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A Study of Export Operations and Documentation in the Agri-Products Industry

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Abstract : *Exporting agricultural products is a complex and heavily regulated process that consists of several steps, including sourcing, quality control, processing, packaging, transporting, and clearing customs before delivering to international customers. Agricultural products stand out among most other exported goods because of their perishable nature and susceptibility to changes in environmental conditions. Therefore, maintaining quality, fulfilling deliveries on time, and completing accurate export documentation are key to successful international trade practices. In India, agricultural exports contribute significantly to the national economy in terms of forex, farmers' income, and job creation across the agricultural supply chain. India exports a range of agricultural products, including rice, wheat, spices, tea, coffee, fruits, vegetables, processed foods, meat, and marine products. As per the data provided, Indian agricultural exports, including both marine products, increased from 41.24 billion dollars in fiscal year 2020–21 to 51.92 billion dollars in fiscal year 2024–25. This data shows the rise in demand for Indian agriculture from the world and India's entry into the international market of agricultural products.*

The research paper conducted focuses on export operations and documentation framework of Indian agro-products industry. Methodology used is descriptive, secondary data design in which information from trade statistics, government regulations, answers provided in Parliament, academic literature has been taken into its account to create an export map starting from registration until payments realization, to identify the types of documents at each level as well their authority in charge of their issuance, as well as risks related to documentation which affect exports. The findings demonstrate that documents used in agro-exporting process represent both customs requirement and proof of food safety, plant protection and traceability, with the increasing importance of documents in the importing countries. The recommendations include the necessity for exporters to view documentation as a unified compliance system supported by pre-shipment testing, traceability and digital archival of documents instead of final steps paperwork.

Keywords: a study of export operations and documentation in the agri-products industry

I. INTRODUCTION

Background

The agricultural commodities sector plays a major role in international commerce and trade in India. It provides input for export revenue for the country. The exporting process, starting with procurement of agricultural items (such as sesame seeds, pulses, and spices) and continuing with quality check, packing, transportation, customs clearance and shipping, should be organized and planned. Agricultural products need to comply with numerous regulations regarding safety and quality. Accordingly, efficient export practices are essential for international trade to take place effectively.

The role of export documentation is an important part of international trade operations, especially within agriculture. The field includes several regulatory norms as well as quality standards related to shipping. To facilitate customs clearance, it is important to use different export documents including, but not limited to, commercial invoices, packing lists, bills of lading, certificates of origin, shipping bills, different transportation documents and licenses. In fact, since

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2020-21, India's agricultural and related exports (including fish) grew from USD 41.24 billion in 2020-21 to USD 51.92 billion in 2024-25 (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2025). Exports are being helped by the Agricultural & Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) which provides the necessary registration to exporters, promotes their businesses and provides them with quality and infrastructure support.

Problem Statement

Normally exporters get a list of the necessary documents such as invoices and certificates. In the Agri-products sector, every document means something depending either on the type of product or place of shipment. Most of the scientific works about agri-food trade have been focused on the effect of standards on the trade process itself. The operational aspect of the problem of how the documents should go in the sequence as well as who should and where the documents need to be submitted is left under-researched in India. The badly-needed connection between the model of export and the reality of Indian Agri-exporters. The aim of the paper is to create a universal map of the whole export process, its documents, and the official data.

Research Objectives

This research aims to understand the export procedure and documentation used in the agriculture sector with special focus on India. The aims of the study are:

a) To document the export procedure of Agri-products from the registration of exporter to the receipt of export proceeds.
b) To classify the major export documents according to stages of export, authority responsible to issue the document and purpose of document.
c) To analyze the performance of Agri-exports of India to provide context for operational issues.
d) To identify risks of documentation and compliance issues in major destination markets.
e) To recommend actions to enhance accuracy of documentation and readiness for exports.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the stages of the Agri-export process in India, and which agencies are involved at each stage?
RQ2: Which documents are mandatory or commonly required, and how do requirements differ between commodity groups?
RQ3: What documentation and compliance risks have affected Indian Agri-exports in recent years?
RQ4: How can exporters reduce documentation-related delay and rejection?

