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Vivek Kumar Singhal
Assistant Professor, Indira Gandhi Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Corresponding Author:
Vivek Kumar Singhal
Assistant professor, Indira Gandhi Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Addressing micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil: Challenges and strategies

Vivek Kumar Singhal

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Abstract
Micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil pose significant challenges to agricultural sustainability, food security, and human health. This paper provides a comprehensive assessment of micronutrient deficiencies, focusing on their causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies. In India, alkaline soils prevalent in regions like Punjab and Haryana are particularly susceptible to deficiencies of zinc and iron due to reduced solubility at higher pH levels. Intensive agricultural practices, including monoculture cropping and imbalanced fertilizer use, exacerbate deficiencies by disrupting soil nutrient cycles. Soil erosion, leaching, and climate change further compound the problem by accelerating nutrient loss and soil degradation. The consequences of micronutrient deficiencies extend beyond reduced crop yields to encompass poor crop quality and compromised human health. Hidden hunger and malnutrition are prevalent, particularly among vulnerable populations. Mitigation strategies include balanced fertilizer application, soil amendments, biofortification, precision agriculture, capacity building, and policy support. Case studies highlight regional variations in micronutrient deficiencies and underscore the importance of tailored interventions. Collaboration between stakeholders is crucial for driving innovation and scaling up interventions. Aligning policies with national nutrition goals and sustainable development objectives is essential for promoting holistic approaches. By adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach, India can build resilience to nutrient deficiencies, enhance agricultural productivity, and improve the well-being of its population.

Keywords: Micronutrient deficiencies, soil fertility, agricultural sustainability, crop productivity, soil management

Introduction
Micronutrients are essential elements required by plants in small quantities for their growth, development, and metabolic functions. These micronutrients include iron (Fe), zinc (Zn), manganese (Mn), copper (Cu), boron (B), and molybdenum (Mo), among others. Despite their relatively low requirement, micronutrients play a critical role in various physiological processes, such as photosynthesis, enzyme activation, and nutrient uptake. However, micronutrient deficiencies in soil have become a significant concern globally, particularly in agricultural regions where intensive farming practices and imbalanced fertilizer use have led to nutrient depletion and soil degradation.

In countries like India, where agriculture is the backbone of the economy and supports the livelihoods of millions of people, micronutrient deficiencies pose formidable challenges to agricultural sustainability and food security. With a population exceeding 1.3 billion and a rapidly expanding demand for food, addressing these deficiencies is imperative to ensure adequate food production, nutritional security, and sustainable agricultural development.

The causes of micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil are multifaceted and often interconnected. Soil properties, such as texture, pH, and organic matter content, influence the availability and uptake of micronutrients by plants. For instance, alkaline soils prevalent in regions like Punjab and Haryana are prone to iron and zinc deficiencies due to reduced solubility of these micronutrients at higher pH levels (Shukla *et al.*, 2021) [19]. Furthermore, intensive farming practices, including mono cropping and excessive use of chemical fertilizers, exacerbate nutrient imbalances and micronutrient depletion in soil (Mahadevakumar *et al.*, 2020) [16]. Soil erosion, leaching, and environmental factors such as climate change further compound the problem by accelerating nutrient loss and soil degradation (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2015) [4].

The consequences of micronutrient deficiencies extend beyond agricultural productivity to encompass human health and environmental sustainability. Reduced crop yields, poor crop quality, and increased susceptibility to pests and diseases are direct repercussions of micronutrient deficiencies in soil. Studies have shown that zinc deficiency alone can lead to substantial yield losses in staple crops such as rice, wheat, and maize, which are central to India's food security (Kushwaha *et al.*, 2020) [15]. Moreover, micronutrient deficiencies compromise the nutritional quality of crops, contributing to hidden hunger and malnutrition among vulnerable populations, particularly women and children (Bouis *et al*., 2000) [5]. Iron deficiency, for example, is a leading cause of iron-deficiency anemia, a widespread nutritional disorder affecting millions of people in India (Agrawal *et al*., 2006) [1].

