



# **Biofortified Vermicompost Mediated Induced Resistance Response in Tomato against *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici***

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*) is a widely cultivated and versatile fruit. Tomato production faces various constraints, both biotic and abiotic stresses. Fusarium wilt, caused by the soil-borne fungus *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici*, is a devastating disease that affects tomato plants worldwide, causing significant economic losses in tomato cultivation. In this study the potential use of biofortified vermicompost for wilt management was investigated. The biological control agents viz. *Trichoderma harzianum*, *Pseudomonas fluorescens* and *Bacillus subtilis* were used to fortify the vermicompost. The study monitored various antioxidants, plant growth indicators, and disease rates across designated treatments at different intervals. The findings revealed substantial differences: tomato plants treated with biofortified vermicompost showed notable reductions in disease occurrence, improved growth, increased yields, and heightened antioxidant activity

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compared to the control. Among these treatments, the most remarkable outcomes were observed in plants treated with *T. harzianum* fortified vermicompost, exhibiting the highest recorded values across the parameters studied. Data revealed that the Tomato plants treated with vermicompost fortified with *Trichoderma* showed maximum root length (14.95 cm) after 15 days of sowing followed by T-2 (11.25 cm) and T-3 (9.85 cm). Maximum dry weight was observed in plants treated with vermicompost fortified with *Trichoderma*. Maximum PAL, PO and PPO activity was recorded in leaves from plant grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum* (T1) at 48 h followed by T2, T3 and T4. The findings revealed tomato plants treated with biofortified vermicompost showed notable reductions in disease occurrence, improved growth, increased yields, and higher accumulation of defense enzyme activity compared to the control.

**Keywords:** Biofortified vermicompost; *Trichoderma harzianum*; *Pseudomonas fluorescens*; *Bacillus subtilis*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*) is a widely cultivated and versatile fruit that is commonly mistaken for a vegetable due to its culinary uses. Tomatoes are rich in essential nutrients such as vitamins (particularly vitamin C, K, and folate), minerals (like potassium), and antioxidants (such as lycopene) [1]. They are low in calories but high in beneficial compounds. Consumption of tomatoes is linked to several health benefits. Lycopene, a powerful antioxidant found in tomatoes, is associated with reducing the risk of certain cancers and promoting heart health. Additionally, their high vitamin C content supports the immune system and skin health. Tomatoes are a significant crop in global agriculture, providing economic livelihoods to many farmers. They are cultivated in diverse climates and regions, contributing to both local and international markets. Tomatoes are a staple ingredient in various cuisines worldwide. They are used in salads, sauces, soups, juices, and as a base for many dishes. The flavor and versatility of tomatoes make them a fundamental component in cooking.

Tomato production faces various constraints, both biotic and abiotic stresses. Among abiotic stresses temperature, draught, soil condition, nutritional deficiency and imbalance are very significant. Tomato plants are also attacked in both field and nursery by various plant pathogenic microorganism and insects. Among the biotic stresses fusarium wilt, early blight, damping off, septoria blotch, bacterial leaf spot and mosaic cause considerable losses in tomato. Fusarium wilt, caused by the soil-borne fungus *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici*, is a devastating disease that affects tomato plants worldwide, causing significant economic losses in tomato cultivation [2]. It colonizes the vascular

system of the plant, obstructing water and nutrient flow and leading to wilting and eventual death of the plant. The fungus enters the plant through the roots and spreads via the xylem vessels, clogging them with fungal mycelium, which restricts water uptake. It produces spores that persist in the soil, contributing to its long-term presence in affected areas [3]. Symptoms of Fusarium wilt typically start with wilting and yellowing of lower leaves, progressing upwards. As the disease advances, the entire plant wilts, leaves turn yellow or brown, and the plant eventually dies. Browning of vascular tissues in the stem may be visible upon close inspection. Fusarium wilt can lead to significant yield losses, especially in regions where susceptible tomato cultivars are grown continuously or where the pathogen is prevalent in the soil.

Integrated disease management, involving a combination of resistant cultivars, cultural practices, biological control, and soil management techniques, offers the most effective and sustainable approach in managing Fusarium wilt. Given the persistent nature of Fusarium wilt and its ability to survive in soil for extended periods, a holistic approach that combines various strategies tailored to the specific conditions of each farming system is crucial for effective management of this destructive disease in tomato crops.

Plant diseases pose significant challenges to global agriculture, affecting crop productivity and food security. Biological management using plant growth-promoting rhizobacteria (PGPR), particularly the antagonistic *Pseudomonas* spp., has become a robust strategy in controlling various soil-borne plant pathogens. Biocontrol agents such as *Pseudomonas fluorescens* and *Bacillus subtilis* are utilized as commercial biopesticides [4,5,6]. A wealth of studies

substantiates their remarkable capacity to effectively manage diverse diseases and nematodes that impact various host plant species. These biocontrol agents boast characteristics conducive to their survival in the rhizosphere. Additionally, they demonstrate diverse modes of action, including antibiosis, competition, promotion of plant growth, and the induction of systemic resistance against numerous pathogens.

Effective field application determines the success of a biocontrol agent (BCA). Previous studies conducted by Sowmya et al. [7] highlighted that combining BCAs with organic amendments such as neem cake or Farm Yard Manure significantly enhanced their antagonistic effects against nematodes and fungal pathogens. The utilization of organic amendments in soil is widely acknowledged as a highly effective method for managing soil-borne phytopathogens by altering the soil and rhizosphere conditions [8,9]. Organic matter plays a crucial role in disrupting the life cycle of pathogens, empowering plants to resist attacks by enhancing vigor and potentially altering root physiology. Vermicompost (VC), derived from earthworms processing biological waste, serves as a sustainable reservoir of both micro- and macro-nutrients. When integrated into horticultural container media, it revitalizes the soil, contributing to its vitality.

Traditional methods of disease management often involve the use of synthetic chemicals, which can have adverse effects on the environment and human health. In recent years, vermicompost has emerged as a promising eco-friendly alternative for plant disease management [10]. Vermicompost, a nutrient-rich organic fertilizer produced through the decomposition of organic matter by earthworms, has gained prominence as an effective tool in plant disease management (Sivasabari et al. 2023; Gudeta et al. 2022), [3]. Vermicompost contains beneficial microorganisms and compounds that exhibit suppressive effects on various plant pathogens. These microorganisms can outcompete or antagonize harmful pathogens, helping to prevent and manage diseases. The utilization of vermicompost offers several benefits that contribute to the overall health and resilience of plants. The application of vermicompost has been associated with the stimulation of the plant's natural defense mechanisms (Rehman et al. 2023), [3,1]. In this study efficacy of biofortified vermicompost was investigated against fungal plant pathogen *Fusarium*

*oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici* causing wilt in tomato.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Experimental Site

The *in vitro* experiments were conducted in the Laboratory of Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Allied Industries, Rama University, Kanpur, India. The *in vivo* experiments were carried out in the polyhouse and agricultural field of the same department, where tomato crop was raised in pots (15 x 10 cm) and field and all physical precautions were kept in view in order to protect the crop from the external damage. The site of the experiment was unaltered during experimentation period.

#### 2.1.1 Collection of diseased samples from different districts of Uttar Pradesh

**Survey for incidence of fusarium wilt from different zones of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and collection of diseased samples:** Random method of survey was carried out to record the severity of wilt in tomato. The survey was conducted during 2022-23 in ten districts of Uttar Pradesh i.e. Kanpur, Prayagraj, Lucknow, Unnao, Etawah, Orai, Kannauj, Varanasi, Hamirpur and Fatehpur. The observations on stage of crop and disease severity were recorded on the rating scale of (1-9). Tomato plants showing typical wilt symptoms were collected separately in paper bags and brought to the laboratory for isolation of associated pathogen and further investigations.

