHNOLOGY: A NEW PARADIGM

Amrita Pramanik

Email
amritapramanik2020@gmail.com

Animal Biotechnology Division, ICAR-National Dairy Research Institute. Karmal, Haryana, 132001, India

Agriculture plays a crucial role in the economy and national security of countries worldwide. It is essential for providing necessary food supplies to the population, with animals being integral to the production of these final products. The demand for livestock products is projected to increase by approximately 70% over the next 30 years to meet the needs of a growing population, particularly in developing nations. Livestock serves as a vital source of protein, draught, and livelihoods, significantly contributing to the Indian economy. According to the 20th Livestock Census of India (2019), the populations of key livestock species are as follows: cattle (192.49 million), buffalo (109.85 million), sheep (74.26 million), goats (148.88 million), and pigs (9.06 million). In the fiscal year 2017-18, the Indian livestock sector contributed about 4.1% to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Globally, meat production has increased by 68% in Asia, 64% in Africa, and 40% in South America since 2000. Thus it's clear that animals are a vital component of national development, influencing economies in both developing and developed countries.

Apart from these factors, the often-overlooked aspect is the development and advancement of biotechnology and its applications in enhancing animal product production. Currently, research funding in agriculture is increasingly focused on biotechnology, molecular techniques, and cell biology. Biotechnology has significantly improved the animal sector, enabling it to achieve greater productivity and reach its current level of success. The integration of biotechnology into animal agriculture has sparked a profound shift in how we approach animal welfare. Traditionally, farming practices have often prioritized productivity and efficiency, sometimes at the expense of animal well-being. The integration of biotechnology into animal agriculture presents a transformative opportunity for enhancing animal welfare, yet it also raises ethical and practical challenges. However, advancements in genetic engineering and related technologies are ushering in a new paradigm that emphasizes not only the health and productivity of livestock but also their welfare. This article explores

the implications of biotechnology for animal welfare, ethical considerations, and the future of sustainable farming.

Animal Welfare

Animal welfare encompasses diverse perspectives, focusing on aspects such as the health and functioning of animals free from disease and injury, as well as their ability to express natural behaviours in appropriate environments. The ongoing debate surrounding animal welfare reflects contrasting views, with some advocating for high-health confinement systems while critics highlight the negative impacts of confinement on animal development. Notable works like Ruth Harrison's *Animal Machines* and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* have raised awareness about the moral implications of animal confinement and the emotional experiences of animals. As discussions evolve, the need for clear welfare standards becomes evident, with experts advocating for reliable indicators based on behaviour, physiology, and health. Emphasizing the role of biotechnology in improving animal welfare is crucial for fostering ethical practices and ensuring the well-being of animals in research and production. Incorporating strong ethical considerations into biotechnological advancements can help reduce potential harm and foster sustainable improvements in animal welfare standards. The five domains of animal welfare emphasize the fundamental aspects of physical and functional well-being, including nutrition, health, environment, mental state, and behaviour. Additionally, these domains encompass essential requirements for good animal welfare, such as disease prevention, appropriate treatment, shelter management, nutrition, humane handling, and humane slaughter.

The Role of Biotechnology in Enhancing Animal Welfare

Animal biotechnology is a specialized field within biotechnology that applies molecular biology techniques to create genetically modified or engineered animals. This advancement enhances their suitability for various applications, including agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and industry. Such innovations facilitate the synthesis of therapeutic proteins and improve growth rates and disease resistance. In developing countries, livestock plays a crucial role in economic development, making the enhancement of their production through biotechnology essential for sustainable agriculture. This raises an important question: Why is it necessary to engineer animals while preserving their natural characteristics? Animals represent a significant source of biodiversity, with many species and breeds

exhibiting superior genes and traits. Table 1 below highlights some of the key breeds and species, particularly in countries like India.

Table 1: Notable animal breeds and their qualities

Animal	Qualities
Buffalo	Rich in fat content with high-quality milk protein
Yak, Mithun	Highly adaptable to extreme high-altitude conditions
Specific Goat Breeds	Renowned for producing Pashmina wool and tools
Garole Sheep	Genetic traits that promote twinning in offspring
Black Bengal Goat	Notable for high prolificacy in breeding
Andaman Goats	Remarkably tolerant to salt, thriving in coastal areas
Sheep, Goat, and Camel	Adapted to tropical arid climates with high lignin tolerance
Diverse Animal Species	Resilient against stress and diseases

The most desirable animals are chosen to benefit from advanced animal production management systems, which include techniques such as artificial insemination, embryo transfer, and other assisted reproductive technologies aimed at enhancing the genetic quality of specific breeds or species. This approach seeks to achieve substantial economic returns. Moreover, these technologies have applications in the therapeutic domain as well; the development of various diagnostic kits and the production of vaccines are crucial for preventing diseases that affect both animals and humans on local and global scales.

However, socioeconomic factors must always be considered. It has been noted that the contributions of developing countries to livestock production far exceed mere output when compared to developed nations. Consequently, the advantages of improved biotechnological applications are anticipated to be more pronounced in these regions, where significant progress has been made recently. Some contributing factors include lower input costs in production systems, high-stress tolerance, specific disease-resistant animal breeds, substantial biodiversity, and integrated production systems.

