

# Arsenic in Plants

Uptake, Consequences and  
Remediation Techniques



Edited by:

Prabhat Kumar Srivastava • Rachana Singh  
Parul Parihar • Sheo Mohan Prasad

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## **Arsenic in Plants**



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## Contents

<b>List of Contributors</b>	<i>xvi</i>
<b>Preface</b>	<i>xxiv</i>
<b>1 An Introduction to Arsenic: Sources, Occurrence, and Speciation</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Jabbar Khan, Govind Gupta, Riddhi Shrivastava, and Naveen Kumar Singh</i>	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Status of Arsenic Contamination Around the World	2
1.3 Arsenic in the Aquatic and Terrestrial Environment	3
1.4 Absolute Bioavailability and Bioaccessibility of As in Plants and Agronomic Systems	4
1.5 Factors Determining Arsenic Speciation and Bioavailability in Soil	4
1.5.1 Effect of Redox Potential (Eh) and pH	4
1.5.2 Interactions with Al, Fe, and Mn Oxides and Oxyhydroxides	5
1.5.3 Interactions with P, Si, and Other Elements' Concentration in the Soil	6
1.5.4 Interactions with Organic Matter	7
1.5.5 Clay Minerals and Other Factors	8
1.6 Arsenic Speciation in Plants	8
1.6.1 Methods of Determination of As and As Species in Plants	8
1.6.2 Uptake and Efflux Mechanism of Arsenate and Arsenite Species	9
1.6.3 Uptake and Efflux Mechanism of Methylated Arsenic Species	11
1.6.4 Arsenic and Rhizosphere Interaction (Mycorrhizal Fungi, Rhizofiltration)	12
1.7 Thiolated Arsenic and Bioavailability of Thiolated As Species in Plants and Terrestrial Environments	13
1.8 Conclusion	13
Acknowledgments	14
References	14

**2 Chemistry and Occurrence of Arsenic in Water 25**

*Marta Irene Litter*

- 2.1 Chemical Properties of Arsenic 25
- 2.2 Worldwide Occurrence of Arsenic 26
- 2.3 Arsenic Occurrence in Natural Media 29
- 2.4 Arsenic Mobilization in Natural Media 31
- 2.5 Biological Methylation of Arsenic in Organisms 35
- 2.6 Anthropogenic Arsenic Contamination 39
- 2.7 Toxicity of Arsenic in Waters 40
- 2.8 Conclusion 41
- References 42

**3 Arsenic Transport and Metabolism in Plants 49**

*Gerald Zvobgo*

- 3.1 Introduction 49
- 3.2 Arsenite Influx and Efflux 50
- 3.3 Arsenate Influx and Efflux 51
  - 3.3.1 Arsenate and Phosphate Chemistry 51
  - 3.3.2 Effects of As and P in Plants 53
  - 3.3.3 Nature of Phosphate Transporters in Plants 53
  - 3.3.4 Variations in PHT upon As and P Addition 54
  - 3.3.5 Gene Manipulation of PHTs and PHT Related TFs 55
- 3.4 Transportation of Methylated As Species 56
- 3.5 Arsenic Metabolism in Plants 56
- 3.6 Conclusion 57
- References 58

**4 Arsenic Induced Responses in Plants: Impacts on Different Plant Groups, from Cyanobacteria to Higher Plants 64**

*Kavita Ghosal, Moumita Chatterjee, Sharmistha Ganguly, Subhamita Sen Niyogi, and Dwaipayan Sinha*

- 4.1 Introduction 64
- 4.2 Responses of Arsenic on Various Plant Groups 66
- 4.3 Arsenic Response in Cyanophycean Algae 67
- 4.4 Responses on Other Groups of Algae (Chlorophyceae, Phaeophyceae, Rhodophyceae, Diatoms, Xanthophyceae, Charophyceae, etc.) 69
  - 4.4.1 Chlorophyceae 69
  - 4.4.2 Phaeophyceae 70
  - 4.4.3 Rhodophyceae 70