**Isolation of the pathogen:** The pathogen was isolated on PDA medium from infected root of tomato plant. A small portion of diseased tissue along with a portion of adjacent healthy tissue were cut into small pieces (3 to 5 mm in length) and then surface sterilized with 0.1% HgCl<sub>2</sub> for 30 sec. The pieces were then rinsed thrice with sterilized distilled water. Sterilized and rinsed pieces were inoculated aseptically on sterilized Petriplates containing PDA medium. The inoculated Petriplates were incubated at 20- 25 °C for 5-6 days. When the fungal colony developed, a small cut was made on mycelium with cork borer and was transferred on another Petriplate containing PDA medium to obtain pure culture. The mycelial bit was also transferred to fresh PDA slants in order to store it for future use.

### **Maintenance and storing of the pathogen:**

The pure culture of the pathogen *F. oxysporum* was maintained on PDA slants throughout the period of investigation by periodic sub culturing on fresh media and stored in a refrigerator at 4 °C.

## **2.2 Pathogenicity Test**

Tomato seeds were surface sterilized by using 1% sodium hypochlorite for 30 sec and was rinsed twice with sterilized distilled water and then air-dried. Soil mixture containing sandy loam soil, and farmyard manure (2:1) was autoclaved for 30 min at 15 lbs pressure for three consecutive days. Half amount of soil was also mixed with crushed mycelial powder of *F. oxysporum*. The seeds were sown in 15 × 10 cm<sup>2</sup> pots under greenhouse conditions. Untreated seeds sown in pathogen infected and pathogen uninfected soil served as positive and negative controls, respectively.

## **2.3 Preparation of Vermicompost**

“Temple, farmyard and kitchen wastes were used as feedstock in the present study. The temple wastes mainly consisted of *Aegle marmelos* leaves, *Datura stramonium*, *Tagetes erecta* and *Hibiscus rosasinensis* flowers” [11]. The offerings were collected from different temples in the city but the bulk from two temples namely “ISKON” and “JK Temple” which receive most of the devotees. “The kitchen wastes were collected from the cafeteria of hostels in the Rama University which had major share of fruit and vegetable peels (60–75%) and the remainder consisted of used tea leaves, flour, rice, bread, noodles, cooked vegetables and potatoes. Flesh, bones, fat, egg shells, etc. were not included in the kitchen waste as they are not easily degradable and can be toxic to earthworms. The yard wastes mainly consisted of dried deciduous leaves (a mixture of *Mangifera indica*, *Saraka asoka*, *Syzygiumcumini*, *Tamarindus indica* and various grasses). Six opaque, rectangular plastic boxes with dimensions measuring 340 cm × 160 cm × 60 cm, were used for vermicomposting and 45 holes, each of diameter 0.65 cm, were drilled at the base of the container for allowing proper exchange of gases. The experiment was set up in a randomized complete block design with three replications of each type of feedstock. Each feed stocks were kept for 2–3 days and thoroughly mixed before placing in the plastic boxes to avoid clumping and compaction of the substrates following addition of water in each of

the three feedstock, mature cow dung was added at a ratio of about 1:7 to provide an instant source of food to the earthworms. Finally the boxes were covered with a layer of soil for decomposition. Adult *clitellate* worms, *Eisenia fetida*, ranging in length from 4 to 8 cm were added at the rate of 1.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup> through the developed cracks after 15 days of partial decomposition of waste to prevent worms from the thermophilic reaction occurring during composting. The moisture content of the feedstock was adjusted to 70 ± 10% at the start of vermicomposting and maintained throughout the period of vermicomposting by periodic sprinkling of water. Watering was stopped when the VC was ready as indicated by uniform dark brown to black coloured granular structure. Three days later the compost along with worms was harvested and the worms were removed by sieving (≤2 mm)” [11].

### **2.3.1 Microbial fortification of vermicompost**

Vermicompost was fortified separately with the selected biocontrol agents. A litre of three days old bacterial culture grown in NB with CFU count approximately 2×10<sup>8</sup> was added to 30 Kg of freshly harvested vermicompost in separate trays. 1 litre of *T. harzianum* culture grown in PDB with 4×10<sup>7</sup> was added to 30 Kg of vermicompost separately.

### **2.3.2 Biological management of fusarium wilt of tomato using biofortified vermicompost**

**Source of BCAs used and viability test:** The biological control agents used in this study viz. *Trichoderma harzianum*, *Pseudomonas fluorescens* and *Bacillus subtilis* were obtained from the culture repository of Plant Health Clinic Laboratory of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences and Allied Industries, Rama University, Kanpur, India.

### **In vitro Efficacy of BCAs against pathogen:**

“The antagonistic ability of selected BCAs against the pathogen was studied *in vitro* following a dual culture assay as described by Verma et al. [12]. A nine mm disc (plug) of 15 days old cultures of *F. oxysporum* sp. *lycopersici* were cut with a sharp cork borer from the growing edge of the culture plate. The cut block was placed on PDA medium 1 cm away from the edge of the plate. 9 mm disc of biocontrol agent namely *T. harzianum* isolate was placed at opposite end of the Petri plate.

PDA plates inoculated with the pathogen alone served as the control and incubated at 25±2°C” [3].

“Similarly, the *in vitro* antagonistic ability of the bacterial isolates was studied using a dual culture assay” described by Azadeh et al. [13]. “A 9 mm plug of the *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici* was placed at the centre of a Petri plate containing PDA, then the test bacterial isolate was streaked 3 cm away from the fungal plug at both the sides towards edge of the plate by a loop loaded with 48 h old bacterial culture. The plates were incubated at 28± 2°C for 7 days and the inhibition zone was measured from the edge of mycelium to the bacterial streaks, when the control plates showed full growth” (Shanmugam et al., 2011). Per cent inhibition over control was calculated as per the following formulae given by Whipps (1997):

$$PI = \frac{C - T}{C} \times 100$$

Where,

PI = per cent inhibition over control C = Growth of test pathogen with absence of antagonist (mm). T = Growth of test pathogen with antagonist (mm)

### 2.3.3 Microbial fortification of vermicompost

“The three BCAs viz. *T. harzianum*, *P. fluorescens* and *B. subtilis* used in this study were chosen because of their compatibility and ascertained ability to reduce the soilborne diseases in various crops [11]. All these selected BCAs were used to fortify the vermicompost individually. 1L of 2 days old bacterial cultures grown in NB with CFU count approximately 2×10<sup>8</sup> was thoroughly mixed with 25 kg of freshly prepared vermicompost in separate trays while 1L of 5 days old *T. harzianum* culture grown in PDB with CFU count approximately 4×10<sup>7</sup> was used to fortify other separate vermicompost tray (25 kg each). Trays were kept under shade and covered with dark polythene sheet for 10 days for acclimatization of BCAs” [3].

## 2.4 Experimental Details

Tomato seeds were surface sterilized by using 1% sodium hypochlorite for 30 sec and was rinsed twice with sterilized distilled water and then air-dried.