Biotechnology offers innovative solutions to longstanding challenges in animal agriculture. Genetic engineering techniques allow for precise modifications to an animal's genome, enabling breeders to select for traits that enhance welfare. Genetic modifications can enhance disease resistance, reduce the need for antibiotics, and improve overall health. For example, researchers have successfully developed pigs that are resistant to African swine fever using CRISPR technology. By reducing disease incidence, these innovations lead to healthier animals that experience less suffering throughout their lives(Ormandy et al., 2011).

Moreover, biotechnology can help alleviate common welfare issues associated with traditional farming practices. For instance, genetic modifications can eliminate the need for painful procedures such as tail docking or dehorning in cattle. By creating animals that naturally possess desirable traits (e.g., polled cattle), farmers can reduce the stress and pain associated with these practices (Mishu et al., 2024). This shift towards more humane treatment aligns with the growing public demand for ethical farming practices.

Advancements in Monitoring Animal Welfare

In addition to genetic modifications, advancements in technology are revolutionizing how farmers monitor and manage animal welfare. Wearable devices and environmental sensors can track various health indicators such as heart rate, body temperature, and movement patterns. This real-time data allows farmers to detect signs of distress or illness early on, enabling timely interventions that can prevent suffering. AI algorithms can analyse vast amounts of data collected from these sensors, identifying patterns that may indicate welfare issues before they become apparent to human observers. For example, changes in feeding behaviour or movement can signal health problems or discomfort. By integrating these technologies into daily farming practices, producers can create environments that better meet the needs of their animals. For example, automated monitoring systems can alert farmers to changes in an animal's behaviour or health status, allowing for immediate action when issues arise. Such proactive measures not only enhance animal welfare but also improve overall farm productivity by minimizing losses due to illness or injury.

Ethical Considerations and Public Perception

Despite the potential benefits of biotechnology for animal welfare, ethical considerations remain paramount. The introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agriculture has sparked debates about safety, environmental impacts, and moral implications. Public perception plays a crucial role in shaping policies and practices within the industry. To navigate these challenges, transparency and education are essential. Engaging consumers about the science behind biotechnology and its benefits for animal welfare can help build trust. Demonstrating how these technologies contribute to healthier animals and more sustainable farming practices may alleviate concerns among consumers who prioritize ethical treatment of animals. The ethical implications extend beyond individual animal welfare to broader societal values regarding the use of biotechnology in agriculture.

Questions arise about what constitutes acceptable practices in genetic engineering and how far we should go in altering an animal's genetic makeup.

Balancing Innovation with Ethical Responsibility

As we embrace this new paradigm of animal agriculture, it is imperative to balance innovation with ethical responsibility. The goal should not only be to enhance productivity but also to ensure that animals lead fulfilling lives free from unnecessary suffering. This requires ongoing dialogue among scientists, farmers, ethicists, and consumers. Regulatory frameworks must evolve alongside technological advancements to ensure that animal welfare remains a priority. Policymakers should consider establishing guidelines for the ethical use of biotechnology in agriculture that prioritize animal health and well-being while allowing for innovation. The 3Rs (Replacement, Reduction, Refinement) are increasingly recognized by Indian scientists as essential principles for conducting ethical research, testing, and teaching involving animals. These principles should be integrated into all scientific and educational activities involving animal subjects. Recently, Dr. Ron Bank introduced a 4th R, Responsibility, which emphasizes post-experimental care, management, and rehabilitation of animals, highlighting its vital role in defining true animal welfare. This principle aligns with Rule 9 (cc) of the Breeding of and Experiments on Animals (Control and Supervision) Act of 1998, reinforcing the need for ethical treatment of research animals. Additionally, the 3Rs should guide research involving genetically engineered animals to minimize pain and distress, ensuring animal welfare remains a priority in scientific practices.

Conclusion

The age of biotechnology presents unprecedented opportunities for improving animal welfare in agriculture. Biotechnology has greatly benefited from advancements in transgenics, the characterization of genetic variability, and assisted reproductive technologies such as artificial insemination, embryo transfer, and in vitro embryo production. Additionally, it encompasses vaccine development, diagnostic and epidemiological methods, as well as innovations in animal nutrition, including probiotics, single-cell proteins, and enzymes. Through genetic engineering and advanced monitoring technologies, farmers can create healthier environments for livestock while enhancing productivity sustainably. However, as we embrace these innovations, it is crucial to maintain a commitment to ethical practices that prioritize the well-being of animals.

By fostering open discussions about biotechnology's role in animal welfare and addressing public concerns transparently, we can pave the way for a future where technological advancements align with humane treatment of livestock. In this new paradigm, both farmers and animals can thrive together. This article highlights how biotechnology is reshaping our approach to animal welfare in agriculture while acknowledging the importance of ethical considerations and public perception in this evolving landscape. The integration of technology into farming practices not only enhances productivity but also aligns with societal values regarding humane treatment of animals.

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