4.4.4	Diatoms	70
4.5	Responses on Moss	71
4.6	Arsenic Response on Pteridophyte	72
4.7	Responses in Angiosperms	73
4.8	Perception of Arsenic Stress by Plants and Triggering of Signaling Cascades	76
4.9	Mechanistic Aspects of Responses Related to Arsenic (Effect on ATP Synthesis, Photosynthesis, DNA, Protein, Cell Membrane, Carbohydrate, and Lipid Metabolism)	79
4.9.1	Effect of Arsenic on ATP Synthesis	79
4.9.2	Arsenic's Effect on Photosynthesis	79
4.9.3	Effect of Arsenic on Cell Membrane	80
4.9.4	Arsenic Induced Oxidative Stress	80
4.9.5	Effect of Arsenic on Carbohydrate Metabolism	80
4.9.6	Effect of Arsenic on Lipid Metabolism	81
4.9.7	Effect of Arsenic on Protein	81
4.9.8	Effect of Arsenic on DNA	82
4.10	Future Prospects and Conclusion	82
	References	83

## **5 Arsenic-Induced Responses in Plants: Impacts on Morphological, Anatomical, and Other Quantitative and Qualitative Characters** 99

*Sumaya Farooq, Simranjeet Singh, Vijay Kumar, Daljeet Singh Dhanjal, Praveen C. Ramamurthy, and Joginder Singh*

5.1	Introduction	99
5.2	Impact of Arsenic on the Morphological Characters of Plants	100
5.3	Impact of Arsenic on the Anatomical Characters of Plants	101
5.4	Effect of As on stem Anatomy of Plants	102
5.4.1	Effect of Arsenic on Anatomy of Plants Roots	103
5.5	Impacts of Arsenic on Quantitative Characters of Plants	103
5.5.1	Root Plasmolysis	103
5.5.2	Cell Division	103
5.5.3	Biomass	104
5.5.4	Energy Flow	104
5.5.5	Photosynthetic Pigments	104
5.6	Impact of Arsenic on the Qualitative Characters of Plants	105
5.6.1	Cellular Membrane Damage	105
5.6.2	Leaf Reflectance	105
5.6.3	Water Loss	106

- 5.7 Conclusion 106
- References 107

## **6 Arsenic-Induced Responses in Plants: Impacts on Biochemical Processes 112**

*Sanjay Kumar, Varsha Rani, Simranjeet Singh, Dhriti Kapoor, Daljeet Singh Dhanjal, Ankita Thakur, Mamta Pujari, Praveen C. Ramamurthy, and Joginder Singh*

- 6.1 Introduction 112
- 6.2 Arsenic Effect on Biochemical Process in Plants 113
- 6.3 Oxidative Stress on the Arsenic-Induced Plant 114
- 6.4 Carbohydrate Metabolism in the Arsenic-Induced Plant 116
- 6.5 Lipid Metabolism in the Arsenic-Induced Plant 118
- 6.6 Protein Metabolism in the Arsenic-Induced Plant 120
- 6.7 Conclusion 121
- References 122

## **7 Photosynthetic Responses of Two Salt-Tolerant Plants, *Tamarix gallica* and *Arthrocnemum indicum* Against Arsenic Stress: A Case Study 129**

*Dhouha Belhaj Sghaier, Silvia Pedro, Bernardo Duarte, Isabel Caçador, and Noomene Sleimi*

- 7.1 Introduction 129
- 7.2 Metal Uptake 131
- 7.3 Impact of Arsenic on Photosynthetic Pigments 133
- 7.4 Effect of Arsenic on Photosynthetic Apparatus 137
- 7.5 Conclusion 147
- References 148

## **8 Genomic and Transcriptional Regulation During Arsenic Stress 153**

*Madhu Tiwari, Maria Kidwai, Neelam Gautam, and Debasis Chakrabarty*

- 8.1 Introduction 153
- 8.2 Study of Differentially Regulated Genes During Arsenic Stress in Plants 154
- 8.3 Genetic Study of Arsenic-Responsive Genes in Plants 158
  - 8.3.1 Genetic Study of Transporters Involved in Arsenic Uptake and Translocation 158
    - 8.3.1.1 Transporters Involved in Arsenate Uptake in Plants 158
    - 8.3.1.2 Transporters for AsIII Uptake in Plants 160