## 2.5 Pot Experiments

“Plastic pots of 15 cm ×10 cm were used to conduct the plant growth promotion and antagonistic potentials of fortified vermicompost against *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici*. Soil was autoclaved for 30 min at 15 psi for three consecutive days. Pots were filled with soil mixture containing sterile soil and microbially fortified vermicompost in the ratio of 1:1 (w/w) (1.5 kg pot<sup>-1</sup>). In the first three treatments, vermicompost was fortified individually with *T. harzianum*, *B. subtilis*, and *P. fluorescens* cultures as described above. Fourth treatment contained only vermicompost (positive control), while the fifth treatment contained only soil (Negative control)” [3].

## 2.6 Pathogen Inoculation

The spore suspension of inoculum was prepared by pouring 20 ml of sterile distilled water in each culture plate of 5-7 days old fungal mycelium and then gently scraped using spore harvester. The concentration of conidia was adjusted to 2-3×10<sup>7</sup> conidia ml<sup>-1</sup> using haemocytometer. 5 ml of prepared spore suspension was used to inoculate each seedling in all five treatments using soil drenching method. Before inoculation, the roots were slightly severed (wounded) by inserting a needle, 1 cm away from the stem. Root severing was done to ensure pathogen penetration through roots. Observations were recorded on wilt symptoms for up to 5 weeks.

## 2.7 Observations Recorded

Random sampling technique was adopted for recording the observations of various morpho-physiological characters after 30, 60 and 90 days after sowing (DAS).

**Table1. Combination of treatments used for conducting experiment**

Treatment No.	Treatment
T <sub>1</sub>	Vermicompost + <i>Trichoderma harzianum</i> + Pathogen
T <sub>2</sub>	Vermicompost+ <i>Bacillus subtilis</i> + Pathogen
T <sub>3</sub>	Vermicompost + <i>Pseudomonas fluorescens</i> + Pathogen
T <sub>4</sub>	Vermicompost + Pathogen
T <sub>5</sub>	Control (Only vermicompost)

Three plants of each treatment from each replication were selected at random at the time of recording the data on various characters. Data of the plants were averaged replication wise and mean data was used for statistical analysis. Recommended package of practices were applied to raise a healthy crop.

## 2.8 Morphological Parameters

**Shoot length (cm):** It was measured in centimeter from the ground level (base of the plant) to the tip of the main axis of the plant after stretching the main shoot of plant at the time span of 30 days after sowing with the help of meter scale.

**Length of roots (cm):** It was measured in centimeter from the ground level (base of the plant) to the tip of the main root of the plant at the time span of 30 days after sowing with the help of meter scale.

**Dry weight (g):** After washing the plants in the tap water and softly wiped with using blotting paper, fresh weight was determined by using an electronic balance (Sartorius BT-224S) and the values were expressed in grams. After taking fresh weight, the plants were placed to 100°C pre-heated hot air oven for one hour. Then they were placed in an oven, maintained at 60±2°C for drying purpose. The weight was measured regularly and expressed in grams

## 2.9 Biochemical Analysis

“Biochemical analysis for determination of different antioxidants and ROS (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) in the leaves of tomato plants at different time intervals after pathogen inoculation was performed” according to the method of Singh et al. [11]. “The enzymatic assays namely phenylalanine ammonia-lyase (PAL), peroxidase (PO), polyphenol oxidase (PPO), superoxide dismutase (SOD) and total phenol content (TPC) was performed after 0, 24, 48, 72 and 96 h pathogen inoculation” as described by Jain et al. [14].

**Superoxide dismutase (SOD) assay:** SOD (EC 1.15.1.1) activity was assayed following the method of Fridovich (1974) by measuring the ability of enzyme extract from samples to inhibit photochemical reduction of nitroblue tetrazolium (NBT) chloride. Fresh leaves (0.1 g) from each of the treatments were homogenized in 2.0 ml of extraction buffer (0.1 mol l<sup>-1</sup> phosphate buffer

containing 0.5 mmol l<sup>-1</sup> EDTA at pH 7.5) in a prechilled mortar and pestle. The homogenate was centrifuged at 15 000 g for 20 min at 4 °C. The reaction mixture contained 200 mmol l<sup>-1</sup> methionine, 2.25 mmol l<sup>-1</sup> NBT, 3 mmol<sup>-1</sup> l EDTA, 100 mmol l<sup>-1</sup> phosphate buffer (pH 7.8), 1.5 mol l<sup>-1</sup> sodium carbonate and enzyme extract. The final volume was maintained to 3 ml. Reaction was started by adding 2 l mol l<sup>-1</sup> riboflavin (0.4 ml), and the tubes were illuminated with two 15 W fluorescent lamps for 15 min. Reaction mixture without enzyme served as control. The reaction was terminated by putting the light off and keeping the tubes in dark until the absorbance was recorded at 560 nm. One unit of the SOD activity was defined as the amount of enzyme reducing the absorbance to 50% in comparison to control lacking enzyme.

### **Phenylalanine ammonia-lyase (PAL) assay:**

Leaf sample of 0.1 g from each of the treatments was homogenized in 2 ml of (0.1 mol l<sup>-1</sup> sodium borate buffer (pH 7.0; 4 °C) containing 1.4 m mol l<sup>-1</sup> β-mercaptoethanol and centrifuged at 16000 rpm at 4 °C for 15 min. The supernatant was used as enzyme source. To the reaction mixture containing 0.2 ml of enzyme extract, 0.5ml of 0.2 mol l<sup>-1</sup> borate buffer (pH 8.7) and 1.3 ml of water were added. The reaction was initiated by the addition of 1ml of 0.1 mol l<sup>-1</sup> phenylalanine (pH-8.7) and incubated for 30 min at 32 °C. The reaction was terminated by addition of 0.5 ml of trichloroacetic acid (TCA, 1 M). PAL (EC 4.1.3.5) activity was measured following the formation of trans-cinnamic acid at 290 nm as described by Brueske [15] and was expressed in terms of μmol l<sup>-1</sup> TCA per g fresh weight (FW).

**Total phenolic content (TPC) assay:** The TPC was determined following the method of Zheng and Shetty [16]. Leaf tissue (0.1 g) was placed in 5 ml of 95% ethanol and kept at 0 °C for 48 h. The samples were homogenized individually and centrifuged at 13000 rpm for 10 min. To 1 ml of the supernatant, 1 ml of 95% ethanol and 5 ml of sterile distilled water and 0.5ml of 50% Folin–Ciocalteu reagent were added, and the content was mixed thoroughly. After 5 min, 1 ml of 5% sodium carbonate was added, the reaction mixture was allowed to stand for 1 h and the absorbance of the colour developed was recorded at 725 nm. Standard curves were prepared for each assay using various concentrations of gallic acid (GA; Sigma-Aldrich-27645) in 95% ethanol. Absorbance values were converted to mg GA equivalents (GAE) g<sup>-1</sup> FW.

**Polyphenol oxidase (PPO) assay:** Leaf samples (0.1 g) were homogenized with 2 ml ice cold phosphate buffer (0.1 mol l<sup>-1</sup>, pH 6.5). The homogenate was centrifuged at 16000 rpm for 30 min at 40°C and the resulting supernatant thus obtained was used directly in the enzyme assay. The reaction mixture contained 0.4 ml catechol (1m mol L<sup>-1</sup>) in 3 ml sodium phosphate buffer (0.05 mol L<sup>-1</sup>; pH 6.5) and 0.4 ml enzyme extract. Reaction mixture containing only substrate served as control. Catechol was used as substrate for PPO (EC 1.14.18.1) and increase in absorbance was recorded at 405 nm [17]. The linear portion of the activity curve was used to express PPO enzyme activity as change in O.D. min<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> FW.

