

Expanding oil palm plantation recipe for ecological disaster: Experts.

25 August 2021

New Delhi, Aug 25 (IANS): Environmentalists feel that the government's announcement to expand oil palm plantation in the northeastern states and Andaman & Nicobar Islands will not just lead to an ecological disaster for the fragile biodiversity in those areas, but also cause a social disorder.

The Union Cabinet had last week approved the National Mission on Edible Oils - Oil Palm (NMEO-OP) as a new centrally-sponsored scheme with a financial outlay of Rs 11,040 crore. The scheme proposes to cover an additional area of 6.5 lakh hectare (ha) for oil palm till 2025-26, thereby reaching a target of 10 lakh ha ultimately.

The production of Crude Palm Oil (CPO) is expected to go up to 11.20 lakh tonnes by 2025-26 and up to 28 lakh tonnes by 2029-30. The government claimed that the yield from one hectare of oil palm plantation is many times more than any of the oil seeds on the same area and that too at a much faster pace.

While oil palm plantations are not new for both northeast India and A&N Islands, environmentalists are a worried lot as there has been no assessment of the environmental impact of the proposed increase in the plantation area.

A 2018 brief note prepared by the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare (DAC&FW) had said that the government had identified 19.33 lakh ha of land as being suitable for oil palm cultivation, including 2.18 lakh ha in the northeast.

Among the northeastern states, Mizoram was ahead with its programme dating back to 2005.

Amit Kurien, a researcher with Bengaluru-headquartered Ashoka Trust For Research In Ecology And The Environment (ATREE), said, "Purely from an income generation strategy, oil palm may be useful in the short term. But it is widely known to rapidly escalate social and economic disparities within communities. Depending on the site, it can also bring about rapid and permanent changes in tenurial systems that may not be desirable for majority of the rural farmers."

"It is widely reported that oil palms can be more deleterious to both habitat and species loss since it causes permanent loss of land that can otherwise be under forest or fallow cover. Plantations are not to be considered as forests from the point of view of biodiversity conservation," Kurien added.

A 2016 study by Jayadev Mandal from Guwahati University and T.R. Shankar Raman from the National Conservation Foundation in Mizoram had found that shifting agriculture supported more tropical forest birds than oil palm plantations in that state. It made it very clear that monoculture plantations would not host as many birds as a biodiversity rich area.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the global consortium comprising both government and civil society organisations, had said in its brief on oil palm and biodiversity, "Oil palm development has significant negative impacts on global biodiversity, as it often replaces tropical forests and other species-rich habitats.

"Globally, palm oil production is affecting at least 193 threatened species, according to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. It has been estimated that oil palm expansion could affect 54 per cent of all threatened mammals and 64 per cent of all threatened birds globally. It also reduces the diversity and abundance of most native species."

The government had also announced last week that it will give a price assurance to the oil palm farmers.

However, voices from the field are wary that the government assurance would create havoc.

Sangtei Zohmingsangi, a researcher pursuing a PhD on soil biology of oil palm plantations at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research in Kolasib, Mizoram, said that earlier there were no purchase guarantee and so more and more farmers were having a rethink.

"But now, with the government assuring to buy the produce, more and more farmers will go for oil palm farming and more virgin forests will be cleared," she feared.

Echoing her sentiments, senior journalist from Assam and an executive member of the Kaziranga Wildlife Society, the oldest wildlife NGO in the northeast, Jayanta K. Das, said, "The oil palm plantation will not just destroy the local biodiversity of northeast, but it will go the same way as eucalyptus plantations decades ago in Assam that had proved to be a blunder. At stake is the flora and fauna of the region, some of which have already disappeared."

And it is not just the environmentalists. Joining the ranks in criticising the government move was former Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh.

"Oil palm plantation was studied in 1980s and was rejected since it's a recipe for ecological disaster - as has been seen in Southeast Asia. Now it will be unleashed in northeast and Andaman. A leading Indian private company had proposed an oil palm plantation in A&N Islands that I had studied and rejected on ecological grounds," Ramesh had posted on a social media platform.

Just like northeast India, the A&N Islands too are known for pristine biodiversity and rich forests.

Oil palm plantations have been tried in the Islands for more than three decades now. A case in the Supreme Court regarding permission is yet to hear the final verdict.

Experts have also pointed at the studies by late T.C. Khatri, former Head of the Department of Zoology, Jawaharlal Nehru Rajkeeya Mahavidyalaya, Port Blair, popularly known as the 'Butterfly Man' of A&N Islands.

His studies had established how despite the weather and general conditions being conducive for red oil palm in the Islands, the pest influence and other variables were not in favour and have been part of the reason for the failure of the 30+ years of monoculture red oil palm plantation at the Little Andaman Island.

Experts who have worked on the ground for decades have also said that the government is treating the Central Nicobar Islands that have vast grasslands as wastelands to be developed and converted into red oil palm plantation as a mission.

"The grasslands are not wastelands. Natural grasslands and coastal forests are owned by various Nicobarese clans, and some are considered sacred groves and places of taboo. The soil is not conducive to the growth of trees on grasslands, which is why no Nicobarese have been able to establish coconut plantation in these habitats for 1000s of years," said Manish Chandi, who was a senior researcher with ANET, and is a member of the Tribal Research Advisory Committee of the Tribal Welfare Department.

He spent 25 years on research, including on indigenous Nicobarese people.

Even the forests have been left alone because the community value the forests for their various benefits, Chandi said and pointed out, "Otherwise, the indigenous Nicobarese are coconut growers producing some of the best coconuts in the country with excellent potential for virgin coconut oil production and huge income generating opportunities. Rather than pursue this trajectory, the government seems keen to push for oil palm to cater to biscuit and cosmetics production."

Monoculture plantations come with a series of ecological and sociological issues, especially in the A&N Islands.

"In the Nicobars, there will be more sociological problems given the inherent ownership and community sharing practices of the grasslands and coastal forests by many hundreds of Nicobarese joint families. Their needs are not being considered at all. Rather than improving an existing crop, which produces the best coconuts in the country, why are we striving to pursue a failed crop in the Islands," Chandi asked.

These plantations also bring in social issues vis-a-vis gender problems. A study titled 'Oil palm plantations vs shifting cultivation for indigenous people: Analysing Mizoram's new land use policy' by Purbi Bose published in the journal 'Land Use Policy' in February 2019 had indicated how even after the NLUP, the bamboo forests were allocated for shifting cultivation, which involved abandoning the land after 3-5 years.

"These abandoned lands are then promoted by the agriculture department for palm oil plantations. Gender dynamics is observed wherein women's roles become 'submissive' in the settled cultivation of oil palm as compared to their contribution in shifting cultivation," Bose pointed out.

Private palm oil companies do not collect fruits from the farmers living away from motorable roads, which pushes them to do daily-wage labour work, and women to do artisanal palm oil extraction at home, she had said.

Ironically, the 'Vision 2050' document by the Indian Institute of Oil Palm Research does not even mention a single line about the negative environmental impacts of oil palm plantations, but only talks about increased area and productivity.

Neither does it mention about any social/land ownership or gender related issues.

Source: <https://www.daijiworld.com/news/newsDisplay?newsID=866790>