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Agricultural Extension in South Asia

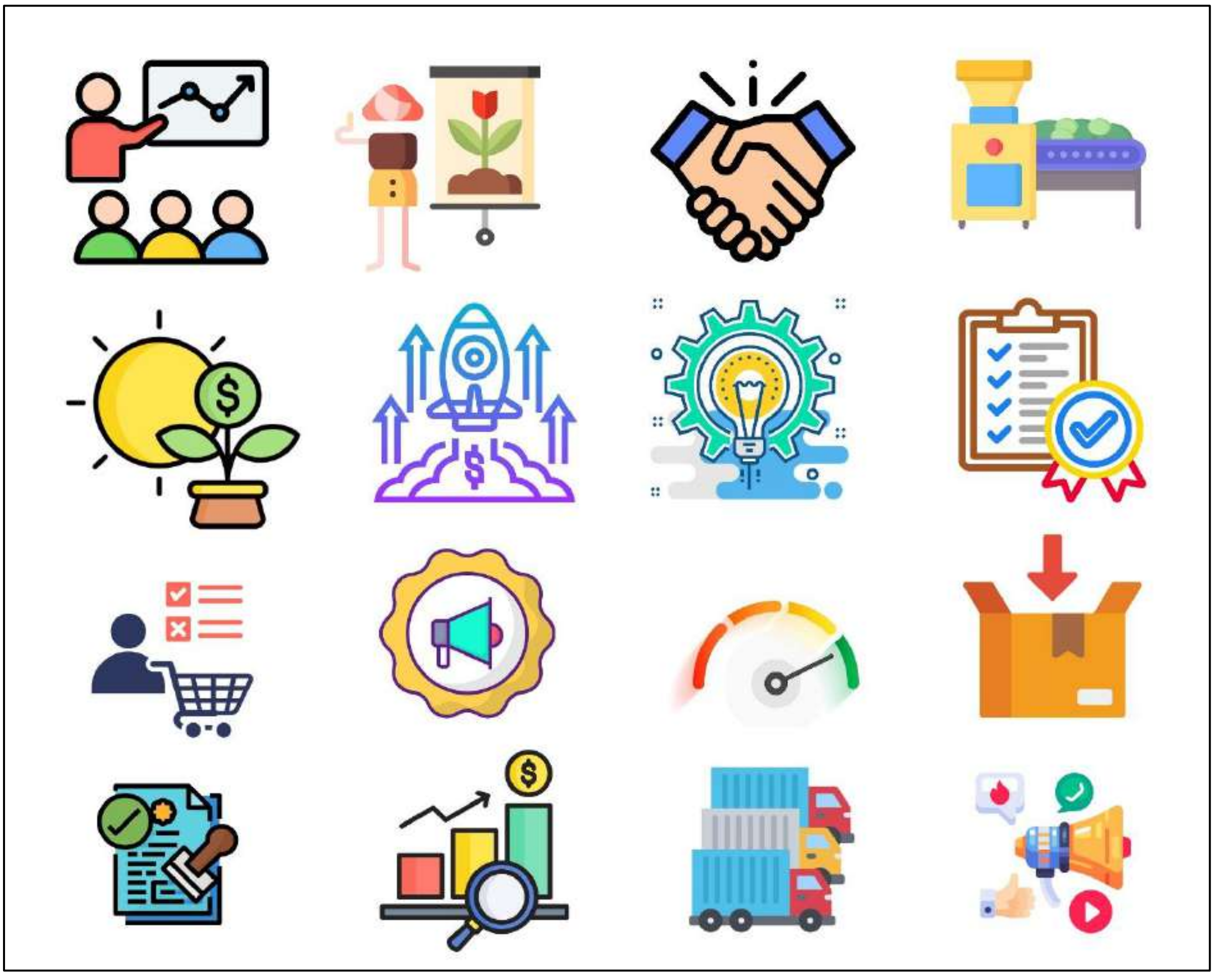
BEYOND TRADITION: WHY EXTENSION MUST HELP FARMERS BREAK THE COMMODITY TRAP

Many small food producers remain trapped in traditional product lines and need support from Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) to break free from the commodity trap. This, as Vithu Prabha argues in this blog, calls for broadening the EAS mandate to include entrepreneurship, diversification, and financial literacy.

CONTEXT

Walk through any village in Kerala or Tamil Nadu, and you will notice a pattern that goes back generations. Certain families are known for specific products, almost as if it is part of their DNA. One household is famous for its crispy pappadams, another for murukku twisted by hand with a grandmother's precision, and fishing communities that have relied solely on dried or smoked fish as their livelihood for centuries.