**Peroxidase (PO) assay:** PO (EC 1.11.1.7) activity was assayed by the method of Hammerschmidt et al. [18], with slight modification. Leaf samples (0.1 g) were homogenized separately in 2 ml of 0.1 mol l<sup>-1</sup> phosphate buffer (pH 7.0), at 4°C, centrifuged at 16000 x g at 4°C for 15 min and the supernatant was used as enzyme source. The reaction mixture consisted of 1.5 ml pyrogallol (0.05 mol L<sup>-1</sup>), 0.05 ml enzyme extract and 0.5 ml H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (1% v/v). Reaction mixture without the enzyme served as control. The changes in the absorbance at 420 nm were recorded after 30s intervals for 3 min. The enzyme activity was expressed as change in the U min<sup>-1</sup> g<sup>-1</sup> FW.

## 2.10 Determination of Disease Incidence

“The disease incidence was recorded on a scale of 0–4 referring to the degree of wilt” as reported by Song et al. [19] where “scale zero refers to healthy plant without any wilt symptoms. On the other hand scale four refers to complete wilted plants. The scale 1, 2 and 3 refers to different degrees of wilt which indicates the scale of disease severity. The scale 1- plant showed yellowing of leaves and wilting ranging from 1-20%; scale 2- plant showed yellowing leaves and wilting ranging from 21-40%; scale 3- plant showed yellowing leaves and wilting ranging from 41-60%. Scale 4- is when all leaves become yellow as an indication of complete infection. Disease incidence is a parameter which includes disease percentage and disease severity” according to Song et al. [19] as given below:

$$\text{Disease incidence (\%)} = \frac{\sum \text{scale} \times \text{number of plants infected}}{\text{highest scale} \times \text{total number of plants}}$$

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Isolation, Purification and Maintenance of *F. oxysporum* isolates

The isolates purified and identified as *F. oxysporum* based on morphological and cultural characters using the descriptions given by C.M.I (1970). The isolates were designated serially from Fol 1 to Fol 20. The purified isolates were maintained in PDA slants and stored at 4°C for further use.

### 3.2 Test of Pathogenicity of *F. oxysporum* isolates

After isolation and purification of *F. oxysporum* from the collected samples, they were subjected to the pathogenicity tests on susceptible genotype of tomato cultivar ‘Kashi Amrit’ through soil inoculation method. Out of 20 isolates of *F. oxysporum* tested for pathogenicity, 10 isolates showed typical wilt symptoms like drooping and wilting of lower leaves. Plants showed yellowing of the lower leaves, occasional formation of adventitious roots, wilting of leaves and young stems, defoliation, marginal necrosis of the remaining leaves, and finally death of the plant. Thus, 10 isolates showed positive result for Koch’s postulate while the remaining 10 isolates failed to prove Koch’s postulate indicating their non-pathogenicity to tomato. Those 10 isolates which showed positive results for Koch’s postulate were selected for further study. The selected isolates were named as Fol 1, Fol 2, Fol 6 Fol 8, Fol 9, Fol 12, Fol 16, Fol 17, Fol 19 and Fol 20 (Table 2). The colony characteristics of these isolates were studied. These selected isolates were further studied for per cent disease incidence (PDI) through ‘soil inoculation’ method. The results of pathogenicity are presented in Table 2.

### Study of the effect of selected isolates of *F. oxysporum* on tomato in pots:

The studies of per cent disease incidence (PDI) of 10 selected isolates of *F. oxysporum* were studied by soil inoculation methods in pots under greenhouse conditions. The data were recorded from 30 DAI to 120 DAI (Table 3). It is evident from Table 3, none of the isolate showed PDI up to 30 DAI while four isolates i.e. Fol 2, Fol 8, Fol 16 and Fol 17 recorded PDI of 19.52%, 16.43%, 16.21% and 18.55%, respectively at 60 DAI. All the ten isolates recorded different levels of PDI at 90 DAI. Maximum PDI i.e 35.55% was recorded in treatment with Fol 2 followed by 30.12% PDI by

Fol 8 and similarly the values of PDI decreased with other isolates. Fol 2 recorded the highest PDI amongst all isolate from 60-120 DAI while Fol 8 recorded the second highest position from 90-120 DAI. Four other isolates i.eFol1, Fol 2, Fol 12, Fol 16 and Fol 17 also recorded PDI more than 70.0% while the remaining ones i.eFol 6, Fol 9, Fol 19 and Fol 20 recorded PDI less than 70.0%.

From the observations of Table 3, Fol 2 isolated from Varanasi, was found to be the most aggressive amongst the ten isolates of *F. oxysporum*, and thus was selected as test pathogen for carrying out further experiments.

### 3.3 Biological Management of Fusarium Wilt of Tomato Using Biofortified Vermicompost *In vitro* Efficacy of BCAs against Pathogen

The above described BCAs were evaluated for antagonistic activities against *F. oxysporum* sp. *lycopersici* after 4 days in dual culture assay. Table 4 shows that the bioagents significantly reduced the radial growth of *F. oxysporum* sp. *lycopersici*. *T. harzianum* showed more antagonistic activity than *B. subtilis* and *P. fluorescens* against the radial growth of *F. oxysporum* sp. *lycopersici*.

**Table 2. Test of pathogenicity of *F. oxysporum* isolates collected from different districts of Uttar Pradesh**

S. No.	Isolate name	Root rot symptoms	Koch postulates
1	Fol 1	+ve	+ve
2	Fol 2	+ve	+ve
3	Fol 3	-ve	-ve
4	Fol 4	-ve	-ve
5	Fol 5	-ve	-ve
6	Fol 6	+ve	+ve
7	Fol 7	-ve	-ve
8	Fol 8	+ve	+ve
9	Fol 9	+ve	+ve
10	Fol 10	-ve	-ve
11	Fol 11	-ve	-ve
12	Fol 12	+ve	+ve
13	Fol 13	-ve	-ve
14	Fol 14	-ve	-ve
15	Fol 15	-ve	-ve
16	Fol 16	+ve	+ve
17	Fol 17	+ve	+ve
18	Fol 18	-ve	-ve
19	Fol 19	+ve	+ve
20	Fol 20	+ve	+ve

**Table 3. Effect of selected *F. oxysporum* isolates on disease incidence of tomato through soil inoculation method. Results are expressed as mean of triplicates ± S.D**

Name of the isolates	Per cent disease incidence (%)				
	Days after inoculation				
	30	60	90	105	120
Control	0 ±0	0 ±0	0 ±0	0 ±0	0 ±0
Fol 1	0 ±0	0 ±0	23.63 ±5.25	47.95 ±8.22	70.25 ±13.41
Fol 2	0 ±0	19.52 ±5.25	35.55 ±7.33	53.85 ±8.33	89.63 ±14.33
Fol6	0 ±0	0 ±0	22.75 ±6.38	42.32 ±9.75	65.85 ±14.33
Fol8	0 ±0	16.43 ±5.25	30.12 ±6.25	47.51 ±8.22	81.25 ±10.25
Fol 9	0 ±0	0 ±0	21.40 ±8.45	31.42 ±9.25	62.70 ±12.33
Fol 12	0 ±0	0 ±0	26.52 ±6.38	41.77 ±14.33	71.35 ±12.25
Fol 16	0 ±0	16.21 ±6.38	27.31 ±6.25	43.63 ±14.33	73.53 ±13.55
Fol 17	0 ±0	18.55 ±6.78	22.11 ±7.22	44.36 ±8.55	77.52 ±13.11
Fol 19	0 ±0	0 ±0	23.55 ±8.11	37.11 ±5.85	64.47 ±10.12
Fol 20	0 ±0	0 ±0	22.18 ±6.22	39.56 ±5.22	65.36 ±13.11



