Extended Abstract

Reviving Coconut Sector in Kerala: Prospects & Perspectives

Coconut sector plays a vital role in the agrarian economy of Kerala, besides its unique place in the socio-cultural fabric of the region. It was always considered as the symbol of rural prosperity and for many years Kerala ranked first in both area and production of coconut in the country. The coconut sector contributes around 15% of total agricultural GDP of Kerala, thus inextricably linked to the agricultural economy of the state. It is estimated that there are about 3.5 million holdings and at least 5 million people depend on this crop directly or indirectly for their employment and livelihood. However, Kerala, the 'land of coconut' has gradually lost its supremacy in coconut production scenario of the country. For instance, in the year 1990, Kerala accounted for 57 per cent area and 47 per cent production of coconut in the country. However, Kerala’s share in area as well as production of coconut has been declining over time (during 2015-16 Kerala accounted for only 36 per cent area and 33 per cent production in the country), and coconut growers are going through a crisis situation, as they find it tough to manage the crop on a remunerative basis. At present, Kerala produces 7448 million coconuts (31.1 per cent share) in the country from an area of 770 thousand hectares. Total productivity has reached up to 9664 nuts/ha in 2017. Nevertheless, the productivity of the state is still below the national average (11481 nuts/ha), which is a matter of concern. Moreover, the current decade is witnessing mass withdrawal of people from this sector, despite the research outputs generated and extended by the research and developmental institutions. Hence, redemption of the traditional coconut farming and reorientation towards profitable ventures is becoming a necessity.

Constraints such as high level of market fluctuation/price crash in coconut, changes in the demographic characteristics of coconut growers with a shift towards absentee landlordism, predominance of senile and unproductive palms, predominance of small and marginal holdings, over populated stands of both coconut and other trees in the homesteads, low level of adoption of crop management practices resulting in low productivity, depletion of natural resources in coconut gardens and soil related constraints, inadequate irrigation facilities, lack of availability of quality planting materials, lack of skilled labour and high...
wage rate, crop loss due to incidence of various pests and diseases, low level of product diversification etc. adversely affects coconut farming in the state, and as such coconut has become a neglected crop. Hence, appropriate research, extension and policy interventions are to be formulated and implemented to enable coconut growers to alleviate these constraints and steer the sector towards achieving the goal of sustainability.

The foremost strategy for improving the coconut production in Kerala is the massive cutting and removal of senile and disease affected coconut palms which are beyond recovery, removal of over aged palms; regulating the palm density and replanting with high yielding planting materials along with adoption of suitable agro-management practices in farmer participatory cluster mode.

The strategy for revitalising coconut sector in Kerala needs to revolve around interventions for ensuring adequate care and management of coconut palms in the existing gardens to enhance productivity. Coconut based integrated farming systems developed by ICAR-CPCRI found to increase the total productivity per unit area, and generated a net income of Rs. 5.7 lakhs/ha, which is 293 per cent higher than that of coconut monocrop (Rs. 1.4 lakhs). A coconut based mixed farming system comprising coconut, pepper, banana, crossbred cows, poultry birds, goat, and pisciculture has proved to generate returns up to three times higher than that of coconut monocrop. In addition to the economic benefits, the systems ensure food and nutritional security coupled with sustainability and environmental services.

It is imperative to keep in pace with the technology upgradations for effective translation of the same in the coconut gardens. For instance, the technology for vermicomposting of coconut leaves as part of on-farm organic matter recycling in coconut gardens is very relevant in the context of growing awareness about organic farming/eco-friendly farming in Kerala.

Community/group approaches ensuring active participation of farmers are needed for the effective implementation of integrated pest/disease management in coconut. The yield increment due to adoption of the integrated management package in root (wilt) disease affected tracts in Kerala results in additional of 8.3 billion rupees. Area-wide implementation of IPM of red palm weevil could reduce the pest incidence up to 56.8% in Kerala that in turn
yields 50.7 million rupees/year. Soil and water conservation technologies have enhanced the water and fertilizer use efficiency and increased the coconut yield up to 60 per cent.

Competitiveness of coconut oil compared to palm oil in the domestic market gets adversely affected and the excessive import of palm oil had frequently triggered price crash in coconut. There is a need to re-calibrate the import duty structure and it is essential that within the framework of permissible limits the tariff rates for the import of palm oil, both crude and refined palm oil are enhanced to protect the interests of coconut growers. In view of the ineffective procurement of copra and raw coconuts in the state, it is suggested to establish block level/panchayat level hubs with forward and backward integration along with unit level collection centres under the supervision of CPS networks.

Technological research has been successful in evolving appropriate processing technologies for the profitable utilization of products and by-products of the coconut palm including tender nut, coconut kernel, coconut water, coconut wood, shell and leaves. To cope with the market fluctuations, there is a need for product diversification and by-product utilization. Another strategic area which has raised lot of expectation is the potential for production (ICAR-CPCRI technology) and marketing of neera. Various value added products like coconut palm sugar, palm jaggery, coconut honey and coconut syrup can also be made from neera. Technologies are now available for preserving and packing coconut inflorescence sap as 'neera' or sweet toddy as non-alcoholic health drink.

Though coconut sector in the state of late confronted by umpteen challenges, there are way outs to combat and conquer the obstacles and steer the sector to a profitable vibrant and sustainable road map. Further, effective linkage is to be established among different research, extension and development agencies and coconut farming community through well coordinated participatory research/extension programmes for ensuring a meaningful technology generation and transfer in coconut.