For these communities, food is more than just a livelihood — it is heritage, pride, and identity. "We are a pappadam family," one artisan in Palakkad once told me. "This recipe was passed down from my grandmother. We cannot change it."



While there is beauty in that continuity, there is also a hidden challenge. Many such micro-entrepreneurs are caught in what we can call the “commodity trap” — the cycle of producing the same traditional product in the same way for the same limited market. It is safe and familiar, but it often limits income, innovation, and resilience in today’s rapidly changing food economy.

WHY TRADITION SOMETIMES BECOMES A BARRIER

South Asia’s small food producers face intense market pressures, as consumers shift toward new tastes, packaged convenience, and healthier alternatives. Yet traditional producers often remain locked into their inherited products.

Why? Several reasons emerge:

- *Cultural identity:* The product is not just food, but a symbol of family pride. Changing it feels like breaking tradition.
- *Risk aversion:* Trying a new product means buying new ingredients, packaging, and facing the possibility of rejection. For a household that survives on thin margins, that risk feels unbearable.
- *Financial barriers:* Many lack working capital. Even if they have ideas for flavoured pappadams or millet-based murukku, banks ask for CIBIL scores, collateral, or guarantors. For reserved category entrepreneurs, this bias is even sharper.
- *Knowledge gaps:* Extension and advisory services often stop at the farm gate. Training focuses on crop production, not on recipe innovation, food safety, or branding.
- *Market access:* Without connections to modern retail chains, e-commerce platforms, or cooperative networks, even innovative products struggle to reach consumers.

Thus, what appears to outsiders as “reluctance” is actually a rational form of risk management. Families stick to what they know because stepping outside the traditional product could risk everything they have.

THE DANGER OF THE COMMODITY TRAP

The problem is that markets do not stand still. Demand for plain rice-based pappadams may plateau, while supermarkets push for flavoured, healthier, or fortified variants. Younger consumers may prefer baked snacks over deep-fried ones. If producers fail to adapt, they risk losing out to larger, more agile competitors — sometimes even companies that imitate and mass-produce “traditional” recipes with better branding.

The commodity trap also stifles intergenerational progress. Younger members of artisan families often see little future in the same old business, leading to out-migration or exit from food processing altogether. The heritage skill risks extinction if it cannot evolve.

WHAT I LEARNT THROUGH TRAINING AND RESEARCH

Much of what I write here comes not just from observation, but from experience. At the Kelappaji College of Agricultural Engineering & Food Technology (KCAEFT) campus in Kerala, where we regularly conduct entrepreneurship development programmes, I have seen first-hand how deeply families identify with their traditional products — and how hesitant they can be to step beyond them. Many sessions end with participants saying, “This is what our family has always done; it is difficult to think of anything else.”

Over the years, ICAR’s All India Coordinated Research Project (AICRP) on Post-Harvest Engineering and Technology at KCAEFT, Tavanur, has also tried to create awareness in this direction. Demonstrations with small food processing machinery have shown that innovation need not mean abandoning tradition; even modest equipment can enable a traditional pappadam maker or a murukku artisan to diversify into newer, safer, and more market-friendly products. Yet, awareness alone is not enough. Without structured extension support and financial facilitation, many of these innovations remain demonstrations, never fully adopted at the grassroots level.

WHAT EXTENSION CAN DO DIFFERENTLY?

This is where extension and advisory systems (EAS) must rethink their role. Instead of only transferring farm technologies, EAS must act as a catalyst for diversification and entrepreneurship. Farmers and food artisans need hand-holding to explore new products, test them safely, and access markets without being crushed by financial risk.

A reimagined extension approach could include:

1. *Innovation hand-holding*
   Organise short “product diversification clinics” at Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and community centres. Here, traditional producers can test new recipe variants in a low-risk setting, with guidance on safety, shelf life, and consumer preferences.