Assessing the micronutrient status of Indian soil is essential for developing targeted intervention strategies to address deficiencies effectively. Soil testing remains a fundamental tool for evaluating soil fertility and identifying nutrient deficiencies. Initiatives such as the Soil Health Card Scheme in India aim to provide farmers with personalized recommendations for nutrient management based on soil test results (Government of India, 2019) [8]. However, challenges such as limited accessibility to soil testing facilities and variability in soil properties necessitate the exploration of alternative assessment methods, including plant analysis and remote sensing techniques (Antil, 2020) [3].

In light of these challenges, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment of micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil, drawing upon existing literature, case studies, and empirical data. By examining the causes, consequences, and methods of assessment of micronutrient deficiencies, this paper aims to elucidate the complexities of the issue and identify potential strategies for mitigation. Furthermore, the paper will explore the implications of micronutrient deficiencies for agricultural sustainability, food security, and human well-being in India, underscoring the urgent need for concerted action to address this critical challenge.

Table 1: Distribution of micronutrient deficiency in Indian soil (in percentage)

Serial no.	Name of state	Zinc	Copper	Manganese	Iron	Boron
1	Andhra Pradesh	22.92	1.33	1.63	17.24	4.08
2	Arunachal Pradesh	4.63	1.40	3.01	1.44	39.15
3	Assam	28.11	2.80	0.01	0.00	32.75
4	Bihar	45.25	3.19	8.77	12.00	39.39
5	Chhattisgarh	25.29	3.22	14.77	7.06	20.59
6	Goa	55.29	3.09	16.91	12.21	12.94
7	Gujarat	36.56	0.38	0.46	25.87	18.72
8	Haryana	15.42	5.13	6.16	21.72	3.72
9	Himachal Pradesh	8.62	1.43	6.68	0.51	27.02
10	Jammu and Kashmir	10.91	0.34	4.60	0.41	43.03
11	Jharkhand	17.47	0.78	0.26	0.06	60.00
12	Karnataka	30.70	2.28	0.13	7.68	36.79
13	Kerala	18.34	0.45	3.58	1.23	31.17
14	Madhya Pradesh	57.05	0.47	2.25	8.34	4.30
15	Maharashtra	38.60	0.14	3.02	23.12	20.69
16	Manipur	11.50	2.46	2.06	2.13	37.17
17	Meghalaya	3.84	1.03	2.95	1.33	47.93
18	Mizoram	1.96	0.98	1.22	0.49	32.76
19	Nagaland	4.62	0.53	3.05	2.00	54.31
20	Odisha	32.12	7.11	2.12	6.42	51.88
21	Punjab	19.24	4.67	26.20	13.04	18.99
22	Rajasthan	56.51	9.15	28.28	34.38	2.99
23	Tamil Nadu	63.30	12.01	7.37	12.62	20.65
24	Telangana	26.77	1.36	3.54	16.65	16.49
25	Tripura	5.51	2.36	0.00	1.57	23.62
26	Uttar Pradesh	27.27	2.84	15.82	15.56	20.61
27	Uttarakhand	9.59	1.51	4.82	1.36	13.44
28	West Bengal	14.42	1.76	0.98	0.03	37.05
All India		36.50	4.20	7.10	12.8	23.4

Source: Shukla *et al*. 2014 [20]

Causes of Micronutrient Deficiency in Indian Soil

Micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil are influenced by a multitude of factors, ranging from soil properties to human activities. Soil characteristics, such as pH, texture, and organic matter content, significantly impact the availability and uptake of micronutrients by plants. For instance, alkaline soils prevalent in regions like Punjab and Haryana are prone to zinc and iron deficiencies due to decreased solubility of these micronutrients at higher pH levels (Indian Institute of Soil Science, 2008) [10].

Intensive agricultural practices, including monoculture cropping, imbalanced fertilizer use, and inadequate soil management, exacerbate micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soils. Studies have indicated that continuous cultivation of high-yielding crops, such as rice and wheat, without proper crop rotation or micronutrient replenishment leads to the depletion of essential nutrients, including zinc, iron, and manganese (Kumar *et al.*, 2020) [14]. Furthermore, the widespread use of phosphatic fertilizers without concurrent micronutrient application can induce zinc deficiency in soil by interfering with its uptake and availability to plants (Shukla *et al.*, 2021) [19].