- 8.3.1.3 Genes Involved in Intracellular AsV to AsIII Conversion in Plants 160
- 8.3.1.4 Transporters for As Translocation 162
- 8.3.1.5 Genetic Study of As Detoxification Genes in Plants 163
- 8.4 Concluding Remarks and Future Prospects 165
  - Acknowledgments 166
  - References 166
  
- 9 Proteomic Regulation During Arsenic Stress 173**  
*Naina Marwa, Sunil Kumar Gupta, Gauri Saxena, Vivek Pandey, and Nandita Singh*
  - 9.1 Introduction 173
  - 9.1.1 Proteins in Antioxidative Defense Strategies 174
  - 9.2 Molecular Chaperones in Response to Arsenic Stress 175
  - 9.3 Participation of Protein in CO<sub>2</sub> Assimilation and Photosynthetic Activity 177
  - 9.4 Pathogen-Responsive Proteins (PR) in Response to Arsenic Stress 178
  - 9.5 Participation of Proteins in Energy Metabolism 178
  - 9.6 Possible Pan-interactomics 179
  - 9.7 Conclusion 180
  - References 180
  
- 10 Metabolomic Regulation During the Arsenic Stress 185**  
*Pooja Sharma, Anuj Kumar Tiwari, Neeraj Kumar Dubey, Charu Chaturvedi, Amit Prakash Raghuvanshi, and Surendra Pratap Singh*
  - 10.1 Introduction 185
  - 10.2 Arsenic Uptake/Translocation in Plants 187
  - 10.3 Arsenic Removal Efficiency in Plants 188
  - 10.4 Toxicity of Arsenic on Plants Metabolism 189
  - 10.5 Metabolome Regulation and Plants Tolerance 190
  - 10.6 Concluding Remarks 191
    - Acknowledgments 192
    - References 192
  
- 11 Role of Phytohormones in Regulating Arsenic-Induced Toxicity in Plants 198**  
*Ummey Aymen, Marya Khan, Rachana Singh, Parul Parihar, and Neha Pandey*
  - 11.1 Arsenic and Its Source 198
  - 11.2 Uptake and Transport of Arsenic Within Plants 200

- 11.3 Mechanism of Arsenic Efflux by Plant Roots 202
- 11.4 Impact of Arsenic on Metabolism and its Toxicity in Plants 203
- 11.5 Phytohormones, Their Role and Interaction with Heavy Metals 205
- 11.6 Mechanism of Detoxification of Heavy Metals with Special Emphasis on Arsenic by Phytohormones 207
- 11.7 Exogenous Application of Phytohormones over Detoxification 209
- 11.8 Conclusion 210
- References 210

## **12 Influence of Some Chemicals in Mitigating Arsenic-Induced Toxicity in Plants 223**

*Palin Sil and Asok K. Biswas*

- 12.1 Introduction 223
- 12.2 Role of Phosphorus 227
- 12.3 Role of Nitric Oxide 229
- 12.4 Role of Hydrogen Sulfide 230
- 12.5 Role of Calcium 230
- 12.6 Role of Proline 231
- 12.7 Role of Phytohormones 232
- 12.8 Role of Selenium 235
- 12.9 Role of Silicon 236
- 12.10 Conclusion 238
- Author Contributions 240
- Acknowledgments 240
- References 240

## **13 Strategies to Reduce the Arsenic Contamination in the Soil–Plant System 249**

*Mohammad Mehdizadeh, Waseem Mushtaq, Shahida Anusha Siddiqui, Samina Aslam, Duraid K.A. AL-Taey, Koko Tampubolon, Emad Jafarzadeh, and Anahita Omid*

- 13.1 Introduction 249
- 13.2 Arsenic 250
- 13.3 Arsenic Use in Agricultural Soils 252
- 13.4 Arsenic Fate in Soil 252
- 13.5 Toxicity of Arsenic on Humans, Animals and Plants 253
- 13.6 Strategies to Reduce the Arsenic Contamination in the Soil–Plant System 254

