

Kashmir's saffron crop ravaged by prickly pest

From our correspondents

AMRIT DHILLON
IN DELHI
SANNA MATTOO
IN PAMPORE



Farms are suffering amid a sharp rise in the number of porcupines, who venture out at night to feast on the world's most expensive spice

At first the farmers blamed the weather or bad luck after their prized saffron crops mysteriously failed to bloom in spring.

But they soon found the quills, providing hard, spiny evidence that Indian crested porcupines had been feasting at their expense.

By day, the rodents rest in rock crevices and thick undergrowth in the hills of south Kashmir. But by night, they are increasingly tunnelling under the saffron fields to devour the bulbs of the world's most expensive spice.

The porcupines have caused despair in Pampore, a town where "red gold" has been cultivated for centuries. The spice is used in rituals, ceremonies, medicine and food, as well as in cups of kahwa — green tea infused with saffron and cardamom, and garnished with slivers of almond.

The thread-like stigmata of the saffron crocus is sometimes offered at a saint's shrine. The land itself is considered sacred for yielding something so precious and beautiful.

"Saffron is our identity. My family's been growing it for generations. It's not just a job, it's our heritage," said farmer Ghulam Hassan Wani, 65, who lives in Namblabal on the outskirts of Pampore.

But the porcupine scourge, growing for many years, is now so serious that debates are rocking the state leg-

islature. Angry farmers are demanding action to protect their livelihoods, but defeating a stealthy, burrowing enemy has proved difficult.

The porcupine population has exploded and the animals, driven by deforestation and habitat loss, now venture closer to villages and farms. India's wildlife laws prohibit killing porcupines, and the terrain around Pampore is full of caves, crevices and hills that offer them perfect shelter during the day.

In April, the forest minister of Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian region that includes Pampore, announced that caves and undergrowth would be cleared, mesh barriers 1.5 metres deep would be installed around vulnerable fields and the regional government would plant iris, wormwood and wild yam which repel porcupines.

The authorities have tried organic repellent sprays. They worked for a while, only for the porcupines to return, having demonstrated Darwinian adaptation. Olfactory deterrents such as naphthalene are part of the arsenal, as are cages to trap and relocate the porcupines. A "situation room" has been set up by the regional

government to monitor progress.

Saffron farmer Ghulam Nabi Wani, 67, says the problem is that the authorities have woken up too late. "Porcupine numbers have exploded in just two years. They're everywhere now. Nobody cared when it started, though we raised the alarm and now it's out of hand," he said.

Although Iran is the world's leading producer of saffron, accounting for about 85 per cent of global production, Kashmiri saffron is the most highly prized. Grown at higher altitudes than most other regions, it has a higher "crocin content", or concentration of colour, aroma and flavour.

Growing the spice is backbreaking work. The soil has to be ploughed multiple times and to a great depth before the crocus bulbs can be planted. Fields have to be left fallow for years to allow the soil to recover. Each crocus flower produces only three stigmas that must be hand-picked. The price of saffron varies but high-quality varieties can range between £4,000 and £5,000 for 1kg. Around 150,000 flowers must be harvested by hand to produce that amount.

Farmers say they are losing about 30 per cent of their crop to porcupines. Nissar Ahmad Malik, 60, railed against the porcupine "terror" which has forced him to reduce the amount of land he devotes to saffron. "I'm anxious, angry and sad," he said.