Soil erosion and leaching are additional factors contributing to micronutrient depletion in Indian soils. These processes result in the loss of topsoil layers, which are rich in organic matter and micronutrient reserves, thereby exacerbating deficiencies (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2015) [4]. Environmental factors, such as climate change, also play a role in micronutrient availability, with altered precipitation patterns and temperature regimes affecting soil nutrient dynamics (Gruhn *et al.*, 2000) [9].

Moreover, anthropogenic activities, including industrial pollution and mining, can introduce heavy metals into the soil, displacing essential micronutrients and rendering the soil unfit for agriculture. Heavy metal contamination poses significant risks to soil health and human health, underscoring the importance of environmental regulations and remediation efforts (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2015) [4].

In summary, micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil are driven by a complex interplay of natural and anthropogenic factors. Addressing these deficiencies requires a holistic approach that integrates soil management practices, agronomic interventions, and environmental stewardship.

Consequences of Micronutrient Deficiency

Micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil have far-reaching consequences, affecting both agricultural productivity and human health. Reduced crop yields and poor crop quality are among the most immediate impacts of micronutrient deficiencies. Studies have shown that zinc deficiency alone can lead to significant yield losses ranging from 5% to 30% in crops such as rice, wheat, maize, and pulses ((Kushwaha *et al.*, 2020) [15]. Similarly, iron deficiency in soil adversely affects the bioavailability of iron in crops, leading to yield reductions and poor crop quality (Gehlot *et al.*, 2023) [7].

Furthermore, micronutrient deficiencies compromise the nutritional quality of crops, contributing to hidden hunger and malnutrition among vulnerable populations. Iron-deficiency anemia, a prevalent nutritional disorder in India, is directly linked to insufficient dietary intake of bioavailable iron from crops (Agrawal, *et al.*, 2006) [1]. Similarly, zinc deficiency in soil results in crops with reduced zinc content, leading to zinc-deficient diets and associated health risks, such as impaired growth and immune function (Kushwaha *et al.*, 2020) [15].

The impact of micronutrient deficiencies extends beyond agricultural productivity to encompass environmental sustainability. Imbalanced fertilization practices aimed at addressing macronutrient deficiencies can exacerbate micronutrient imbalances and soil degradation. For instance, excessive use of phosphatic fertilizers without concurrent micronutrient application can induce zinc deficiency in soil and contribute to nutrient runoff and water pollution (Shukla *et al.*, 2021) [19].

Moreover, micronutrient deficiencies in soil have broader implications for ecosystem health and biodiversity. Essential micronutrients play key roles in enzymatic processes and biochemical pathways essential for plant growth and development. Their deficiency can disrupt ecological interactions and nutrient cycling processes, affecting soil microbial communities and overall ecosystem functioning (Kumar *et al.*, 2019) [13]. In summary, micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil have multifaceted consequences, ranging from reduced crop productivity and nutritional quality to environmental degradation and ecosystem disruption. Addressing these deficiencies is crucial for achieving sustainable agricultural development and improving human health outcomes.

Causes of Micronutrient Deficiency in Indian Soil

Micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil are influenced by a multitude of factors, ranging from soil properties to human activities. Soil characteristics, such as pH, texture, and organic matter content, significantly impact the availability and uptake of micronutrients by plants. For instance, alkaline soils prevalent in regions like Punjab and Haryana are prone to zinc and iron deficiencies due to decreased solubility of these micronutrients at higher pH levels (Indian Institute of Soil Science, 2008) [10].

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Soil erosion and leaching are additional factors contributing to micronutrient depletion in Indian soils. These processes result in the loss of topsoil layers, which are rich in organic matter and micronutrient reserves, thereby exacerbating deficiencies (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2015) [4]. Environmental factors, such as climate change, also play a role in micronutrient availability, with altered precipitation patterns and temperature regimes affecting soil nutrient dynamics (Singh *et al.*, 2022) [21].

Moreover, anthropogenic activities, including industrial pollution and mining, can introduce heavy metals into the soil, displacing essential micronutrients and rendering the soil unfit for agriculture. Heavy metal contamination poses significant risks to soil health and human health, underscoring the importance of environmental regulations and remediation efforts (Thakuria *et al.*, 2016) [22].

In summary, micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil are driven by a complex interplay of natural and anthropogenic factors. Addressing these deficiencies requires a holistic approach that integrates soil management practices, agronomic interventions, and environmental stewardship.