- 13.6.1 Agricultural Management for Detoxification and Mitigation of Arsenic 254
- 13.6.2 Biotechnological Method 255
- 13.6.3 Bioremediation 256
  - 13.6.3.1 Phytoremediation 256
  - 13.6.3.2 Microbial and Fungal Remediation 256
  - 13.6.3.3 Addition of Fertilizers to Soils 257
  - 13.6.3.4 Other Methods 257
- 13.7 Conclusions 257
- References 259
  
- 14 Arsenic Removal by Phytoremediation Techniques 267**  
*Zahra Souri, Hamidreza Sharifan, Letúzia Maria de Oliveira, and Lucy Ngatia*
- 14.1 Arsenic Presence in the Environment 267
- 14.2 Arsenic Contamination and its Effects on Human Health 269
- 14.3 Arsenic Toxicity in Plants 270
- 14.4 Arsenic Attenuation by Phytoremediation Technology 273
- 14.5 Phytoextraction 274
- 14.6 Arsenic Hyperaccumulation by Plants 274
- 14.7 Phytostabilization 275
- 14.8 Phytovolatilization 275
- 14.9 Rhizofiltration 276
- 14.10 Novel Approaches of Phytoremediation Technology 276
  - 14.10.1 Using Nanotechnology 276
  - 14.10.2 Nanoparticles in Soil 276
  - 14.10.3 Foliar Application of Nanoparticles 277
  - 14.10.4 Intercrops and Rotation Cultivation 279
  - 14.10.5 Irrigation Regime Management 279
  - 14.10.6 Soil Oxyanions Management 279
- References 280
  
- 15 Arsenic Removal by Electrocoagulation 287**  
*Aysegul Yagmur Goren and Mehmet Kobya*
- 15.1 Introduction 287
- 15.2 Arsenic Contamination in Natural Waters 287
- 15.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Main Arsenic Removal Technologies 290
- 15.4 As Removal Mechanism with EC 293

- 15.5 Operating Parameters Affecting Arsenic Removal Through EC 295
- 15.6 Electrode Shape and Material 295
- 15.7 Solution pH 301
- 15.8 Effect of Applied Current 302
- 15.9 Optimization of EC Arsenic Removal Process 304
- 15.10 Cost of EC Arsenic Removal Method 305
- 15.11 Merits and Demerits 306
- 15.12 Conclusions 307
- References 308

## **16 Developments in Membrane Technologies and Ion-Exchange Methods for Arsenic Removal from Aquatic Ecosystems 315**

*Muhammad Bilal Shakoor, Israr Masood ul Hasan, Sajid Rashid Ahmad, Mujahid Farid, Muzaffar Majid, Irshad Bibi, Asim Jilani, Tanzeela Kokab, and Nabeel Khan Niazi*

- 16.1 Introduction 315
- 16.2 Arsenic Chemistry, Sources, and Distribution in Water 316
- 16.3 Health Implications of Arsenic 318
- 16.4 Membrane Technologies 319
  - 16.4.1 High-Pressure Membranes 319
    - 16.4.1.1 Reverse Osmosis 319
    - 16.4.1.2 Nanofiltration 320
  - 16.4.2 Low-Pressure Membrane 320
    - 16.4.2.1 Microfiltration 320
    - 16.4.2.2 Ultrafiltration 321
- 16.5 Ion Exchange 322
  - 16.5.1 Ion-Exchange Resins 323
  - 16.5.2 Polymeric Ligand Exchangers 323
  - 16.5.3 Fe-Loaded Resins 324
  - 16.5.4 Cu(II)-Loaded Resins 325
- 16.6 Conclusion 325
- Acknowledgments 326
- References 326

## **17 Arsenic Removal by Membrane Technologies and Ion Exchange Methods from Wastewater 330**

*Simranjeet Singh, Harry Kaur, Daljeet Singh Dhanjal, Praveen C. Ramamurthy, and Joginder Singh*