2. *Micro-grants for trials*
   Provide small seed grants — as little as ₹10,000–₹25,000 — to allow families to test new packaging, try a flavoured batch, or introduce a millet-based alternative. Unlike loans, these micro-grants reduce fear of debt. Such micro-grants need not come directly from extension budgets, but extension systems can play a catalytic role in helping producers access them. Programmes like the District Innovation Fund, the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), or the PM-FME Scheme already have small innovation or seed-funding components that can be channelled for trial-level experiments. Extension officers can guide farmer groups, SHGs, or micro-entrepreneurs in mobilising and applying for these funds, ensuring that financial inclusion complements technical training. In short, extension may not always provide micro-grants, but it can certainly enable them.
3. *Packaging and branding support*
   Extension should not stop with technical recipes. Support in packaging design, nutrition labelling, and storytelling (heritage branding with modern appeal) can make a huge difference.
4. *Financial literacy and credit advocacy*
   Train producers in financial basics — from maintaining accounts to understanding CIBIL scores. More importantly, extension officers can act as navigators between banks and entrepreneurs, advocating for alternative credit scoring models that recognise group lending and cooperative track records.
5. *Inclusive incubation hubs*
   Set up local incubation kitchens where small artisans can access hygienic facilities, shared equipment, and guidance on food safety. This allows them to innovate without risking contamination or incurring significant equipment costs. The Agri-Business Incubator at Kerala Agricultural University already mentors novel ideas and startups with a well-established, state-of-the-art facility for food processing and quality control, demonstrating how universities can actively bridge the innovation gap.
6. *Market linkages*
   Partner with cooperatives, e-commerce platforms, and local retailers to help traditional producers showcase new products. Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) can serve as aggregators for small batches, easing entry into bigger markets.

LESSONS FROM THE GROUND

There are encouraging signs. In parts of Kerala, women's self-help groups have successfully transitioned from traditional pickles to innovative products, such as fruit-based squashes and ready-to-eat curry pastes, with support from Kudumbashree and state extension agencies. In Tamil Nadu, a few artisan murukku makers have experimented with millet-based variants, tapping into the health food trend.

One such example comes from Mrs Sulochana P. P. and her husband, Mr Arumughan P. of Ananthavoor (Thirunavaya), Kerala, who founded Devas Pickle after attending a training at KCAEFT, Tavanur. (Box 1)

These successes demonstrate that tradition and innovation can coexist without being in conflict. The "grandmother's recipe" can remain, but alongside it, new products can be introduced that cater to today's consumer while sustaining tomorrow's livelihoods.

Box 1: Devas Pickle — Carrying Heritage into New Markets

Mrs Sulochana and her husband, Mr Arumughan, from Ananthavoor, Malappuram, Kerala, belong to a reserved community with a tradition of home pickling. Sulochana loved cooking and shared her family's mango pickle with neighbours, but aimed for a larger market. After entrepreneurship training at KCAEFT, they turned their recipe into Devas Pickle, a small business. Training helped them refine flavours, adjust ingredients, and create new variants like lemon, garlic, and gooseberry pickles. They also diversified into instant chutney powders and spice mixes.
Investing gradually in equipment improved product consistency; their pickles last three months without chemical preservatives, though labels cite two months for trust. Local demand grew through word of mouth, and travellers carried their pickles abroad, providing a steady income. They plan to expand into salted pickles and seek technical support. Their story shows how basic training and equipment can help traditional households modernise while preserving cultural tastes.

POLICY DIRECTIONS

To break the commodity trap, policymakers should:

1. *Expand the extension's mandate* — beyond productivity to include entrepreneurship, diversification, and financial literacy.
2. *Create micro-innovation grants* — small, quick-disbursing funds for rural food artisans to experiment.
3. *Develop alternate credit scoring* — so marginalised and reserved communities are not blocked from loans due to conventional CIBIL criteria.
4. *Integrate incubation with extension* — turning every KVK into not just a demonstration centre but also a mini food innovation hub.
5. *Measure success differently* — not just by crop yields, but by the number of diversified products launched, new markets accessed, and net incomes increased.

A CALL TO ACTION

South Asia's small food producers hold a treasure trove of skills and heritage. But without support, many risk being trapped in tradition, unable to adapt to the changing palate and economy. Extension must step in as a guide — not to erase tradition, but to help it evolve.

Imagine a future where a pappadam family still proudly makes their grandmother's recipe — but also offers a ragi-based, spiced variant that reaches supermarkets in Bengaluru or Dubai. Where a fishing community not only dries fish but also develops hygienic fish pickles and snacks for urban youth. Where murukku makers introduce millet twists that resonate with health-conscious consumers.

That future is possible only when "extension" is seen as a shared ecosystem — one that brings together public officers, university incubators, Farmer Producer Companies, start-up accelerators, agri-business centres, NGOs, and digital-advisory platforms. Public extension can coordinate, while private and civil partners provide design, market, and finance linkages. Joint actions such as district-level food innovation hubs, cluster-based mentoring networks, or co-branded incubation kitchens can make this collaboration tangible.

Breaking the commodity trap is not about discarding heritage; it is about carrying it forward into new opportunities — through collective effort from everyone who helps farmers and food artisans turn tradition into enterprise.

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