Case Studies and Regional Variations

Micronutrient deficiencies exhibit regional variations across different states in India, influenced by soil properties, climatic conditions, and agronomic practices. Case studies provide valuable insights into the prevalence and management of micronutrient deficiencies in specific regions.

In the Punjab region, characterized by intensive agriculture and alkaline soils, zinc deficiency is widespread and poses significant challenges to crop productivity. A study conducted by (Kaur, 2024) [12] revealed that over 60% of soils in Punjab are deficient in zinc, adversely affecting crops such as wheat, rice, and maize. The primary factors contributing to zinc deficiency include imbalanced fertilizer use, particularly excessive application of phosphatic fertilizers, and high soil pH levels (Kushwaha *et al.*, 2020) [15].

Conversely, in eastern India, manganese deficiency is a prevalent issue affecting rice cultivation. Studies conducted in states such as West Bengal, Odisha, and Jharkhand have reported widespread manganese deficiency in soils, resulting in reduced rice yields and poor crop quality (Nayyar, *et al.*, 2001) [18]. The acidic soils prevalent in these regions exacerbate manganese deficiency, highlighting the importance of tailored soil management strategies and micronutrient supplementation (Thakuria *et al.*, 2016) [22].

In southern India, particularly in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, boron deficiency has emerged as a significant constraint to cotton and fruit crops. Boron deficiency in over 30% of soils in these regions, leading to reduced cotton yields and fruit quality. Boron deficiency in soil is exacerbated by leaching in sandy soils and excessive rainfall, underscoring the need for targeted boron fertilization strategies (Ahmad, *et al.*, 2012) [2].

These case studies highlight the regional variations in micronutrient deficiencies across India and underscore the importance of tailored interventions to address specific soil and crop requirements. Implementing region-specific soil management practices, balanced fertilizer application, and micronutrient supplementation are essential for mitigating deficiencies and improving crop productivity and quality.

Mitigation Strategies

Addressing micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil requires a multifaceted approach that integrates soil management practices, agronomic interventions, and policy initiatives. Several strategies have been proposed to mitigate micronutrient deficiencies and promote sustainable agriculture:

a) **Balanced Fertilization:** Adopting balanced fertilizer application practices, including the use of micronutrient-enriched fertilizers, can help replenish depleted nutrients and improve soil fertility. Integrated nutrient management approaches that combine organic and inorganic fertilizers have been shown to enhance micronutrient availability and crop productivity (Kumar *et al.*, 2020).
b) **Soil Amendments:** Application of soil amendments such as lime, gypsum, and organic matter can help correct soil pH imbalances and improve micronutrient availability. Liming acidic soils and acid sulfate soils can reduce micronutrient deficiencies, particularly of elements like zinc and manganese (Shukla *et al.*, 2021) [19].
c) **Foliar Sprays:** Foliar application of micronutrient solutions directly to plant leaves can provide a rapid and efficient means of correcting nutrient deficiencies, especially during critical growth stages. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of foliar sprays in alleviating zinc and iron deficiencies in crops such as rice, wheat, and pulses (Kushwaha *et al.*, 2020) [15].
d) **Biofortification:** Biofortification, the process of breeding crop varieties with enhanced nutrient content, offers a sustainable approach to addressing hidden hunger and improving nutritional outcomes among vulnerable populations. Crop breeding programs focused on enhancing the micronutrient content of staple crops have shown promising results in increasing dietary intake and reducing micronutrient deficiencies (Bouis and Welch, 2010) [6].
e) **Precision Agriculture:** Adoption of precision agriculture technologies, such as soil sensors, remote sensing, and geographic information systems (GIS), can facilitate targeted nutrient application and optimize fertilizer use efficiency. Precision nutrient management strategies enable farmers to tailor fertilizer applications based on soil nutrient status, crop requirements, and spatial variability, thereby reducing input costs and environmental impacts (Singh, 2022) [21].
f) **Capacity Building and Extension Services:** Strengthening extension services and farmer education programs is essential for promoting awareness and adoption of micronutrient management practices. Training programs on soil testing, nutrient management, and crop nutrition can empower farmers to make informed decisions and implement sustainable agricultural practices (NAAS, 2013) [17].

