Agroforestry: A Sustainable Approach for Enhancing Soil Fertility and Carbon Sequestration

Farhat Jahan*

M. Sc. Scholar, Department of Soil Science and Agricultural Chemistry, College of Agriculture, Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology, Bhubaneswar, 751003, Odisha

Corresponding Author
Farhat Jahan
Email: jahanfarhat311@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Agroforestry is an integrated land use system which combines trees, crops and livestock to enhance the productivity as well as the environmental sustainability. It mimics the natural ecosystem which helps agroforestry systems to perform well. One of the significant roles of agroforestry systems is carbon sequestration by capturing the carbon dioxide from atmosphere and storing it in biomass and soil. Additionally, agroforestry practices improve soil fertility by enhancing organic matter content, microbial activity and nutrient cycling. Agroforestry systems have the potential to mitigate climate change and contribute in sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

As per the current scenario climate change and soil degradation are major global concerns that threaten agricultural productivity and food security across the world. Conventional agricultural practices, such as monocropping and feeding the soil with excess fertilizers have led to depletion of major nutrients in soil as well as increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Agroforestry which is defined as the collective name for land use systems and technologies which includes woody perennials and

agricultural crops (or animals) on the same land management units in some form of either spatial arrangement or temporal sequence (Nair, 1989). Agroforestry offers a sustainable alternative by integrating trees and shrubs with crops along with the livestock thereby improving carbon storage, improving soil health as well as increasing farm resilience.

Carbon Sequestration in Agroforestry

As discussed above agroforestry systems contribute significantly to carbon sequestration through multiple ways:

- Aboveground biomass storage: Trees in agroforestry systems absorb atmospheric carbon dioxide. Aboveground carbon stock (C stock) and its implication for carbon sequestration are directly related to measurements or estimates of aboveground biomass (AGB), with the assumption that 50% of the biomass is made. AGB is typically calculated by adding the amount of harvested and standing biomass (Gupta *et al*., 2017).

- Belowground carbon storage: Organic carbon in soils exists in various forms, which includes living root and hyphal biomass, microbial biomass and soil organic matter (SOM), which can be both labile and more stable in nature (Gupta *et al*., 2017).

- Litter and Residue Incorporation: Organic matter from leaf litter, root secretions, and microbial activity promotes nutrient cycling, supports beneficial soil microbes, and enhances soil health, leading to increased productivity and long-term sustainability (Korwar *et al*., 2006).

Impact of agroforestry on soil fertility
Agroforestry enhances soil fertility through the following mechanisms:

- Organic Matter Enrichment: Tree litter and the exudates secreted by the roots contribute to soil organic carbon which further improves soil structure and nutrient availability (Jose, 2019).

- Agroforestry systems significantly influence soil properties, such as its chemical makeup and physical structure, as well as microbial diversity. These alterations enhance soil fertility, which indirectly benefits plant growth (Fahad *et., al* 2022).

- Agroforestry systems promote higher microbial abundance because of the presence of trees, organic matter accumulation, and root exudates. These factors create a favourable environment for beneficial soil organisms, such as earthworms, fungi, and various insects, which are essential for carbon transformation and nutrient cycling (Lorenz and Lal, 2014).

Future prospects

Although agroforestry offers many benefits, there are still challenges like lack of technical expertise, high initial investment, land ownership etc which hinder its broader adoption. However, with proper policy support and farmer training these challenges can be addressed. In the future, research should focus on improving tree-crop combinations and assessing the long-term carbon sequestration potential of agroforestry systems. By continuing these efforts, we can make agroforestry practices more effective which will help in mitigating climate change.

CONCLUSION

Agroforestry offers a promising solution for enhancing both carbon sequestration and soil fertility. By integrating trees with agricultural practices, it not only addresses climate change but also results in healthier soils and increased farm productivity. Hence it has a great potential to contribute to sustainable agriculture and environmental conservation.

Therefore, agroforestry deserves greater attention and adoption in the future. Promoting this practice can help us in building resilient farming systems that balance economic, environmental, and social benefits.

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