- 17.1 Introduction 330
- 17.2 Arsenic Removal Using Membrane Separation 331

17.2.1	Microfiltration	332
17.2.2	Nanofiltration	333
17.2.3	Reverse Osmosis	333
17.2.4	Ultrafiltration	334
17.3	Arsenic Removal Using Ion Exchange Methods	334
17.3.1	Ion Exchange Resin	334
17.3.2	Ion Exchange Fiber	335
17.4	Methods to Increase the Efficiency of Arsenic Removal	336
17.4.1	Oxidation	336
17.4.2	Adsorption	337
17.4.3	Coagulation and Flocculation	337
17.4.4	Phytoremediation	338
17.5	Conclusion	338
	Acknowledgments	339
	References	339

## **18 Methods to Detect Arsenic Compounds 345**

*Shraddha Mishra and Sanjay Kumar Verma*

18.1	Introduction	345
18.2	Colorimetric Method	347
18.3	Electrochemical Method	347
18.4	Method Based on FRET	348
18.5	Method Based on SPR	349
18.6	Method Based on Spectrometry	349
18.6.1	Atomic Absorption Spectrometry	350
18.6.1.1	Hydride Generation Atomic Absorption Spectrometry	351
18.6.1.2	Electrothermal/Graphite Furnace Atomic Absorption Spectrometry	351
18.6.2	Atomic Fluorescence Spectrometry	352
18.6.3	Inductively Coupled Plasma Techniques	352
18.6.3.1	Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry	353
18.6.3.2	Inductively Coupled Plasma/Optical Emission Spectrometry	353
18.7	Biosensor for Arsenic Detection	353
18.7.1	Whole Cell-Based Biosensor	354
18.7.1.1	Green Fluorescent Protein-Based Biosensor	355
18.7.1.2	Bioluminescence/Luciferase-Based Biosensor	356
18.7.1.3	$\beta$ -galactosidase/ <i>lacZ</i> -based biosensor	356
18.7.1.4	Whole-Cell Biosensor Based on Other Approaches	357
18.7.2	Cell-Free/Biomolecules-Based Biosensor	358

- 18.7.2.1 DNA-Based Biosensor 358
- 18.7.2.2 Aptamer-Based Biosensors 359
- 18.7.2.3 Protein-Based Biosensors 361
- 18.8 Conclusion 362
- References 362

## 19 An Overview on Emerging and Innovative Technologies for Regulating Arsenic Toxicity in Plants 367

*Arun Kumar, Pradeep Kumar Yadav, and Anita Singh*

- 19.1 Introduction 367
- 19.2 Uptake of Arsenic 368
- 19.3 Arsenic Toxicity on Plants 370
- 19.4 Remediation Strategies of Arsenic Toxicity in Plants 373
  - 19.4.1 With the Application of Signaling Molecules and Phytohormones 373
  - 19.4.2 With the Application of Nano Particles 377
  - 19.4.3 With the Application of Genetic Manipulations 379
- 19.5 Conclusion 381
- Acknowledgments 381
- References 384

## 20 A Potential Phytoremedial Strategy for Arsenic from Contaminated Drinking Water Using *Hygrophilla spinosa* (Starthorn Leaves) 395

*Nilanjana Roy Chowdhury, Debapriya Sinha, Antara Das, Madhurima Joardar, Anuja Joseph, Iravati Ray, Deepanjan Mridha, Ayan De, and Tarit Roychowdhury*

- 20.1 Introduction 395
- 20.2 Methodology 397
  - 20.2.1 Adsorbent 397
    - 20.2.2 Sample Collection and Preparation of Adsorbent 397
      - 20.2.2.1 Sampling Site 397
      - 20.2.2.2 Preparation of Material 397
    - 20.2.3 Adsorbate 399
    - 20.2.4 The Batch Adsorption Study 399
    - 20.2.5 Estimation of As 399
    - 20.2.6 Estimation of Fe 399
    - 20.2.7 Calculation 400
    - 20.2.8 Quality Control and Quality Assurance 400



20.2.9	Statistical Evaluation	400
20.3	Results and Discussion	400
20.3.1	Effect of Adsorbent Dosage	400
20.3.2	Effect of Contact Time	402
20.3.3	Effect of pH	403
20.3.4	Effect of RPM	405
20.4	Conclusion	407
	References	408
	<b>Index</b>	<b>411</b>