By implementing these mitigation strategies in a coordinated manner, India can enhance soil fertility, improve crop productivity, and ensure food and nutritional security for its growing population.

Future Directions and Recommendations

To address micronutrient deficiencies effectively in Indian soil, it is essential to prioritize research, innovation, and policy initiatives aimed at sustainable agricultural development. Several future directions and recommendations can guide efforts in this direction:

a) **Research on Soil-Plant Interactions:** Further research is needed to elucidate the complex mechanisms governing micronutrient uptake, transport, and utilization in plants. Understanding soil-plant interactions and micronutrient dynamics can inform the development of tailored soil management practices and crop breeding programs aimed at enhancing nutrient use efficiency and resilience to stress (Mahadevakumar *et al.*, 2020) [16].
b) **Development of Site-Specific Management Strategies:** Embracing precision agriculture technologies and data-driven approaches can enable site-specific nutrient management tailored to the unique soil and agronomic conditions of different regions. Integration of soil sensors, remote sensing, and predictive modeling can optimize fertilizer use efficiency, minimize environmental impacts, and enhance agricultural sustainability (Singh 2022) [21].
c) **Promotion of Organic Farming and Soil Health:** Encouraging the adoption of organic farming practices can improve soil health, enhance nutrient cycling, and reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers. Organic amendments such as compost, vermicompost, and biochar can enhance soil fertility and micronutrient availability while promoting environmental sustainability (Indoria *et al*., 2018) [11].
d) **Capacity Building and Farmer Empowerment:** Strengthening extension services, farmer education programs, and agricultural training institutes is critical for building capacity and empowering farmers with knowledge and skills for sustainable micronutrient management. Training programs on soil testing, nutrient management, and best agronomic practices can enhance adoption and implementation at the grassroots level (NAAS, 2013) [17].
e) **Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaboration between government agencies, research institutions, private sector stakeholders, and civil society organizations is essential for driving innovation, scaling up interventions, and promoting technology transfer. Public-private partnerships can facilitate investment in research and development, market access for micronutrient-enriched fertilizers and biofortified crops, and knowledge dissemination to farmers.
f) **Policy Support and Incentive Mechanisms:** Policy frameworks that incentivize sustainable agricultural practices, such as subsidies for micronutrient-enriched fertilizers, tax incentives for organic farming, and market support for biofortified crops, can stimulate adoption and investment in nutrient management technologies. Aligning policies with national nutrition goals and sustainable development objectives is crucial for promoting holistic approaches to address micronutrient deficiencies.

By prioritizing these future directions and recommendations, India can build resilience to micronutrient deficiencies, enhance agricultural productivity, and ensure food and nutritional security for its population.

Conclusion

Micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil pose significant challenges to agricultural sustainability, food security, and human health. The complex interplay of soil properties, agricultural practices, environmental factors, and socioeconomic conditions exacerbates the problem, necessitating a multifaceted approach for mitigation.

Effective management of micronutrient deficiencies requires a combination of soil-based interventions, agronomic practices, technological innovations, and policy support. By addressing the underlying causes of deficiencies and promoting sustainable agricultural practices, India can enhance soil fertility, improve crop productivity, and ensure nutritional security for its population.

Key strategies for addressing micronutrient deficiencies include balanced fertilizer application, soil amendments, biofortification, precision agriculture, capacity building, and policy support. These interventions should be tailored to regional variations in soil properties, cropping systems, and socio-economic contexts, emphasizing a holistic and context-specific approach.

Collaboration between government agencies, research institutions, private sector stakeholders, and civil society organizations is crucial for driving innovation, scaling up interventions, and promoting technology transfer. Public-private partnerships can facilitate investment in research and development, market access for nutrient-enriched fertilizers, and knowledge dissemination to farmers.

Moreover, aligning policies with national nutrition goals, sustainable development objectives, and climate resilience targets is essential for promoting holistic approaches to address micronutrient deficiencies. Policy frameworks should incentivize sustainable agricultural practices, support research and extension services, and prioritize investments in soil health and crop nutrition.

In conclusion, addressing micronutrient deficiencies in Indian soil requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, farmers, and consumers. By adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach, India can build resilience to nutrient deficiencies, enhance agricultural productivity, and improve the well-being of its population.

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