**Table 4. Effect of bioagents on the growth of *F. oxysporum* sp. *Lycopersici***

Microbial strain	Radial growth (cm)	Inhibition Percentage (%)
<i>B. subtilis</i>	1±0.1 <sup>b</sup>	88.86±1.66 <sup>c</sup>
<i>P. fluorescens</i>	1.45±0.02 <sup>c</sup>	83.88±0.2 <sup>b</sup>
<i>T. harzianum</i>	0.46±0.15 <sup>a</sup>	95.18±1.69 <sup>d</sup>
Control	9.0±0 <sup>d</sup>	0.0±0 <sup>a</sup>

**Table 5. Microbial dynamics after fortification of vermicompost**

BCAs	0 day after fortification (CFUg <sup>-1</sup> )	10 days after fortification (CFU g <sup>-1</sup> )
<i>B. subtilis</i>	2×10 <sup>7</sup> ±0.52 <sup>a</sup>	6.9×10 <sup>8</sup> ±0.61 <sup>b</sup>
<i>P. fluorescens</i>	1.8×10 <sup>8</sup> ±0.74 <sup>b</sup>	4.4×10 <sup>7</sup> ±0.81 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Trichoderma</i> sp.	3.3×10 <sup>6</sup> ±0.08 <sup>a</sup>	5.6×10 <sup>6</sup> ±0.06 <sup>a</sup>

The dynamics of microbial population observed in biofortified vermicompost 10 days after fortification indicated that there was a high adaptability of the selected BCAs.

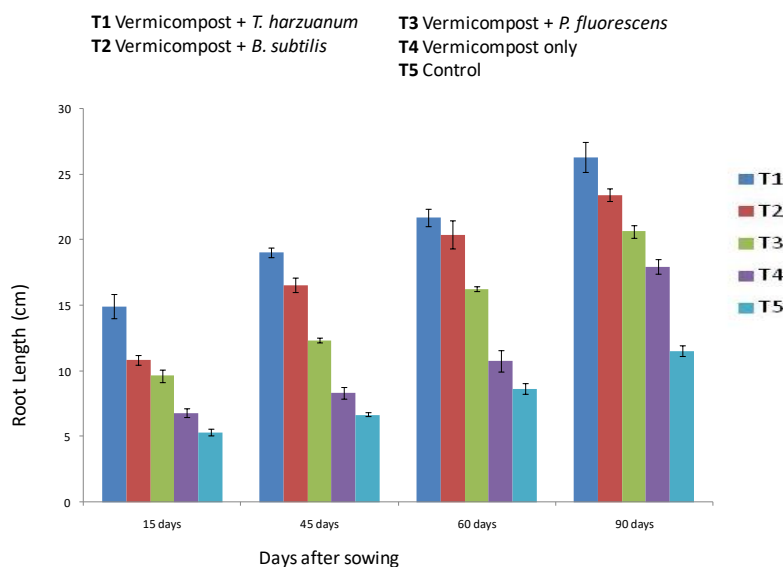
### 3.4 Survival of BCAs in Vermicompost

“Total microbial population present in vermicompost was determined before fortification with selected microbes. The isolation was done using serial dilution method with suitable media NA and PDA for bacteria and fungi, respectively. Large number of fungal and bacterial species including *Aspergillus*, *Fusarium*, *Mucor*, *Penicillium* and *Trichoderma* were present in the vermicompost. However, we estimated only three BCAs of our interest, i.e. *P. fluorescens*, *Bacillus* sp. and *Trichoderma* sp. The colonies formed with BCAs were expressed as CFU g<sup>-1</sup>. The isolation showed that among the bacteria grown on NA plate, the population of *Bacillus* was approximately 6×10<sup>6</sup> (CFU g<sup>-1</sup>). No colonies could have been identified as *P. fluorescens*. The population of *Trichoderma* sp. was found at the level of 8×10<sup>4</sup> (CFU g<sup>-1</sup>). Re-isolation of

selected BCAs after ten days of biofortification of vermicompost revealed that the population of *B. subtilis*, *P. fluorescens* and *T. harzianum* were 6.9×10<sup>8</sup>, 4.4×10<sup>7</sup> and 5.6×10<sup>6</sup> CFU g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively” [3].

### 3.5 Effect of Various Treatments on Growth Parameters of Tomato Crop

**Root length:** The influence of different microbes used for fortification of vermicompost on the growth characters was clearly observed after 15 days of transplanting. All treated plants showed significant improvement in root length in comparison to the control. Tomato plants treated with vermicompost fortified with *Trichoderma* showed maximum root length (14.95 cm) after 15 days of sowing followed by T-2 (11.25 cm) and T-3 (9.85 cm). Similar trends were observed after 45, 60 and 90 days after sowing (Fig. 1).