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## Preface

Arsenic contamination in agricultural lands has become a global problem extending from Middle-East countries, South Asian countries including Afghanistan and Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, South-East Asian countries, China, Japan, Canada, USA, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, New Zealand to European and African countries. This metalloid severely affects the plant as well as the human system by interrupting important physiological and molecular processes. The food chain is infiltrated by arsenic through arsenic-loaded groundwater and industrial and municipal wastewater contaminated with arsenic used for irrigation purposes. Arsenic also penetrates the food chain through the usage of fertilizers and herbicides (arsenicals) in agricultural fields. Arsenic severely intoxicates plants via various physiological and biochemical anomalies and reduces their growth and development. Toxicity symptoms range from biomass reduction to morphological impairments leading to the loss in fruit and grain yield that culminates into the complete death of the plants. Severe toxic effects of arsenic change the concentration, accumulation, and translocation of nutrient elements in plants, inhibit seed germination, and increase arsenic levels in the edible parts of vegetables.

This book gives an overview of arsenic, prominently covers the occurrence of arsenic in our environment, usage of arsenicals in crop fields, its chemistry, speciation, its transportation and metabolism in plants, phytotoxicity, i.e. impact on plant metabolism, alteration in different plant groups, from plants' overall structure, their physiology up to the changes at their ultrastructural level; and mechanisms involved therein and interaction/interruption with phytohormones and metabolic processes and future perspectives. The book covers the morphological, anatomical, and other quantitative and qualitative traits of plants including their physiological, biochemical, and molecular responses under arsenic stress. The impact of exogenous phytohormones and growth-regulating substances and mineral nutrients has been covered. It discusses *-omics* approaches, i.e. regulation at genomic, transcriptomic, proteomic, ionomic, and metabolomic levels adapted by plants to combat this stress condition and the models used to explain these adaptations.

This book brings forth ideas being explored by scientists and environmentalists to overcome this menace. This book emphasizes the differences in the mechanism of tolerance in hyper-accumulator and non-accumulator plants. It discusses the management of arsenic contamination in the soil-plant continuum, major arsenic remediation techniques including the removal of arsenic from soil and water through physical and biological methods.

Thus, this book is a comprehensive compilation of studies to date and is an endeavor to bridge the gap between the research from the past to the current time. This book will serve as a reference book for environmentalists, toxicologists, and risk assessors. The compilation of various studies in the form of an edited book enriches the existing knowledge about arsenic pollution and opens newer avenues to be exercised. The students and scholars would find many studies, researches, reviews of literature, views, and opinions in one book.

This book is the result of an arduous effort of many scholars working in different parts of the world along with all four editors. All the editors thankfully acknowledge their contributions. All editors also gratefully acknowledge the team at JohnWiley & Sons Ltd. that made possible the proposed book in its present form. We hope that this book will remain relevant for the upcoming many years for the students of environmental sciences, stress physiology, agronomy, life sciences, and crop sciences at the university level.

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## 1

## An Introduction to Arsenic: Sources, Occurrence, and Speciation

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### 1.1 Introduction

Naturally, arsenic is present in rocks and water in the environment, and its concentration depends on geological and anthropogenic activities. Generally, the concentrations of arsenic in noncontaminated soils are usually less than  $10 \text{ mg kg}^{-1}$ . Arsenic (As) contamination has become a worldwide problem due to its toxicity and increasing contamination of soil, water, and crops around the world. It occurs as a result of geological processes and anthropogenic activities. Arsenic is a toxic metal that occurs by a natural and anthropogenic process such as the burning of fossil fuels, mining, and uses of agrochemicals (Mandal and Suzuki 2002; Bissen and Frimmel 2003). Excess arsenic in water and soil accumulates in plants and leads to food chain contamination. Arsenic causes toxic effects in plants and carcinogenic effects in human beings through water, soil, and food contamination (Zhao et al. 2010; Naujokas et al. 2013). Litter et al. (2010) reported that regular arsenic consumption through food and water causes arsenicosis, affects the central nervous system detrimentally, and causes hyperkeratosis, hepatic damage, skin cancer, hair fall, etc. Chakraborty et al. (2018) investigated the contamination of arsenic in groundwater and food materials in different regions of the Ganga River Basin (GRB), which includes Nepal, Bangladesh, and Tibet, where arsenic concentration was above the permissible limit of the World Health Organization's (WHO) standards. Anderson and Bruand (1991) reported the position of arsenic in the Group 15 of the periodic table, and it exists in the environment with the combination of oxygen, chlorine, and sulfur. Saeki et al. (2000) reported that arsenic has long been toxic and teratogenic (risk for a birth defect in a baby). In soil, dust, rocks, and air, arsenic is present in small quantities. In many industrial goods and processes, arsenic is used. Therefore, through waste and environmental pollution, arsenic becomes a major contaminant (Berg et al. 2001; Reboledo et al. 2019). The mobilization and occurrence of