Significance of the Study

The research is important for a number of reasons. To begin with, it provides all the available information on operational processes and regulations in one place that can be used by students and novice exporters. Moreover, it connects the documentation with the results of compliance in other markets, which is rarely the case with practitioners' checklists. Finally, the recommendations given in the research can be implemented by small and medium-sized exporters suffering the most financially from the documentary errors.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rathee, Chhikara and Solanki (2025) The authors of the paper entitled "Navigating the Complexities of Export Order Processing: Challenges for Indian Agri Exporters" looked into the key problems faced by the Indian agri exporters in the export order processing. The research was performed through the questionnaires and interviews of the 300 agricultural exporters located in Haryana. The results revealed the presence of the numerous issues including logistics, financial limitations, quality control, hurdles in the supply chain, and customs paperwork. Moreover, the research has

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proven that the more experienced exporters encounter fewer operational issues. The study emphasizes the significance of well-organized procedures and timely submission of documents in the Agri business.

Malini L. Tantri (2022) conducted a study called "Doing Business, Trade Facilitation and Agricultural Exports in India – The Case of Select Agricultural Products". This study concentrated on difficulties faced in trade facilitation and exporting some agricultural products in India. It was found that exporters of agricultural products encounter issues regarding documentation, certification, transaction costs and compliance. The research further explained how delays experienced in obtaining necessary paperwork lead to losses, especially because agricultural products are perishable. The study stresses the need for simplifying export procedures and improving the documentations systems used likely to lead to a better agricultural export performance in India.

Suresh Ramaiah and Gopal Krishna Roy (2021) A research was done concerning the "Determinants of Export Behaviour of Agro-processing Companies in India: The Impact of Technology, Imported Raw Materials and Logistics Infrastructure". This research was aimed at identifying which factors affect the export performance of the agro-processing companies in India and paying special attention to technology, imported raw materials and logistics infrastructure influence on the export. The findings demonstrated that technology development and advanced logistics play a significant role in increasing the export potential of agro-processing companies. The results show that having proper technological, logistical and operational systems in place is important for competitiveness of exporters in the agriculture industry.

Ashish Kumar and Sunil Agrawal (2023) published an article called "Challenges and Opportunities for Agri-fresh Food Supply Chain Management in India." The publication analysed the main concerns with the management of the supply chain of fresh agricultural products in India. By conducting a systematic literature review, 34 challenges were identified and six opportunities for the enhancement of supply chain performance were discussed. The research pointed out perishability, low-quality transportation, supply chain management inefficiencies, and others. Besides, it indicated the importance of good handling of products and transportation. The study is important for companies engaged in agricultural exports, as proper handling and fast transportation is crucial to keeping the quality of products during the international shipping.

Vijay Singh Chauhan and Sruti Vijayakumar (2021) "Measuring Trade Facilitation: Evidence from India" is the name of a study carried out to examine the trade facilitation situation in India. The research used various measures related to international trade in the process. Some of the aspects examined in the study include customs clearance activities, logistic performance, and paper requirements. The study emphasizes the need for easier procedures for international trade and better communication and coordination among government departments responsible for international business activities. According to the results obtained from the research, good documentation systems and customs clearances lead to reduction in procedures and improvement in results for export.

H. G. Abhyankar and Nilesh R. Mate (2017) A study was conducted titled "Agriculture Exports Supply Chain Management – A Literature Review from Indian Context as per this research, studies related to agricultural export supply chain management relevant to India were reviewed concerning transportation, storage and handling, distribution, infrastructure and coordination among various actors in agricultural export supply chain management. This study also noted that the effective supply chain management is essential for maintaining quality of the crops being exported and for facilitating timely delivery to international markets. The study stressed that better logistics and coordination is essential for improving agricultural-export.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2010) The ESCAP study "Trade Facilitation in India: An Analysis of Trade Processes and Procedures" has studied the administrative and procedural obstacles that impede international trade in India. The study focuses on export processes that include dealing with some products such as cotton yarn, fresh vegetables and fruits. It has borne out the significance of delays in transport, customs clearance and payment involving international business as obstacles toward international trade. The study has also indicated in details the time and cost required for completing such processes. The conclusions of the study indicate

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that simplifying the documentation requirements and improving infrastructure related to trade will help reduce delays and costs of export transactions.

Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) (2015) An announcement was made with respect to the publication of a report called "Vegetables Export Process." The report underlines the various steps and mandates involved in the export of vegetables out of India. It describes the key aspects of inspection of quality, testing of pesticide residue, recognition of packhouses, and obtaining phytosanitary certificate for the vegetables to be exported. This publication highlights that the quality of agricultural and other products to be exported must be in accordance with the quality and safety standards of the importing countries. The report also describes the importance of laboratory testing and inspection to safeguard against rejection of consignments exported.