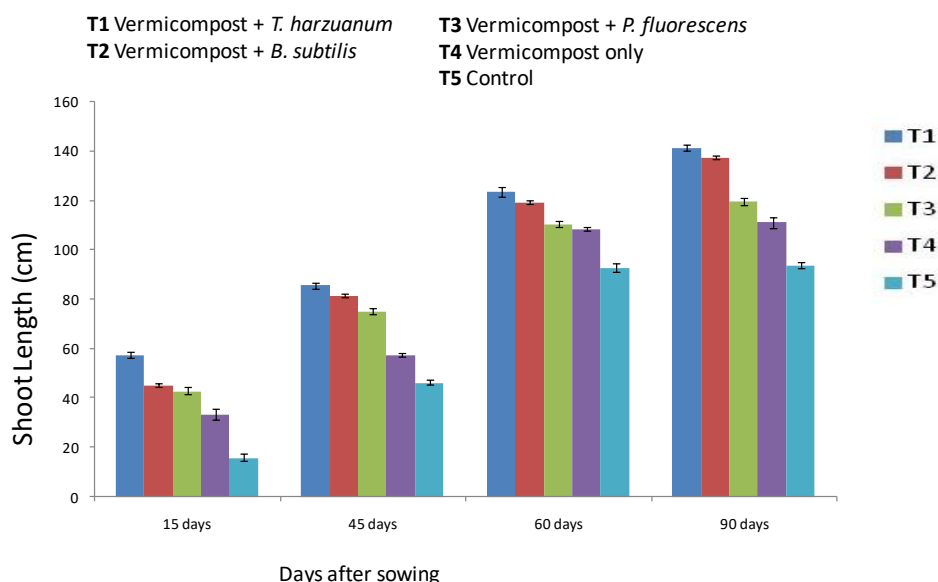


**Fig. 1. Effect of different treatments on root length of tomato**

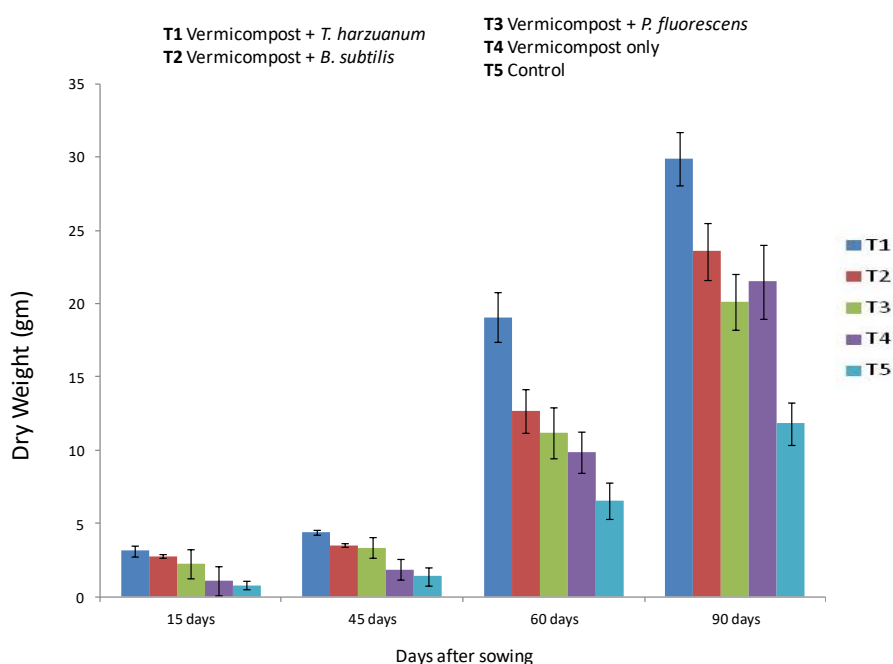
**Shoot length:** Shoot length was recorded at 15, 45, 60 and 90 days after sowing. Tomato plants treated with vermicompost fortified with *Trichoderma* showed maximum shoot length at every interval. Maximum shoot length 57.5 cm was observed in T-1 followed by T-2 (45.13 cm) and T-3 (42.25 cm) after 15 DAS. Similar pattern was observed after 45, 60 and 90 days after sowing. After 90 DAS maximum shoot length was observed in T-1

(142.25 cm). After 90 DAS significant difference was observed in treated and control plants (Fig. 2).

**Dry weight:** Dry weight was recorded at 15, 45, 60 and 90 days after sowing. Maximum dry weight was observed in plants treated with vermicompost fortified with *Trichoderma*. After 15 DAS, 3.15 g dry weight was in T-1 followed by T-2 and T3 (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2. Effect of different treatments on shoot length of tomato**



**Fig. 3. Effect of different on treatments on dry weighth of tomato**

### 3.6 Effect of Biofortified Vermicompost on Defense Related Enzymes in Tomato Plants Challenged with *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *Lycopersici*

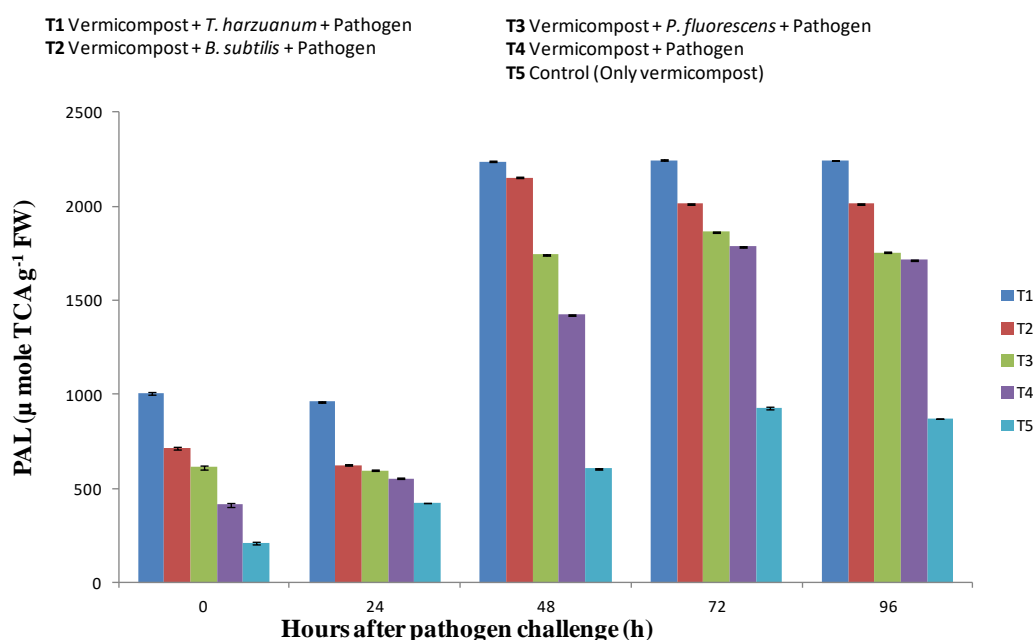
**Phenylalanine Ammonia Lyase (PAL):** PAL levels increased significantly in all treatments up to 48 h, followed by a decline in its activity. Maximum PAL activity was recorded in leaves from plant grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum* (T1) at 48 h followed by T2, T3 and T4. At 48 h T1 showed 3.6 fold increases in PAL activity in comparison to control. At the same time T2, T3 showed 3.5 and 2.5 fold increase in PAL accumulation when compared to control. Plants from non fortified vermicompost also showed higher PAL accumulation in comparison to the control. At 48 h plant only with vermicompost (T4) showed 2.3 fold increase in PAL accumulation when compared to control (Fig. 4).

**Peroxidase (PO):** PO levels increased significantly in all treatments up to 72 h, followed by a decline in its activity. Maximum PO activity was recorded in leaves from plant grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum*(T1) at 72 h followed by T2, T3 and T4. At 72 h T1 showed 8.2 fold increase in PO accumulation in comparison to control. At the same time T2 and

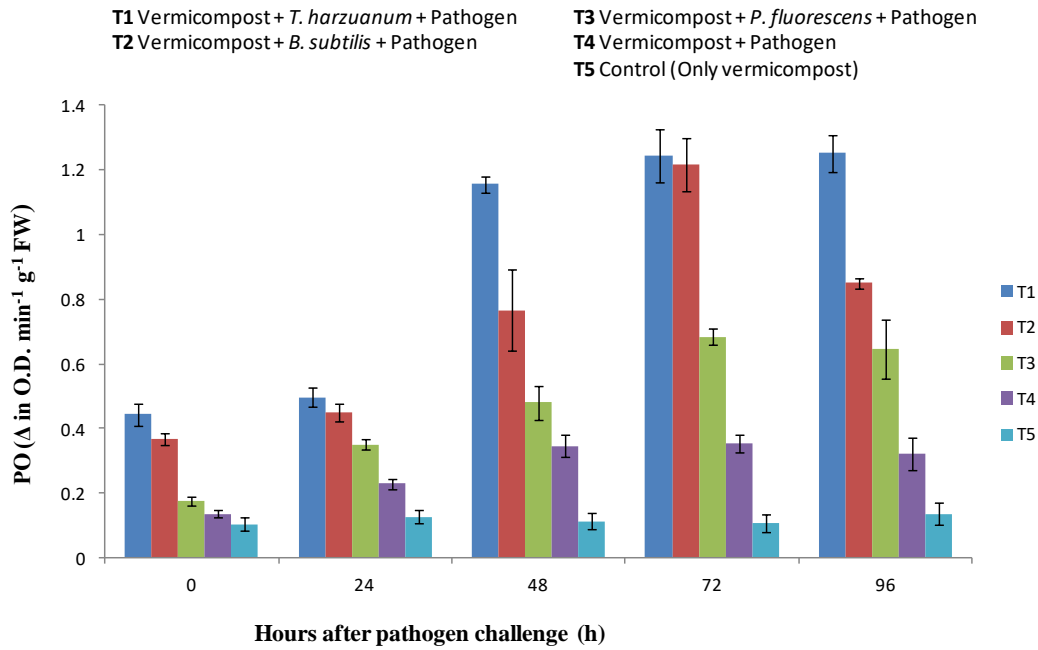
T3 showed 7.5 and 4.5 fold increase in PO activity in comparison to control. Plants from only vermicompost also showed higher PO accumulation in comparison to the control. At 48 h and 72 h plant only with vermicompost (T4) showed 3.09 and 2.3 fold increase in PO accumulation when compared to control (Fig. 5).