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heavy metals in the environment include various procedures such as soil weathering, rock and coal, biological processes, volcanic processes, etc. Similarly, high amount of urban waste, burning of fossil fuels, mining, use of fertilizers, biocides, sewage sludge, seed desiccants, alloys, and anthropogenic activities account for the widespread dispersion of arsenic (Smedley and Kinniburgh 2002). However, this causes adverse effects such as atmospheric accumulation, especially in crops, such as increased cancer risk, teratogenicity, and mutagenicity (Farid et al. 2003). Due to high-arsenic concentrations, a cereal yield decrease of about 20% was observed. The potential to accumulate arsenic and its relative toxicity increase the threat to the ecosystem. Reducing As and other heavy metal contamination in crops, with particular emphasis on horticultural products, has been one of the key objectives of the research over the past decades (Wilson et al. 2014; Mancinelli et al. 2019). Due to overexploitation of water, more arsenic may be released into the aquifers as arsenopyrite minerals oxidized by exposure to oxygen-rich water. Therefore, due to oxidation of arsenic-containing rocks and release, more arsenic concentration is reported in the groundwater from Bangladesh (Mandal et al. 1996; Nickson et al. 1998). Chen et al. (1992) reported that arsenic is known as one of the most significant environmental contaminants due to its toxic effects on human health. Arsenic toxicity is due to the replacement of phosphate by arsenic (+5), the protein thiol groups' affinity of arsenic (+3), and the cross-linking of protein–DNA and DNA–DNA. Arsenic contamination is a regular occurrence in many countries due to its pervasiveness in the environment, and millions of people have been continuously exposed to arsenic through geological contamination of potable water (International Agency for Research on Cancer 2004). Arsenic contamination in marine habitats is primarily due to the indiscriminate disposal of effluents containing high arsenic from household and industrial discharge (Huysmans and Frankenberger 1990; Filali et al. 2000). Aquatic plants growing in contaminated water may accumulate arsenic, causing a health risk to animals and humans through the food chain. The concentration of arsenic in seafood and fish can be high due to accumulation and biomagnification (International Agency for Research on Cancer 2004). Arsenic is a notorious neurotoxin that affects the nervous system in the exposed species. Arsenic can be tolerated to a certain extent in humans because it is eliminated from the body through urine, stool, skin, hair, nails, and breathing. Arsenic is accumulated in tissues as a result of excessive exposure affecting cellular functions and metabolism (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2002). Aside from toxicity, arsenic's inhibitory effects are influenced by background concentrations and the type of organism (Birnboim and Doly 1979). In plant and animal tissues, it can be actively sequestered. Arsenicals have been used medicinally for a long time and were among the first chemotherapeutic agents to be used in the treatment of infectious diseases such as syphilis and trypanosomiasis. Salvarsan, an arsenic-based drug, was introduced by Paul Ehrlich as a “magic bullet” in syphilis treatment (Waxman and Anderson 2001).

## 1.2 Status of Arsenic Contamination Around the World

The geogenic and anthropogenic degradation of persistent toxic substances poses significant threats to the environment (Nordstrom 2002; Hoang et al. 2010). Arsenic contamination in groundwater is reported in various countries, including Argentina, Bangladesh, Chile,