Abadi Gugusaa and other researchers (2026) conducted a research paper called "A Systematic Review of Cold Chain Logistics Performance for Fresh Agricultural Products: Trends, Gaps, and Conceptual Framework Development". The study reviewed cold chain logistics as a key aspect of maintaining the quality, safety and sustainability of fresh agricultural products. In their work, the authors used systematic literature review to expose the gaps in performance measurements by indicating the necessity to utilize integrated cold chain management. The significance of the study lies in operational efficiency, economic efficiency and sustainability of the transportation and storing. The relevance of the study to agriculture exports is that temperature-controlled logistics are necessary for quality preservation during the process of reaching foreign markets.

III. INDUSTRY AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

India's Agri-Export Sector

Various types of items are included in the export basket of India. This export basket is made up of cereals, spices, both fresh and processed fruits and vegetables, meat and dairy products, and oil meals. The item with the highest export is rice. According to a report by The Financial Express, as of the year 2024-25 agricultural and processed food products worth 25.14 billion dollars were exported from India, which is 13 percent higher than the previous year (Das, 2025). Since the export basket consists of high value, bulk and perishable goods, a single standard document does not suffice for all the exporters.

Institutional and Regulatory Framework

The export system consists of many entities, each of which has a defined role in the process. The Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) is responsible for giving the Importer-Exporter Code (IEC) and for running a website where one can apply for APEDA's electronic Registration-cum-Membership Certificate (e-RCMC) (Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority, 2023). APEDA registers exporters of scheduled products and ensures the growth of their exports. The authorities of Plant Protection, Quarantine and Storage can issue phytosanitary certificates for plant products (Maharashtra State Agricultural Marketing Board, n.d.). Customs issues the shipping bill electronically through ICEGATE and gives Let Export Order.

Destination-Market Requirements

Countries that import products from India tend to impose their own regulations in addition to what is required under Indian law. These regulations incorporate permissible maximum residue limits, import permits, labelling requirements, and more recently, requiring testing of the products at the point of importation. Consequently, exporters are required to make their products conform to two sets of regulations and the documents cleared by Indian authorities may face rejection in the country of import, if they do not have required information expected by that country's officer.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this research, a descriptive design approach is used, which utilizes qualitative and quantitative methods but heavily relies on secondary data. It is important to employ a descriptive design in research in which the questions are formulated about processes, relevant documents and possible risks. The quantitative part of the descriptive research

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design of this project is limited to a few measures of growth rates and compound annual growth rate and percentages based on secondary business statistics.

Data Sources

Four types of sources were used:

(i) official trade statistics and parliamentary replies of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

(ii) procedural and regulatory material published by APEDA, the Spices Board and FSSAI.

(iii) peer-reviewed and institutional literature on standards and trade facilitation.

(iv) recent press and trade reports, used only to identify compliance events and always attributed to the reporting outlet.

Analytical Technique

The analysis of procedural materials was conducted using process mapping methodology to identify various steps taken and responsible parties involved. Documents were categorised based on their attributes like stage, issuing body, and purpose of issuance. Compliance-related incidents were analysed according to their category and put into groups based on the kind of risk they represent.

Limitations

Firstly, the research does not employ any information from firms or surveys, hence it cannot provide any data on how frequently particular mistakes are made in practice. Secondly, different figures reported by different sources employ different classifications (for instance, agri-exports with and without seafood), so they cannot be compared. Thirdly, procedures and rules change rapidly and the research results describe only the state at the moment of access. Last but not least, media reports used in the study are secondary materials and can overlook essential regulations being summarized data rather than data for estimation.

V. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Performance and Composition of Agri-Exports

Table 1 summarises the headline indicators used as context for the operational analysis.

Indicator	Value	Source / basis
Agri and allied exports incl. marine, 2020-21	USD 41.24 bn	Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2025)
Agri and allied exports incl. marine, 2024-25	USD 51.92 bn	Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2025)
Growth, 2020-21 to 2024-25	25.9%	Derived by the author
Compound annual growth rate (4 years)	5.9%	Derived by the author
Rice exports, 2024-25	USD 12.47 bn	APEDA data cited by S&P Global (2026)
Rice as share of total Agri exports	24.0%	Derived by the author
Non-basmati / basmati rice, 2024-25	USD 6.52 bn / 5.94 bn	APEDA data cited by S&P Global (2026)
Marine products, 2022-23 / 2023-24 / 2024-25	USD 8.08 / 7.37 / 7.41 bn	Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2025)

Table 1: Selected Indicators of India's Agri-Export Performance

Exports grew by about one-quarter over four years, a compound rate of roughly 5.9 per cent, which is steady rather than rapid. Rice alone accounts for almost one quarter of the total, and non-basmati and basmati rice are close to equal in value. This concentration matters operationally: a documentary or compliance problem in one large commodity has an outsized effect on national export performance. Marine exports fell by about 8.3 per cent between 2022-23 and 2024-25 before stabilising, although the data do not by themselves identify the cause.