**Polyphenol oxydase (PPO):** PPO levels increased significantly in all treatments up to 72 h, followed by a decline in its activity. Maximum PO activity was recorded in leaves from plant grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum*(T1) at 72 h followed by T2, T3 and T4. At 72 h T1 showed 5.4 fold increase in PPO accumulation in comparison to control. At 72 h plant only with vermicompost (T4) showed 2.3 fold increases in PPO accumulation when compared to control (Fig. 6).

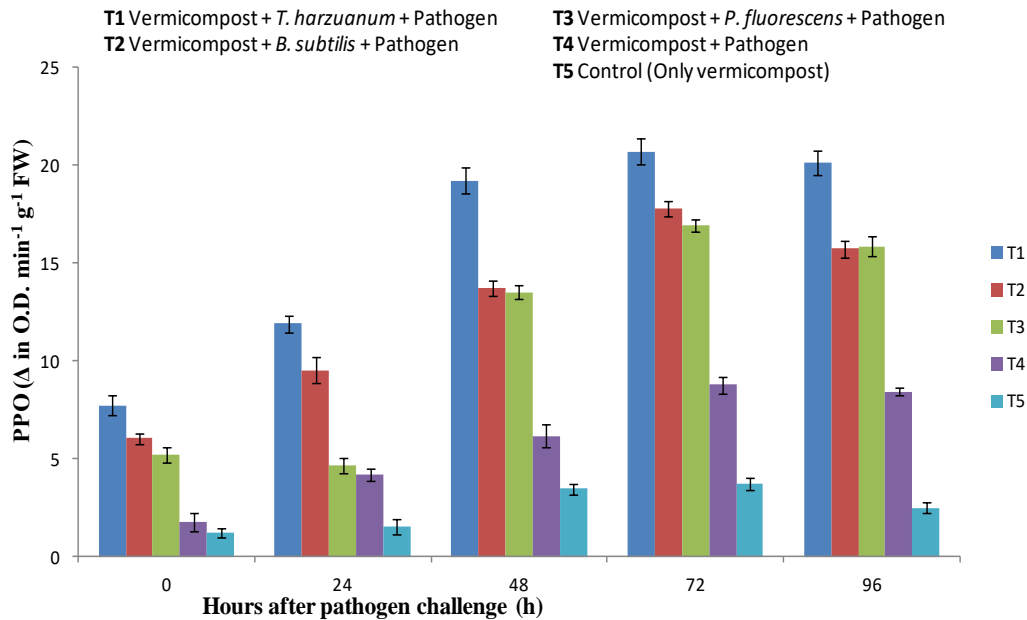
**Total phenol content (TPC):** The TPC followed a similar trend that of PAL with maximum increment at 48 h in T1 followed by a sharp decline in its activity. The amount of TPC content shows significant variation among different treatments. The highest phenolic content was observed at 48 h in T1. The total phenolic content was higher by 6.5, 5.4, 3.9 and 3.8 fold in T1, T2, T3 and T4 respectively, in comparison to control at 48 h (Fig. 7).



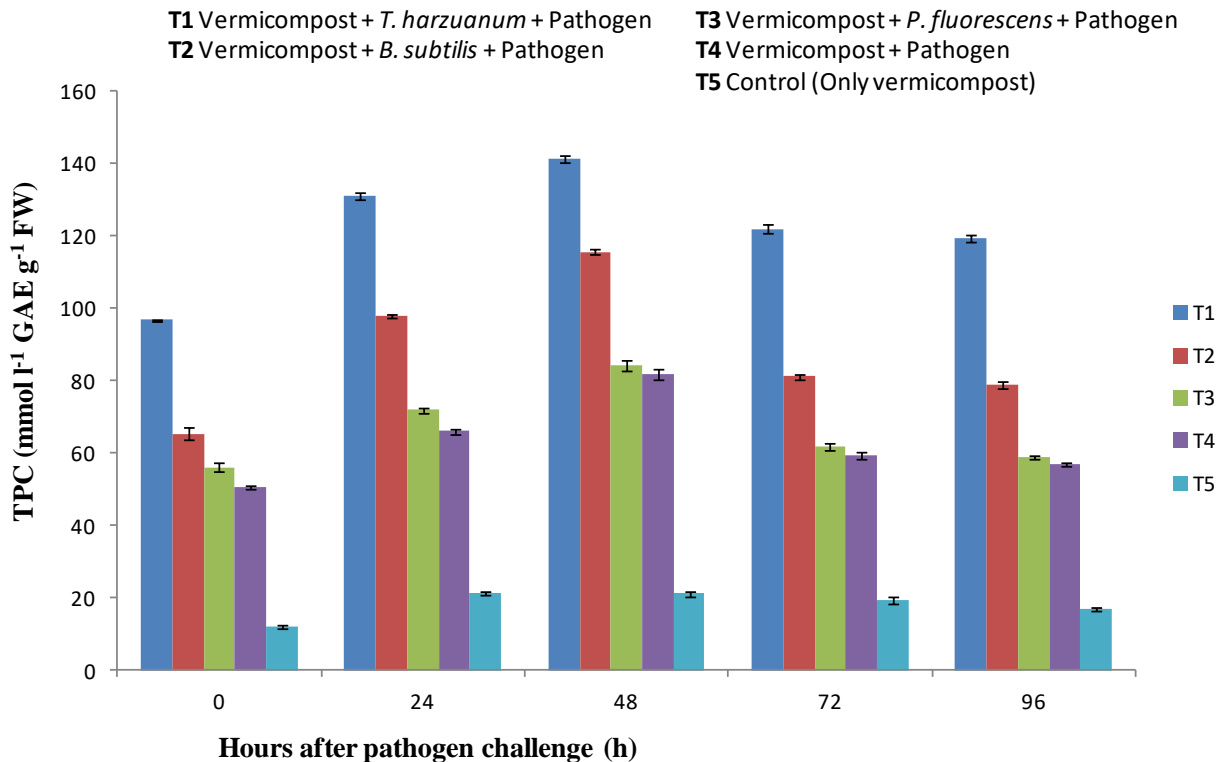
**Fig. 4.** PAL activity at different time intervals in tomato raised from seeds sown in soil amended with biofortified vermicompost challenged with *F. oxysporum*. Results are expressed as means of three replicates and vertical bars indicate standard deviation of the mean. Different letters indicate significant difference among treatment results taken at same time interval according to Duncan's multiple range test at  $p \leq 0.05$



**Fig. 5. Effect of microbial fortified vermicompost on PO activity. Results were expressed as means of three replicates and vertical bars indicate standard deviation of the means. Different letters indicate significant differences among treatments of results taken at same time interval according to Duncan's multiple range test at  $P \leq 0.05$**



**Fig. 6. Effect of microbial fortified vermicompost on PPO activity. Different letters indicate significant differences among treatments of results taken at the same time interval according to Duncan's multiple range test at  $P \leq 0.05$**



**Fig. 7. Effect of microbial fortified vermicompost on TPC. Different letters indicate significant differences among treatments of results taken at the same time interval according to Duncan's multiple range test at  $P \leq 0.05$**

The BCAs viz. *Bacillus*, *Pseudomonas* and *Trichoderma* used in the present study are well known to control *F. oxysporum* [20,21,3,14]. It is also evident from the results of this study that these rhizospheric strains showed very high levels of antagonistic activity against the test pathogen. Production of cell wall degrading enzymes, HCN and siderophores can be correlated with their antagonistic activity against test pathogen. Several studies have demonstrated that production of siderophores, HCN and lytic enzymes by *Pseudomonas*, *Bacillus* and *Trichoderma* strains resulted in effective control of plant pathogens [22,23].

