

Agroforestry in India: Systems, Benefits and Policy Perspectives for Sustainable Land Management

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OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Agroforestry, Types of agroforestry, Ecological benefits, Agroforestry practices & Challenges

How to cite this article:

Roghan, H. B. and Vennila, S. 2026. Agroforestry in India: Systems, Benefits and Policy Perspectives for Sustainable Land Management. *Vigyan Varta* 7 (05): 27-30.

ABSTRACT

Agroforestry is a sustainable and multifunctional land-use system that integrates trees, crops, and livestock to enhance ecological stability, economic productivity, and social well-being. This article provides a comprehensive overview of agroforestry, highlighting its major systems, ecological functions, and socio-economic benefits. Agroforestry systems, including agrisilvicultural, silvopastoral, and agrisilvopastoral models, are designed to optimize resource use efficiency while mimicking natural ecosystems. The study emphasizes the critical role of agroforestry in improving soil fertility, conserving biodiversity, regulating microclimate, and sequestering carbon, thereby contributing significantly to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Furthermore, agroforestry enhances livelihood security by diversifying income sources, generating employment, and reducing risks associated with market and climatic uncertainties. The paper also discusses the relevance of agroforestry in the Indian context, including traditional practices and policy initiatives such as the National Agroforestry Policy (2014). Despite its numerous advantages, challenges such as policy constraints, lack of awareness, market limitations, and technical issues hinder its widespread adoption. The article concludes by underscoring the future potential of agroforestry in

achieving sustainable development goals through technological innovations, supportive policies, and increased research efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Agroforestry is a sustainable land-use system that integrates trees, crops, and/or livestock on the same land management unit to enhance productivity, ecological stability, and socio-economic benefits. It is increasingly recognized as a climate-smart agricultural practice that contributes to biodiversity conservation, soil health improvement, and carbon sequestration (Nair, 1993; Leakey, 2017). Unlike monoculture systems, agroforestry mimics natural ecosystems by promoting species diversity and functional interactions among system components. The concept of agroforestry gained global prominence through institutions such as the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), which emphasized its role in sustainable development and environmental conservation (Garrity, 2004). Agroforestry systems are particularly important in tropical and subtropical regions, where smallholder farmers depend heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods.

1. Types of Agroforestry Systems

Agroforestry systems can be broadly classified based on their components and functional arrangements.

1.1. Agrisilvicultural Systems

These systems involve the integration of trees and crops. Examples include alley cropping, taungya systems, and improved fallow systems. Trees provide shade, improve soil fertility, and reduce erosion, while crops ensure food production (Young, 1989).

1.2. Silvopastoral Systems

These systems combine trees with pasture and livestock. Trees provide fodder, shade, and

shelter, enhancing livestock productivity and welfare (Jose, 2009).

1.3. Agrosilvopastoral Systems

This is a combination of crops, trees, and livestock in a single system. It is considered one of the most efficient land-use systems due to its multifunctionality (Nair, 1993).

2. Ecological Benefits of Agroforestry

Trees enhance soil fertility through nitrogen fixation, organic matter addition, and nutrient recycling. Deep-rooted trees bring nutrients from deeper soil layers to the surface (Young, 1997). Agroforestry systems support higher biodiversity compared to monoculture systems by providing diverse habitats for flora and fauna (Altieri, 1999). Agroforestry plays a significant role in mitigating climate change by sequestering carbon in biomass and soil. Carbon storage in agroforestry systems can range from 12 to 228 Mg C ha⁻¹ depending on the system and region (Nair et al., 2009). Trees modify microclimatic conditions by reducing temperature extremes, wind speed, and evapotranspiration, thereby improving crop productivity (Jose et al., 2004).

3. Economic and Social Benefits

Agroforestry provides multiple products such as timber, fuelwood, fruits, fodder, and medicinal plants, reducing economic risks for farmers (Leakey, 2017). Smallholder farmers benefit from year-round income and improved food security through diversified production systems (Garrity, 2004). Agroforestry systems create employment opportunities in rural areas through activities such as planting, harvesting, and processing (FAO, 2013). The diversification inherent in agroforestry systems

reduces vulnerability to market and climate shocks (Jose, 2009).

4. Agroforestry and Climate Change

Agroforestry is widely recognized as a climate-smart agricultural practice. It contributes to both climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Agroforestry reduces greenhouse gas emissions and enhances carbon sequestration. Trees act as carbon sinks, storing carbon in biomass and soil (Nair et al., 2010). Agroforestry systems improve resilience to climate variability by enhancing soil moisture retention, reducing erosion, and providing alternative income sources during crop failure (Verchot et al., 2007). Agroforestry is included in international frameworks such as REDD+ and the Paris Agreement as a strategy for sustainable land management (IPCC, 2019).

5. Agroforestry Practices in India

India has a long tradition of agroforestry, with systems varying across agro-climatic zones.

5.1. Traditional Systems

- Homegardens in Kerala
- Shifting cultivation in Northeast India
- Parkland systems in dry regions

5.2 Modern Agroforestry

India introduced the National Agroforestry Policy in 2014, becoming the first country to adopt such a policy. The policy aims to increase tree cover, improve productivity, and enhance farmer income (Government of India, 2014).

5.3 Common Tree Species

- *Neolamarckia cadamba*
- *Azadirachta indica*

- *Dalbergia sissoo*

- *Eucalyptus spp.*

These species are widely used due to their fast growth and economic value.

6. Constraints in Agroforestry Adoption

Complex regulations regarding tree harvesting and transport discourage farmers (FAO, 2013). Farmers often lack knowledge about agroforestry practices and benefits. Poor market access and price fluctuations affect profitability. Issues such as species selection, competition between trees and crops, and management practices need careful consideration (Jose, 2009).

7. Future Prospects

Agroforestry has immense potential to address global challenges such as food security, climate change, and biodiversity loss. Advances in remote sensing, GIS, and precision agriculture can enhance agroforestry planning and management. Supportive policies and incentives can promote agroforestry adoption at large scales. More research is needed to optimize system design, improve productivity, and assess ecosystem services. Agroforestry contributes to multiple SDGs, including zero hunger, climate action, and life on land (United Nations, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Agroforestry is a holistic and sustainable land-use system that integrates ecological, economic, and social benefits. It enhances biodiversity, improves soil health, sequesters carbon, and provides diversified income sources for farmers. Despite certain challenges, agroforestry holds great promise for sustainable agriculture and environmental conservation. With appropriate policy support, technological advancements, and increased

awareness, agroforestry can play a crucial role in achieving global sustainability goals.

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