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The Agri-Export Process

Table 2 maps the export process into five stages. The sequence is strict at the start: an IEC is required before RCMC registration, and RCMC is needed before incentive or scheme benefits can be claimed.

Stage	Key activities	Principal agencies
1. Registration	Obtain IEC; register under GST; obtain APEDA e-RCMC; open or link an authorised dealer bank account	DGFT, GST authorities, APEDA, bank
2. Contract and pre-shipment	Agree sales contract and Incoterms; issue proforma invoice; arrange payment terms; source and pack product; conduct residue and quality testing	Buyer, bank, accredited laboratories, APEDA
3. Certification	Obtain phytosanitary, health or inspection, fumigation and origin certificates as the product and market require	Plant quarantine, FSSAI or commodity board, issuing agencies
4. Shipment and clearance	Issue commercial invoice and packing list; file shipping bill on ICEGATE; present cargo for examination; obtain Let Export Order; load; obtain bill of lading or airway bill	Customs, port, forwarder, shipping line or airline
5. Post-shipment	Submit documents to bank; receive foreign exchange; obtain electronic realisation certificate; claim applicable benefits and tax refunds	Bank, RBI rules, Customs, tax authorities

Table 2: Stages of the Agri-Export Process in India

Classification of Export Documents

Table 3 classifies the principal documents. They fall into three functional groups: commercial documents (invoice, packing list, transport document), regulatory documents that certify product safety, health and origin, and financial documents that support customs declaration and payment realisation.

Document	Issued or filed by	Purpose
Importer-Exporter Code (IEC)	DGFT	Basic identity for exporting
e-RCMC	APEDA (applied for via DGFT portal)	Membership and eligibility for APEDA products and schemes
Commercial invoice	Exporter	Records buyer, goods, value and terms; basis for customs valuation
Packing list	Exporter	Gives package count and net and gross weights
Phytosanitary certificate	Plant quarantine authority	Certifies that plant products meet plant-health requirements
Health or inspection certificate	FSSAI, commodity board or inspection agency	Certifies food safety for regulated products
Certificate of origin	Designated issuing agency	Supports preferential tariff claims
Shipping bill	Exporter, filed with Customs	Export declaration and basis for Let Export Order

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Document	Issued or filed by	Purpose
Bill of lading or airway bill	Shipping line or airline	Transport contract and receipt of cargo
Electronic realisation certificate	Authorised dealer bank	Evidence that export proceeds were received

Table 3: Principal Export Documents by Issuer and Purpose

Documentary consistency is critical because the same data travel across many hands. APEDA's pre-shipment reference chart shows the invoice and the packing list each concerning eight different parties, drawn from a list that includes the importer, forwarder, shipping line, Customs and the bank (Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority, n.d.). An error in either document is therefore replicated across the chain and is costly to correct after the cargo has been booked.

Documentation and Compliance Risks

Table 4 groups recent, documented compliance events by the type of risk they illustrate.

Risk type	Illustrative evidence	Documentary implication
Contaminant residues	Spices Board carries out mandatory ethylene oxide sampling and testing for spices exported to the EU (HS 0904–0910, 1302, 2103); testing was made mandatory for consignments to Singapore and Hong Kong in April 2024 (Ministry of Commerce and Industry, 2024; ThePrint, 2024)	Laboratory report becomes a precondition for clearance
Escalated inspection	EU tests Indian cumin for pesticide residues at a 30% frequency; Spices Board requires pesticide testing for exporters whose consignments were notified (Spices Board of India, 2025)	Exporter's compliance history determines document burden
Non-pesticide deficiencies	A report cited by FreshPlaza notes 365 EU food-safety notifications against Indian products, with 81% of rejections attributed to causes other than pesticides (FreshPlaza, 2026)	Labelling, certification and microbial controls need equal attention
Product-specific certification	FSSAI arrangements for curry leaves exported to the EU require pesticide residue analysis and a health certificate for compliant consignments (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, n.d.)	Additional certificate for selected products
Policy change	Export restrictions placed on wheat and on certain rice categories in 2022-23	Exporters must verify current DGFT conditions before contracting