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Effect of Microbial Fortified Vermicompost on Growth Parameters of Tomato Crop

It is widely accepted that use of composts and vermicomposts as soil amendments could improve soil nutrient status, promote soil health and improved most of the characteristics of crop plants compared with synthetic fertilizer. The introduction of biofortified vermicompost led to

the significant results in terms of yield enhancement and reduction of disease incidence. The results presented in this study showed that there was a clear difference in growth promotion in tomato plants grown in microbial fortified vermicompost as well as in vermicompost alone. Highly significant variations were observed in root length, shoot length and dry weight among the treatments. Results of the current study are in accordance with the report of Wang et al. [24] who reported that the application of vermicompost in addition with other bioinoculants in tomato promoted growth. In their study using different treatments, it was found that maximum growth in tomato plants was obtained where a combination of different treatments i.e. vermicompost, *Bacillus pumilus*, *Trichoderma* and a mycorrhizal fungus *Glomus mosseaewere* used. Similar results were also reported by Bachman and Metzger [25] who stated positive effect on productivity enhancement and nematode management through vermicompost and bio-pesticides in brinjal. The findings of this study are also in agreement with experimental findings which showed that vermicompost or its combination with *Pseudomonas fluorescens* based biopesticide have played a vital role in promoting growth in tomato [26].

## 4.2 Effect of Fortified Vermicompost on Activity of Defense Related Enzymes in Tomato

Plants contain a range of mechanisms to protect themselves against invading phytopathogens. Treatment with biofortified vermicompost may accelerate cellular defense responses which is most economical substitute are only expressed when plant is challenged with pathogen. Results from the present investigation indicated that tomato plants with biofortified vermicompost exhibited higher levels of defense related enzyme activity and accumulated phenols in leaves when challenged with *F. oxysporum*. ISR develops systemically in response to colonization of plant roots by beneficial microorganisms from vermicompost and selected BCAs [27]. Such cellular responses also include an early oxidative burst and a stronger upregulation of defense genes [14]. Induction of defense proteins and enzymes in the present study can be correlated as a defense response triggered against pathogen invasion in tomato. The results obtained demonstrate that treatment with biofortified vermicompost led to many fold increase in the activities of defense related enzymes such as PAL, PO, PPO, SOD and phenols, suggesting their role in disease resistance. Maximum enzyme activities were recorded in the plants treated with vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum*.

Phenols have diverse roles in plants defense, such as cell wall strengthening, antimicrobial activity and synthesis of signaling compounds salicylic acid [28]. Maximum PAL activity was recorded in leaves from plant grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum*(T1) at 48 h. Our findings are in agreement with the studies conducted on suppression of damping off diseases in psyllium by *Bacillus subtilis* and vermicompost. Amooaghaie et al. [29] reported that vermicompost and *B. subtilis* induced systemic resistance through nitric oxide (NO) signaling. Their combined application triggered the accumulation of defense related enzymes including  $\beta$ -1,3-glucanase, PAL, PPO and also effectively reduced lipid peroxidation in psyllium leaves. To some extent, the increased activity of PAL is directly related to the increased antimicrobial activities and therefore greater degree of host plant resistance to pathogen is achieved.

The enzymes SOD and PO, work together with other enzymes of the ascorbate–glutathione

cycle to promote scavenging of free radicals [14]. SOD is part of a group of antioxidative enzymes catalyzing the dismutation of  $O_2^-$  to  $H_2O_2$  and  $O_2$  that are most important to ameliorate the damage caused by oxidative stress [30,31]. PO enzyme catalyzes the reduction of  $H_2O_2$  via transport of electrons to various donor molecules, which is linked to broad range of physiological processes, including lignification, auxin metabolism, cross-linking of cell wall proteins and defense against phytopathogens (Sarma et al, 2015). In the present study, analysis of plants after pathogen infection indicated that the PO levels increased significantly in all treatments up to 72 h, followed by a decline in its activity. Maximum PO activity was recorded in leaves from plant grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum*(T1) at 72 h. Similar results were also found in previous study where vermicompost biofertilizer was found to induce maximum PO and SOD activity in greenhouse cucumber after 72 h of *Pythium aphanidermatum* challenge [32]. Following treatment with biofortified vermicompost, increased PO activity in treated plants, as observed in may lead to accumulation of lignin which is important physical barrier to check the pathogen invasion.

Enhanced PPO activities in plant tissues against phytopathogens and insect pests have been reported in several beneficial plant–microbe interactions [14]. To some extent, increased activity of PAL and PPO is directly proportional to the increased antimicrobial activity and decrease in accumulation of toxic oxidation products and therefore greater degree of resistance to pathogen is achieved. In this present study maximum PO activity was recorded in leaves from plant grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum* at 72 h. An increased PPO activity in all the plants treated with fortified vermicompost is also an indicator of increased pathogen tolerance. An increased level of defense related enzymes PAL, PO, PPO in plants treated with *B. subtilis* and vermicompost under the stress generated by *F. oxysporum* in *Plantago psyllium* [28]. Our results are also in agreement with Bosco et al. (2017) where increased PAL, PO and PPO activity was recorded in tomato when treated with biofortified vermicompost against fusarium wilt.

Increased activity of defense related enzymes in the plants treated with biofortified vermicompost may be considered as a part of the response of the host cells to pathogen which is useful in

check the development of the fungus without causing further damage to the surrounding tissues and may partially account for the observed delay in symptom development.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The three BCAs viz. *T. harzianum*, *P. fluorescens* and *B. subtilis* were chosen because of their compatibility and ascertained ability to reduce the soilborne diseases in various crops and used to fortify the vermicompost individually. Effect of biofortified vermicompost on plant growth and disease suppression was recorded. All treated plants showed significant improvement in root length in comparison to the control. Biochemical analysis of plants from each treatment was done to evaluate the effect of biofortified vermicompost on defense related enzymes. PAL, PO and PPO levels increased significantly in all treatments up to 48 h, followed by a decline in its activity. Maximum PAL, PO and PPO activity was recorded in leaves from plants grown in vermicompost fortified with *T. harzianum* (T1). Utilizing vermicompost enriched with specific biocontrol agents proved highly effective in biologically managing fungal wilt in tomatoes caused by *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *lycopersici*. Tomatoes grown in soil blended with fortified vermicompost displayed notable increases in defense-related enzymes. The fortified vermicompost notably impacted plant morphology and various growth parameters. This growth enhancement and biocontrol potential observed in vermicompost could be attributed to its hosting of beneficial microorganisms for plants.

## CONFERENCE DISCLAIMER

Some part of this manuscript was previously presented in the conference: "International Conference on Emerging Trends in Agriculture & Allied Sector for Sustainable Developments" organized by Faculty of Agricultural Sciences & Allied Industries, Rama University, Kanpur Nagar, U.P., India on 8th and 9th December, 2023. Web Link of the proceeding: <https://www.ramauniversity.ac.in/news-rama-university-hosts-successful-international-conference-on-emerging-trends-in-agriculture-12-49-5706>

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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