

Oil Palm in North-East India – a recipe towards adoption of oil palm in a big way

Around 32% of total potential area in India (9 lakh Ha. in North-East, out of 2.8 million Hectare total potential area identified so far in India) is available and suitable in North-East (N-E) for oil palm cultivation, as per the report of Government of India, **without touching Forest Cover**. In India, the government plays a pivotal role in the palm oil sector by developing the framework within which the various stakeholders operate. This is done through the Regulation of Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB) supply, Fixation of FFB pricing, Subsidy & training support. **Agri Scientists and Agro economists are saying that N-E farmers have potential to take up oil palm cultivation.**

Attention should be given towards unexplored potential and avenues in N-E in the form of Tourism and Agriculture. One of the smart solution seems to be to start oil palm cultivation in N-E. There has been direct intervention by our Hon'ble PM Narendra Modi. Government of India launched a mission on 18th August 2021 in the name of "National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm" (NMEO-OP) to promote oil palm cultivation in India extensively with a Special Focus in N-E., with the main object to improve farmer's economical condition and to attain self-sufficiency in edible oil production of the country. The industry has welcomed the PM's decision. NMEO-OP is a right mix of policies, subsidies, precision farming etc. and provides various support (additional support specifically to N-E farmers who are interested to grow oil palm) to address the challenges across the value chain. Therefore it is expected that palm cultivation in N-E will be successful and sustainable.

Post launch of the aforesaid mission, Green Activists have started negative campaign regarding ecological imbalances due to introduction of monoculture and water intensive crop like oil palm at the cost of deforestation in N-E and Carbon emission etc. They are citing the example of SE Asian and African countries, where oil palm is grown at the cost of environment but it is not the case in India. I would like to correct the misleading perception in the society by explaining the following:

Since early 90s, oil palm cultivation was started in India through farmers and it has been seen:

1. There is no encroachment in Forest area/ protected areas/ land classified as to be conserved.
2. There is no deforestation, no conversion of High Conservation Values (HCVs) or High Carbon Stocks (HCS) Forest.
3. Farmers know and respect the boundaries of HCS & HCV areas for conservation and it has been experienced that the risk of land conversion for oil palm planting is extremely minimal.
4. Either the land was fallow or through crop conversion - short duration crop to oil palm cultivation started under irrigation. This was the first such instance in the world where oil palm was grown successfully and sustainably without touching forest cover and under irrigation, unlike SE Asia where it is grown under rain fed conditions.
5. Oil Palm is no more a monoculture as per the report of IOPR (Indian Institute of Oil Palm Research, Govt. of India), since lot of less water intensive intercrops like pepper, ginger, turmeric, cocoa etc. are grown under partial shade condition in existing plantation.

6. Crop per drop concept through micro irrigation in oil palm field already established and it ensures judicious use of water. This is specially required during short dry spell in N-E for hardly four months. Total water requirement in oil palm field is less than that of Rice, sugarcane & Banana.

Crop	Water Requirement (lakh Litres/Ha./year)
Oil Palm	67.35
Banana	120.00
Sugarcane	133.00
Rice*	300.00

*for two crop seasons in a year

Ref. BN Rao Et al. (2016) Technical Bulletin – Irrigation Management in Oil Palm, IIOPR- Pedavegi – 534450.

7. It was proven in one study in Andhra Pradesh under factory zone of Godrej Agrovet Ltd. that the Net Green House Gas removal by sinks in palm plantations over a period of 20 years is estimated to be equivalent to 10.35 lakh tons of Carbon dioxide(CO₂) equivalent.

Loss of Forest cover in the entire N-E region is significant due to shifting (Jhum) cultivation. Until & unless the Jhumias are offered some alternative livelihood, jhum cultivation cannot be eradicated. Rehabilitation of tribal families once made thru establishment of oil palm plantation with the help of Jhumias successfully, we will be able to reduce destruction forest cover over a period of time. OP cultivation in N-E will improve Socio economic condition of local people without disturbing environment.

There are certain challenges like:

- (a) Poor infrastructure, topography & poor link road connectivity.
- (b) Cost of cultivation is high.
- (c) Marketing is an issue.

However, NMEO-OP has taken care of all these aforesaid issues for this Strategic palm oil Industry. Now responsibility lies with State Government & Processors with accountability.

Opportunities:

There is good potential (without touching FOREST) to grow oil palm sustainably in N-E. Even if we can bring hardly 25% of the targeted area under OP through clustered approach in a short span of time, we will be able to meet the demand of palm oil under HoReCa (about 2.5 lac tons palm oil presently consumed in N-E).

Suggestions: To realize North East's Oil Palm potential, we must have a long term focus with strong commitment spanning 12-15 years.

Lastly I can say without an iota of doubt, If India wants to produce as much edible oils as it is consuming through its traditionally grown oil seeds, the country needs around 30 million Ha. under oil seeds cultivation ,which is next to impossible. OIL PALM IS THE BEST OPTION in N-E and I can affirm from my vast experience that nature will not be harmed. The mission (NMEO-OP) is based on sustainable development program, which takes care of economic development, social development and environmental protection & Management.

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(Author's Personal View)**