Table 4: Documentation and Compliance Risks in Agri-Exports

The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (2024) told Parliament that total rejection was only 0.2 per cent of spice exports for the period it examined, against exports of USD 4,464.17 million in 2023-24. Low aggregate rejection and tighter controls are not contradictory: enhanced testing is applied to specific commodities and markets, so a small

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national rejection rate can coexist with heavy cost for the exporters concerned. For example, the EU raised its inspection frequency on Indian cumin to 30 per cent in January 2025, after 312 spice alerts on its rapid alert system in 2024 (Al Jazeera, 2026). The 81 per cent share of non-pesticide causes in EU rejections is also significant for documentation, because labelling and certification deficiencies are errors of paperwork and process that can be prevented.

VI. DISCUSSION

Documents as Evidence of Compliance

The results indicate that Agri-export documentation has evolved from being merely transactional into being compelling proof that products are safe, traceable, and legitimate. In this respect, the lab report provided in Table 4 is an example of such documentation, so even though it is not a customs document itself, it is still the paper that decides whether the shipment can be exported outside of the country. This indicates that the ability argument proposed by Henson and Loader (2001) is true because the ability to produce a satisfactory proof belongs to processes of testing, documenting and monitoring suppliers.

Sequential Dependence and Single Points of Failure

According to Table 2, every phase hinges on one that came before it. Thus, an exporter who doesn't possess a valid IEC will not be able to procure RCMC. Similarly, without a phytosanitary certificate, the consignment cannot clear for plant products. Therefore, not making it through any step halts the entire shipment process. As evident whenever firms try to move perishables, the time penalty accumulates and leads to huge losses in the case of delays. Djankov et al. (2010) and Hummels and Schaur (2013) show that even a few days of delay will bring about losses that are as great as the customs duties being paid, which indicates clearly that document checks prior to shipment delivery are of serious economic value.

Concentration and Market Exposure

Since rice and spices constitute major export categories and since destination authorities use commodity-specific scrutiny, the effect is concentrated. This confirms the view of Jaffee and Henson (2004) that standards serve both as obstacles and as opportunities: exporters that create compliance systems can access sophisticated markets, while those that do not will face exclusion.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

After conducting the analysis, the following course of action is recommended:

a) Implement a systematic export checklist, similar to what is in Table 2, and check each paper against the invoice and the packing list.
b) Testing of products should be carried out in accredited laboratories before dispatch for the presence of residues required by the buyer and the relevant results must be kept with the consignment papers.
c) Keeping thorough records of all processes from the field to dispatch is crucial for the demonstration of the origin of any consignment.
d) Keeping track of the notification from authorities such as APEDA, DGFT, Spices Board, FSSAI, and local authorities is very important.
e) Whenever possible, apply electronic documentation and electronic certification in order to minimize mistakes due to incorrect transcription and also related time delays.
f) Small exporters should think of uniting in groups either on the basis of manufacturing firms or packhouses for the sake of sharing costs of testing and certification.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study analysed the processes and documentation used in Agri-exports in India drawing on government data, regulations and academic materials. The export process was divided into five stages, documentation was classified

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according to the issuer and purpose, and compliance risks in destination countries have been identified. The finding is that in Agri-exports documentation should be regarded as a compliance mechanism rather than a clerical duty, as it's document accuracy and completeness that affect success of the shipment as well as the evidence of food safety and traceability in increasing number of cases. It should be noted that because the study is based on secondary data it describes the mechanism instead of measuring error rates. Future studies may utilize survey data from exporters or shipment data to assess the delays, reasons for rejection and documentary error cost per commodity.

The results imply that the process of exporting agricultural products depends greatly on the import/export paperwork. For example, the invoices, the packing lists, the shipping bills, bills from the processing companies, the proof of origin, the proof of plant health, and many other certificates help exporters and importers and customs authorities to maintain records of international transactions.

In general terms, the research concludes that efficient export of agriculture products depends not only on production capacity, quality of product, and import demand but also on the exporter's ability to carry out documentation and comply with rules and regulations in place. Therefore, improving documentation practices, spreading knowledge of international trade regulations, introducing technologies, and developing systematic verification mechanisms will contribute to the mitigation of operational risks and enhancement of competitiveness of agricultural export sector in India in global markets.

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