

ARE WE PREPARING YESTERDAY'S EXTENSION WORKERS FOR TOMORROW'S AGRICULTURE?



In this blog, Alagu Niranjan and Rasheed Sulaiman V critically analyse the 6th ICAR Dean's Committee B. Sc. Ag (Hons) extension syllabus.

CONTEXT

India's agricultural extension system stands at a moment of profound transformation. While increasing climate volatility, evolving consumer preferences, and concerns around the sustainability of agrifood systems challenge agricultural production, the availability of digital advisory platforms, the expansion of farmer-producer organisations (FPOs), and youth-led agripreneurship initiatives are providing new opportunities for Indian agriculture. Yet a close look at the Agricultural Extension syllabus prescribed by the [ICAR 6th Deans' Committee](#) raises an uncomfortable question: are we educating future extension professionals for today's realities or reproducing the logic of yesterday?



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The four undergraduate courses in the BSc Hons Agriculture programme offered under Extension are as follows:

- Rural Sociology and Educational Psychology,
- Fundamentals of Extension Education,
- Communication Skills, and
- Personality Development

Although the Extension Departments offer communication skills and personality development across all UG programmes, a careful analysis of the content shows that these courses are not, in fact, about extension. The communication skills course focuses on learning good English, and the personality development course focuses on soft skills. Entrepreneurship, which could have been considered under Extension, has now been moved to Economics. The other two courses provide a classical foundation in extension by introducing students to rural social structures, leadership, learning processes, communication models, and basic extension concepts. These are not trivial contributions. However, the problem lies not in what is included, but in what remains marginal, vague, or missing altogether.

A CURRICULUM ANCHORED IN TRANSFER, NOT TRANSFORMATION

At its core, the syllabus continues to reflect a transfer-of-technology mindset, even when it gestures toward newer ideas. Extension is implicitly seen as an andragogical activity that involves teaching farmers, disseminating messages, producing leaflets, or delivering talks rather than as a facilitative, systems-focused profession. While terms such as “market-led extension,” “pluralistic systems,” and “ICTs” appear, they serve more as rhetorical embellishments than as guiding principles of the curriculum.

Contemporary extension practice, however, is no longer primarily about the transmission of messages. [Extension professionals today operate as brokers, facilitators, data users, climate risk communicators, and institutional entrepreneurs](#). Most of them need to support farmers in finding appropriate markets, strengthen FPO governance, mediate between public and private actors, and increasingly work through digital platforms. These roles demand [competencies](#) that go far beyond classical communication theory or sociological description.

DIGITAL AGRICULTURE: MENTIONED, NOT MASTERED

Perhaps the most striking gap is the superficial treatment of digital extension. While the syllabus acknowledges ICTs and social media, it does not specify the competencies students must acquire. There is no requirement that a graduate be able to design a mobile advisory, manage a WhatsApp farmer group, interpret digital feedback data, or use basic GIS or survey tools. In an era when information exchange increasingly occurs on smartphones rather than in meeting halls, this omission is consequential.



Without hands-on digital practice, graduates risk becoming extension professionals who can describe communication models but cannot operate in the digital ecosystems where farmers increasingly seek advice.

CLIMATE CHANGE WITHOUT CLIMATE ADVISORY

Equally problematic is the near absence of climate-smart agriculture and climate risk communication. Climate change is arguably the single most defining factor shaping agricultural decision-making today. [Extension professionals are expected to interpret seasonal forecasts, advise on adaptive practices that also enhance mitigation, and help farmers manage risk and uncertainty](#). Yet the syllabus does not explicitly prepare students for these tasks.

Teaching “new trends in extension” without grounding them in climate realities leaves students intellectually aware but operationally unprepared.

COMMUNICATION COURSES THAT MISS THE FIELD

The Communication Skills course illustrates a deeper issue. A significant portion of the syllabus is devoted to grammar, sentence construction, and formal presentation skills. While clarity of expression matters, this emphasis comes at the expense of technical, digital, and facilitative communication, the kinds of communication extension professionals actually perform. The course content does not require an extension teacher; rather, an English teacher could handle it with ease.



What students need is practice in translating technical information into farmer-friendly advisories, facilitating group discussions, managing conflict, and using multimedia and digital channels. Communication in extension is less about grammatical perfection and more about relevance, trust, and interaction; something an extension teacher can demonstrate well. The current syllabus struggles to make that shift.

PRACTICALS WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL FORMATION

Practical components exist, particularly in Fundamentals of Extension Education, but they are fragmented and often symbolic. Village visits, PRA exercises, and micro-teaching are valuable, yet they rarely lead to sustained engagement or measurable outcomes. Surprisingly, Rural Sociology has no practical component at all, despite being the course most directly concerned with understanding rural realities.

Absent is a serious, compulsory field practicum that allows students to experience extension as a profession rather than a classroom subject. Without prolonged immersion, reflection, and responsibility, students do not develop the professional identity of an extension worker. They remain observers, not practitioners.

OLD BOOKS FOR A NEW WORLD

The reading lists further reinforce this disconnect. Dominated by older, canonical texts, they provide historical grounding but insufficient exposure to contemporary practice. Missing are practitioner

manuals, recent peer-reviewed syntheses, and global resources on digital advisory services, market systems development, and climate-smart extension, which are freely downloadable. Students are trained to revere tradition, not to interrogate evolving realities.



WHAT KIND OF EXTENSION PROFESSIONAL ARE WE PRODUCING?

Taken together, the syllabus produces graduates who are theoretically informed, communicatively polite, and socially aware but not necessarily field-ready. The implicit professional identity is that of an educator and messenger, not a facilitator of innovation systems or a partner in farmers' economic decision-making.

This matters because extension is no longer a protected public-sector role. Graduates compete for positions in NGOs, agribusiness firms, start-ups, and development projects that require immediately deployable skills. When curricula fail to evolve, students pay the price.

NOT THE FIRST WARNING

These concerns are not raised for the first time. An AESA working paper in 2018 titled "[Agricultural Extension Curricula in India: Is it Relevant to Changing Times?](#)" critiqued the then 5th ICAR Dean's Committee syllabus and other earlier syllabi. That same year, the [MANAGE Committee proposed Undergraduate-Level Courses in Agricultural Extension. It included them in the Annexure to the BSMA report](#) (as the BSMA concerns the curricula of PG and PhD programmes). While developing these courses, the committee first identified the core competencies required at different levels and worked backwards from those areas, organising them into courses. Unfortunately, ideas from neither of these documents are reflected in the present syllabus.

A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY FORWARD

Critique need not imply rejection. The ICAR syllabus provides a foundation on which a far more relevant program can be built. What is needed is a shift toward competency-based education, anchored in real-world practice. Digital extension, gender and caste (inclusion), climate advisory, market facilitation, designing and evaluating extension programme (which was taught as a course on programme planning earlier), and use of participatory methods should be integrated across courses—

not as passing mentions. Communication and personality development should be reframed around employability, facilitation, and leadership in complex systems rather than just a set of soft skills.



Most importantly, every extension student should graduate having done extension, not merely studied it.

If agricultural extension is to remain relevant in India's rapidly evolving agrarian landscape, its curriculum must prepare professionals not just to explain agriculture but to shape its future actively. Unfortunately, we do not see these basic concerns of professional development reflected in the multiple conferences that extension societies organise every year in the country. Will the next Dean's committee address these issues? Should we have to wait till then? If so, we will continue to produce Yesterday's Extension Workers for Tomorrow's Agriculture.

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