

Rethinking agroforestry beyond degraded lands: a perspective

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Agroforestry in India is predominantly perceived as a tool for rehabilitating degraded lands; however, such a narrow framing undermines its broader potential. The present article aims to shift the narrative, positioning agroforestry not as a remedial measure alone, but as a viable and profitable land-use strategy for mainstream agriculture. Empirical evidence shows that tree-crop systems deliver substantial economic advantages: Poplar-sugarcane-turmeric models in northern India yield net returns of ₹5.5 lakh/ha, while Melia-banana combinations in the south exceed ₹21 lakh/ha, with benefit-cost ratios up to 4.2. Simultaneously, these systems can help bridge India's growing timber deficit, projected to increase by nearly 70% by 2030, reducing imports worth \$350 million annually if high-value native species such as teak and mahogany are cultivated on private farmland. Beyond profitability, agroforestry enhances resilience and ecosystem services on productive soils. Integrated systems sequester 3.7–34.6 Mg C ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹, far surpassing degraded land plantations, while improving soil organic carbon (+1.14%) and raising crop yields (e.g., 10–15% increase). Therefore, the present article narrates rethinking agroforestry beyond 'restoration', advocating its integration into fertile agricultural landscapes as a pathway to sustainable intensification, enhanced livelihoods, and climate-smart farming.

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