



Agar tree is goldmine, needs a policy push

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The synergy between forestry trees and agriculture has increased during last 40 years. Incentive to farmers for growing Agar trees can be immensely beneficial

Resource management is a fine art which India's policy makers need to consolidate to solve the problems of increasing the income of farmers from our rich biodiversity. Forest management for more than 150 years has been timber oriented to meet primarily the needs of colonial interests as well as promotion of Railways in India, besides serving the needs of agriculture and water security, while setting up of forest administration in India.

Today one of the problems farmers are facing is regular disruptions in agriculture productivity due to climatic factors and irregular rains, which further create low yields due to year after year fragmentation of agriculture land holding. More than 86 per cent farmers are small and marginal, owning only less than 1 ha of land according to Agriculture census 2015-16 with 70 per cent households depending on agriculture.

Under such conditions, diversification is the only way to increase the farmers' income. The government of India has been promoting through several steps to increase the income but some of the good steps taken like three Farm Acts enacted during 2020 were embroiled in big controversy and had to be repealed by the government when the farmers' agitation turned ugly and anti-national elements entered it.

Under these conditions, the role of agroforestry assumes importance so that tree growing complements the agriculture for enhancing the income from farming. The synergy between forestry trees and agriculture has received a big boost during the past 40 years as major supply (of more than 85 per cent) of wood both industrial as well as domestic is met in the country from private agricultural fields and also from imports.

Two most valuable trees growing in India are Agar wood and Red sanders. These trees are a few species of trees which need to be specially taken care of like tea, coffee, rubber and other cash crops in the country. Agar wood trees are nothing less than a gold mine, considering its oil and chip's value in the international market. It is also known as 'the wood of Gods'. This author visited farmers' fields in Tripura recently and saw Agar Tree for ground assessment of the potential, which could help in formulating a policy framework that may be adopted at the national level. Red sanders need to be discussed separately.

The capital of Tripura, Agartala, is named after the Agarwood tree as it used to be present profusely in and around the Agartala city and all over Tripura's forests. But detrimental exploitation made it a rare species and is now listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Agar wood tree is an evergreen species scientifically known as *Aquilaria malaccensis* previously known as *Aquilafia agalocha*. It is grown naturally in India and other South Asian and South-East Asian countries.

In India, it is found growing up to an elevation of 3000 feet to 3500 feet in West-Bengal and all the North-Eastern states and Sikkim. It is most valuable and easy growing tree and can be cultivated on

farmers' fields in tropical humid climatic conditions. Agar tree becomes valuable only after it is naturally infected by the fungus after it is attacked by the insects. It has also already been planted by the farmers in Orissa, Kerala and Karnataka. The Agar oil and agarwood chips are in high demand in Middle East countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, etc., for preparations of perfumes, medicines and other valuable products; in Korea, it is used to prepare wine and in China for ornamental functions.

The cost of one kg Agar oil is around Rs 25 lakh and of one kg Agar chips is Rs one lakh. In natural conditions, it is infected by fungi which is the cause of production of resin in Agar in the tree. The chips are burnt for incense and oil is used in perfume making. In India, Assam and Tripura are the centre of international trade in agar wood.

Though some rough estimates of agar wood trees have been made by the Forest Survey of India but of late the Tripura Forest department under JICA project with the help of specially recruited Van Mitra (friends of forests who are paid monthly honorarium for assisting the forest department) and proper sampling techniques have assessed that more around 54 lakh trees of Agar are growing in the state. During the last few years under JICA more than seven lakh trees were planted in farmers' fields.

With a rotation of 20 years, five lakh trees are available for harvest each year but resin impregnated percentage is generally 20 to 22 per cent. However, the artificial infections also are quite successful and the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education has standardized the artificial inoculation which can be adopted by the farmers in a big way.

The export quota fixed by the CITES for India is 75,000 kg of chips and 1,500 kg of oil but so far the legal way of export is not taking place due to impractical and too much bureaucratic red tapes in export policy of 2021. In countries like Vietnam, the Chambers of Commerce's certificates are sufficient documents for export and CITES issues permit.

In India, the State forest departments' certificate should be sufficient to export and CITES should have uniform procedure for all countries. Here in our country everything is considered suspicious unless proved otherwise. While proving the correctness the officers' insensitivity kills the enterprise and enthusiasm with convoluted guidelines with the result that other countries are reaping the benefits or the trade is done clandestinely. The guidelines need to be simplified. We also need to take up diplomatically anti-India cartel in CITES where even the Shisham tree has been put under CITES which is extensively grown on farm lands all over India.

The government of India must take immediate steps to promote species like Agar wood by launching special schemes to help farmers plant Agarwood wherever feasible climatically. A 'National Agarwood of India' with regional centres in other states should be established in one of the Agar growing species and preferably in Tripura which is promoting it among the farmers in a big way with infrastructure with a well-defined 'Agarwood Policy'.

We must take a lesson from the Kautilya's "Arthshastra" which vividly describes the use of Agarwood in commercial perfume business and help our farmers to enrich themselves.

(The author is former Director-General in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change)

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